

“Refine”

“Prepare The Way” Advent 2018 – part #2

Malachi 3:1-4, Luke 3:1-6

Two years ago our family took a trip to Fayette State Park in the Upper Peninsula. Fayette used to be a very profitable iron smelting community. Although the furnaces have long since stopped burning, you can go to the park today and stand in the middle of two great iron smelters. Iron smelting was a big deal, and a dangerous one. There were plenty of accidents. But when they were working, the fires at Fayette made a good profit because the steel companies would only buy refined iron, not rocks with iron ore in them.

Fire tests things, finding their intrinsic value. When iron companies and goldsmiths use fire the right way, they can burn the impurities out and increase the value of the product. Refining is a dangerous business, but also extremely helpful.

Have you ever wanted to have an impurity removed from your life? I’m not talking about a wart or a mole; I’m talking about something in your heart and mind. An anxiety. A burden. A bad habit. A sin. Perhaps you do. But like the rock that is mixed with ore, that impurity probably won’t come out easily. It may take the fire of the Lord to remove it.

This morning we are looking at Advent from the perspective of two prophets: Malachi and John the Baptizer. Now, a prophet is someone who, you could say, plays with fire. They certainly preach fiery messages! The words they speak come from God, and those words are intended to burn their way into our souls.

According to Malachi, the Lord God says, “I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come.” (Mal 3:1) To me, this sounds like a good thing. We are here to worship God today. Wouldn't it be great if God literally appeared before us, with a real, live prophet to speak to us?

The answer is yes and no. Malachi warns that the appearance of God is a difficult thing to endure. The presence of the LORD is like refiner's fire – it will get you really, really clean, but it might leave you a little raw; sort of the way you feel when you sit too long next to an open fire, and your cheeks burn, only, a lot hotter. The purpose, Malachi says, is to refine and purify us like gold and silver. Burn off the sinful parts and leave the honorable parts.

Advent is a time when we look forward to Christmas, and we also remind ourselves that the Lord Jesus Christ will return to this earth, and his presence will be an awful lot like a blazing refiner's fire. Why? Because Jesus does not want us to remain impure. He wants us to cast off the sin that weighs us down and clings to us tightly. (Hebrews 12:1) He wants to melt and soften our hearts to receive him.

One of our Christian beliefs is that the prophecy spoken by Malachi was fulfilled in John the Baptizer. If you have read Luke chapter 1, you might remember that John was actually Jesus' cousin, and John had a pretty terrific birth story as well. You could even make the case that John the Baptizer should have a place in the nativity set, although you might want to place a fire extinguisher next to him.

John the Baptizer preaches a fiery message to the people who are expecting God to show up. Ironically, his message could also be classified as a wet blanket. John does not prophesy great news of wealth and prosperity. Luke 3:3 says John preached “baptism by repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” John insisted that he was there to make a way for God, literally crying out in the wilderness, the hot desert of Judea. And something about John’s message of repentance struck the people, because they came in droves to hear him and be baptized by him.

A lot of people think that the purpose of a prophet is just to condemn and tell them what they are doing wrong. But that is not true. A real prophet proclaims the truth of God, who gives us a second chance. Either you view a prophet as a bringer of bad news or as a person who calls for renewal. It depends on whether or not you believe and follow their message.

So let me ask this morning, why does the message of repentance seem so difficult to us? After all, we in the church love grace and forgiveness, don’t we? Here’s the deal. Repentance is the act of saying “I’m sorry. Please forgive me. I will change.” The trouble is, no one really enjoys saying that. Repentance is hard because it forces us to examine ourselves and identify the things that God does not like, and admit that these things must be removed from our lives in order to be pure in God’s eyes.

Look, this is Christmas time, chestnuts roasting on an open fire, hot chocolate, warm eggnog – shouldn’t we be talking about happiness, joy, love, and peace? Yes, absolutely. Those are worth more than gold and silver, and we should desire them. (Psalm 12:6, 19:10, 119:72 & 127) However, you cannot have all these good things if you don’t also have the fire of truth, the warmth of

forgiveness, the flame of repentance, and the burn of humility. I'll tell you about humility. John wore camel skin, ate locusts, and lived in the desert. Jesus Christ was born in a manger, despised by his own people, hung naked on a cross, and died as a common criminal. The whole story of Christmas is one of humility.

There has never been a better time than Advent for us to examine, repent, renew, and let God's fire burn in us.

Malachi said God would purify us like launderer's soap and refiner's fire. When this purity returns, Malachi said, God's people will give the right offerings. Offerings like serving justice, caring for the poor, practicing generosity, giving love and forgiveness to all.

John continued what Malachi had started. John wanted the people to be ready for God to show up. He warned that Jesus was coming, the one whose shoes he was not worthy to untie. John said, "Look, I am just using water for baptism. When the Messiah appears, he will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire!" (See Luke 3:16)

Think of all those impacted by the wildfires in California this year. If there was an intense fire coming, I don't know about you, but I would appreciate the warning! Fire, obviously, burns. It can injure. It also can clean, disinfect, provide light, and warm us up.

We need the fire of God's presence in our lives. We need God's fire in our church! We all need to hear the message of the prophets again and believe them. We all need to take a collective breath and say, "I'm sorry." We all need our sin removed. We all need renewal. We all need a second chance.

That is ultimately the message of Advent: forgiveness in Christ. Jesus is coming, and he gives us a second chance. Right here. Right now. None of us will leave this place saying that we were not warned.

Will you take that second chance? Will you listen to the prophets? Will you give your life over to Christ and allow his fire to remove the impurities in your life? Would you take the time, swallow your pride, and go to someone with whom you're angry and say, "I'm sorry. Please forgive me"? Would you invite someone to church to hear the good news? Would you tell them the good news yourself? How God has given you a second chance and changed your life? Will you repent? Will you forgive? Will you worship Jesus?

Our job is to make the roads smooth, clear the path so that people can meet the Lord. (Luke 3:5) We have valleys to fill in: valleys of depression, loneliness, and sorrow. We have mountains to level: pride, arrogance, greed, gossip, injustice. When the church commits with all their heart to following the Lord, these obstacles are removed, burned up and discarded, and only what truly matters remains.

A prophet's message of repentance can sound like a word of condemnation. It depends on your reaction. If you disagree with him/her, yes, it is. At which point, you will reject the message, condemn the messenger, and do a whole lot of complaining. But if you accept the message, that's a completely different world. The prophet saved you. Brought grace to you. Showed you forgiveness, the error of your ways. The difference is in the humility of the hearer, not the speaker.

The scriptures promise that "All humanity will see God's salvation together." (Luke 3:6; Isaiah 40:5.) This is only possible if all humanity is willing to

stand shoulder to shoulder together. We must drop our weapons, stop our cruel words and actions. I cannot stand next to you if there is animosity between us.

This is one of the reasons I am so proud of the team that does the Moms Shopping Mission. It is a very tangible way that we serve the poor and needy in our community, telling them that someone cares. But it's not enough. Not if we are to truly listen to John's message and act on it.

John is only the appetizer, the opening act. When Jesus comes, “He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.” (Luke 3:16) Why? To refine us. Remove the impurities in our hearts and souls. Remove the pride that prevents us from worshiping God and serving others. Burn with his passion instead.

What is your gift to Jesus this season? We have the news of God's salvation to share, but many will not give it away. Take, for example, the invitations to Christmas Eve in your bulletin. (I found a lot of them leftover in the pews last week.) Take them home and put it on your dining room table. Tape them to your bathroom mirrors. Don't walk out thinking someone else will do what God has called you to do.

There is something precious inside of you, something that will only be brought forth if you allow yourself to be exposed to the fiery passion of the Lord Jesus Christ. My prayer for you is that you will hear the message of the prophets and respond, the way the people did in Malachi's time and John the Baptizer's time, believing that Christ will return and doing everything in your power to be prepared to receive him. Amen.

Memory Verse: Luke 3:16b

“But one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.”

Reflection Questions:

1. What images or memories come to mind when you think of fire?
2. How does fire represent both good and bad actions?
3. Have you thought of Jesus’ return as a day of fire and refining? What things would Jesus remove from your life?
4. How are you preparing yourself for Jesus’ return? How are you preparing others?