

Two and a half weeks until Christmas. The schedule's getting frantic. Buying gifts. Wrapping gifts. Mailing cards. Decorating. Cooking. Going to parties. Lots of preparations to be made.

Yet, once again, we are invited to pause, and to consider deeper preparations that need to be made--spiritual preparations before we welcome the babe in the manger.

The key message this morning comes from our OT lesson from the Prophet Malachi. Like Jeremiah last week, Malachi at first seems like a rather harsh prophet for two and a half weeks before Christmas.

The very short book of Malachi is concerned with abuses in the temple. The people are being stingy and greedy. They're not giving their full tithes to God. The priests are being sleazy and greedy. They're keeping the best animals for themselves, and only offering the defective animals in sacrifice to God.

Over and over Malachi calls the people to repentance. But then in ch3, there is a new message from God.

Our OT lesson picks up here. God speaks saying, "See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts."

God says, 'You've been seeking for me. You say that you delight in me, that you desire me. Well, I'm coming. I will come to you.'

That's a wonderful promise. God promises to come.

But then Malachi asks the tough question. "But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?"

Malachi is asking, 'Are you ready? Are you really ready? You want God to come. But are you really ready? Can you really stand up and face God when he comes?' A tough question.

At first it seems that Malachi is saying the equivalent of, "You'd better watch, you'd better not cry, you'd better not pout, I'm telling you why... God is coming to town."

If Malachi stopped there, this message would seem rather dire and harsh. But Malachi doesn't stop there. The message continues,

"For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap."

God is coming, but he's coming like refiner's fire and fuller's soap.

Refiner's fire at the time was the hottest fire around. It was the white hot fire you get when you blow a strong stream of air on the coals. And that hot fire was used to refine metal. It was used to remove impurities. It was used to get rid of the crud and keep the good stuff.

Fuller's soap was the strongest soap known at the time. It was a very strong lye soap. It was used to clean and to bleach garments white. It was strong stuff, but it got clothes their whitest white.

God is coming, but he's coming like refiner's fire and fuller's soap.

God is coming to get you cleaned up. God is coming to help you, to get rid of your impurities, to get rid of those things in your life that hold you back from being all that you were created to be.

Malachi continues: "(God) will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the LORD in righteousness."

The descendants of Levi, the priests and their assistants, will be purified until they are doing what they're supposed to be doing. God will make them right, so that they can present their offerings in righteousness.

And Malachi concludes, "Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of old and as in former years."

The Good News in Malachi is that God himself will come and do for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

Of course, we can make one of two mistakes.

1. We can say, "Well, I'm in pretty good shape. I don't need God's cleansing." That's a common mistake.

I saw an article a couple years ago about a hospital in California that was trying to crack down on the spread of bacteria. They had those antibacterial foam canisters everywhere. But they couldn't get compliance from the physicians to foam in, and foam out when they visited patients. Nurses and visitors were fairly compliant. But the physicians basically had the attitude, "We're clean enough. We're not spreading bacteria. Why should we bother?"

Then they had a project where they cultured the doctors hands. They got some of the doctors to put their hand prints in petri dishes. And lo and behold all kinds of bacterial colonies developed. Then they took pictures of the bacteria and used them as screen savers in the hospital. Afterwards the physicians' compliance rate went up to almost 100%.

We're not always as clean as we think we are. None of us is perfect. All of us stand in need of God's cleansing and purifying. We all need God's refining fire. We all have parts that get in the way of being fully human. All of us have tarnish that keep us from being the bright shiny people God created us to be.

For those who say, "I'm in pretty good shape; I don't need God's cleansing," the message of Malachi is "submit." God is coming to do something extraordinary for you. Submit to it. Let him cleanse and purify you.

The other common mistake is to say, "I'm so screwed up, there's no hope. There's nothing God can do for me."

If you think that, remember who we're talking about here. We're talking about the creator of the universe, the Living God. What can possibly lie beyond God's power? God offers refining spiritual fire, strong spiritual soap.

Being purified may not be easy. In the chemistry lab it takes extremely hot fire in a red, glowing, ceramic crucible to remove impurities from metal. And yet a strong fire can do it.

If you think, "I'm so screwed up, there's no hope" I would remind you of what the Angel Gabriel said to Mary: "Nothing will be impossible with God."<sup>1</sup>

The message of Malachi is that we have to trust God's power, God's cleansing fire, God's spiritual detergent. In the end, "God will purify."

We heard a similar message in our Gospel. The key sentence in our Gospel lesson is Luke 3:3:

"John went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins."

That's the essence of John's teaching: repentance, submission, forgiveness and cleansing. Repentance and submission are the things we do. Forgiveness and cleansing are the things God does.

The Greek word for repentance is "metanoia," which literally means a change of mind. We have to have a change of mind, a change of heart, a change of will and intention. Then we have to submit to God's cleansing water.

That's our part.

But when we do, God promises both forgiveness and cleansing.

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 1:37

And this is not a one time deal. This is a continuing process throughout our lives. None of us is perfect. All of us are under spiritual construction. But God promises that the end result will be wonderful. That's the key verse in our epistle lesson, Philippians 1:6:

"I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ."

God has begun to work with us. And God will keep working with us, if we'll let him.

So let's get cleaned up for Christmas. After all, that's the natural thing to do.

What's the first thing you do before you hold a newborn baby? You wash your hands.

Let's get cleaned up to meet the baby in the manger.

In the next two and a half weeks, let God's refining fire, God's cleansing soap, God's purifying water wash over you. Prepare yourself for Jesus' coming.

The poet Christina Rossetti asks,  
"What can I give Him, poor as I am?  
If I were a shepherd I would bring a lamb,  
If I were a wise man I would do my part;  
Yet what I can I give Him, give my heart."

Your heart is the greatest gift God desires this Christmas.

Offer your heart to God that he might cleanse it.  
Open your heart to God that he might dwell there.

Jesus is coming.

"Let every heart prepare him room."