



Morrison Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church

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December 6, 2009
2nd Sunday of Advent
Malachi 3:1-4
Pastor Randy Ott

First Lesson: Malachi 3:1-4
Psalm of the Day: Psalm 24
Second Lesson: 1 Corinthians 4:1-5
Gospel: Luke 3:1-6

Prepared For a Purpose

To be refined
To respond in righteousness

If your plan a couple of weeks ago was to say, "This Saturday let's get all the gutters cleaned out because the snow is going to come soon and we want to make sure that everything is taken care of before all that happens;" or do other outside work or things like that, whatever the case may be. You and your significant other get ready to go do it, and you head outside. As you come down into the living room, there sits your spouse dressed to the nines, all made up in their nicest dress like you are going out to dinner. Men, how scared would you be right then and there? What would you think you had forgotten and messed up and you are going to be in big trouble for? If you see someone dressed like that, you know they aren't getting dressed to go clean gutters or do yard work, right?

When we prepare ourselves, we prepare ourselves for a purpose. You can tell what we are going to do at times by how we prepare ourselves. You don't get dressed up to do yard work. And usually you don't put on old ratty clothes to go out some place nice for a nice dinner. We prepare ourselves for a purpose.

This morning as we look at this reading from Malachi, our God tells us he is the same way. He spent so much time in the Old Testament. He spent so much in the New Testament, encouraging us to prepare for Christ's comings. His coming at Bethlehem when he was born, which he prepared his Old Testament people for; he tells us to prepare ourselves for his coming to us through Word and Sacrament. Make faithful use of it. Don't ignore it. And he tells us to do all this because we need to be prepared for when his second coming comes, when he comes to judge the living and the dead. There's no time to run upstairs and change when he comes back.

Today we see especially how he prepared his people by urging them to repent. Prepare for a purpose. Prepare to be refined like gold or silver is refined by fire. That was one of the works of the Messiah, to refine God's people so that God's people could then respond in righteousness. That's our purpose; to respond in this righteousness that our God gives us, to live to thank our God. Not demand of our God, but to live to thank our God.

The Book of Malachi is the last book of the Old Testament. It's also the last book that was written in the Old Testament, about 400 BC. About 100 years earlier, the exiles had come back from Babylon, those who had mourned and wailed while they were away from the temple. When they got back, they didn't want to build a temple right away. They wanted to build their own houses first. Then finally there was a period of renewal and religious renewal as they began to serve God faithfully and rebuild the temple and rejoice in these blessings from God. But now, by the time of Malachi, they had kind of drifted back away again. They said, "Okay, we rebuilt the temple, but where is his coming? I don't see him coming. I don't see it happening. God isn't keeping his promises. He isn't sending the promised Messiah. Things go on as they did yesterday, and they'll go on today, and they'll go on the same way tomorrow. There's no difference. God isn't coming."

So Malachi, whose name means "messenger," talks about the messenger that God would send who would prepare the way for the messenger of the covenant, the coming Messiah, who would appear suddenly. He said, "I'm going to send my messenger ahead of you who is going to prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple."

The Way Preparer we heard about in our Gospel. It was John the Baptist who preached a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. It ties in with being refined by fire. It ties in with what we sang in Psalm 24, "Who can approach God; he who has clean hands and a pure heart." It ties in with being refined by God, repenting, turning away from our sins, and turning to him. God refines us by showing us what filthy wretches we are and how desperately we need a Savior to come. If we think we are doing pretty good and doing alright, we aren't going to think we need the Lord's help. We'll think we can stand before God on our own. Then we won't be refined. We'll be consumed by fire eternally.

Being refined by fire, like a launderer's soap, is talking about washing away all those things that separate us from God. You and I can't do that. I don't care how much we repent; we can't take away our sins by repenting. But God calls us to repent. Not only does he call us to repent, involved in that call to repent is trusting in the messenger of the covenant who comes to the temple and who does the refining for us, the one who lives in our place and then dies in our place to take away our sins. That's how we are refined. He calls us to turn away from our sin and then look to the one who came and lived and died in our place. He calls us to be shaped by that.

It's been my experience that we need to get the "L" out. You and I need to get the "L" out. I think all too often we are shaped by the WORLD instead of by the WORD. If we could just get that "L" out of the word "WORLD," we could start getting shaped by the WORD instead of by the WORLD.

This week I asked the Confirmation Class, which can you quote from better, Paul's Letters, or South Park? What do you think the answer was? First they said, "Paul's Letters." I said, "Quit lying to me." Then they said, "Okay, South Park." I said, "Okay,

then who is winning in your life right now? Is God winning, or is Satan winning. Are you being shaped by the WORD, or shaped by the WORLD?"

Now, before you people that are a little bit taller than those Confirmands start saying, "Oh, those kids today. They are terrible. They just don't understand things." I had a gray-haired man come up to me when I was in Minnesota after the 2nd Sunday of Advent, this very Sunday, where the theme is "repent." He wouldn't shake my hand. He just looked at me and glared at me and said, "Don't you know Christmas is coming? Why all this talk about repentance?" I don't know, because God does? So what do you think he was shaped by, the WORLD, or the WORD?

God's Word calls us to repentance. It calls us to see what we are. It calls us to put our trust in God, not in ourselves. The world calls us to sing happy songs even though the world acknowledges that for many people this is the most depressing time of the year. We get shaped by depression that comes in the world.

We want to be shaped by the Word. We have to start being a little more honest with ourselves and say, "Yes, I am a sinner. I need to repent. No, I'm not 'jingle bells all the way' all the time. I'm a sinner, and at times I get down. I get worried. I get depressed. I get anxious about every last thing. I hurt. I mourn. I wail." God never tells us that doing some of those things in and of themselves is wrong, but he tells us when we do them to turn to him and find our strength in him. I am convinced that all too often we have loved things more than we have loved God and instead of admitting it, we want to blame the messenger who tells us we're loving things more than we love God. We want to blame it on everything else and say, "Why can't we be more like the world?" Well, the world's going to hell in a hand basket, and it's going to hell eternally.

You and I have heaven as a free gift because our God cared enough to refine us. For you and me, we will find joy when we acknowledge that on our own we have nothing, but we have a God who has given us everything. You and I will find joy in his promises to never leave us or forsake us. You and I will find joy in his love that refines us even when we didn't want to be refined. That's only going to come as you and I are more and more shaped by the Word. As it touches us and speaks to us, the way will be prepared for the Lord. Preparing the way for the Lord usually means in the Bible just making a straight path for him; getting all the obstacles out of the way.

You and I have a lot of obstacles that we carry around in our daily lives that keep us from getting close to the Word; all the demands of the world around us that pull and yank us in every direction. Yet, you and I know that when we get closer to God we have a peace and a blessing that comes that passes all understanding and that sustains us and strengthens us. God doesn't promise it's going to happen instantaneously. God doesn't promise it's going to be easy.

That's one of the things we looked at in Bible Study this morning about standing alone against the world. At times God has told us so clearly that things are going to be tough. You live in a sinful world. Things are going to be tough. But don't give in to the sinful

world. Be refined. Let God burn away the impurities of your faith so that your faith gets ever stronger and ever more dependent, not on yourself or your own ability to handle the next crises, but on your trust that God loves you no matter what and that God has said, "I will not let anything separate you from the love of God that's in Christ Jesus."

As the impurities of our faith are refined away, we become more and more like that .999% pure bar of gold; precious to our God, not because of what we do, but because of what he has made us. Then we are prepared for the purpose that God speaks of through Malachi today so that when we are refined, and when we are prepared, and when the impurities of our faith are burned away, we begin to serve God, not out of obligation, not out of sense of duty, but out of the sense of pure joy.

Look at what he says, "Then the LORD will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness, and the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be acceptable to the LORD, as in the days gone by, as in former years." The offerings he is talking about here are not the blood offerings that paid for sins. He uses a word that are for the grain offerings, the thank offerings, where a portion of the offering would be burned and consumed and then another portion would go to the servants in the temple, and they would use them. The people were to bring the first fruits of these things so that they would say, "We honor you God because you gave this to us, and we trust you Lord that you will take care of us because we are bringing you what is the first fruits, not what is left over. We trust that you are going to keep your promise that you will give us what we need to live."

When these offerings are brought in righteousness, it's brought not out of sense of duty or obligation or going through the motions; it's brought by acknowledging that I am right with God because he lived and died in my place, trusting his promise of a Savior. I am right with him and now I respond because I want to, because I get to, not because I have to. I want to thank God. That's what these grain offerings were, thank offerings.

You and I don't have to bring grain to thank God like they did, but God has told us all kinds of ways that we can thank him in our lives. We can thank him as we use our lives to serve him by serving others faithfully, not because we have to, but because we want to. We can serve him by serving ourselves with the Word so that we have that Word of God to share with those when they need it and to point them to the peace that passes all understanding that we so often talk about. But here the Lord wants us to live it; bring offerings in righteousness.

You and I have every opportunity to do that through this busy season of the year. We can bring the offerings that are given to God out of love for God with our time and with the various things that we do to serve our God and serve one another. I am absolutely convinced the greatest thank offering we can give to God is to grow closer to him as he refines us, because all the other things just flow naturally out of it. And we'll never show up for a work day dressed in the wrong clothes. We'll always be prepared by our God for these purposes.