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 Second Sunday of Advent
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Refined
Malachi 3:1-4

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. ² But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?

*For he is like **a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap**; ³ he 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.^[a] ⁴ Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord as in the days of old and as in former years.*

Most of us are **familiar with John the Baptist** and his role as God's messenger, sent to prepare the way for Jesus.

But in the fifth century B.C.,

the prophet **Malachi was God's messenger**,

sent to prepare the way of the Lord to those who had returned from exile, but had fallen into sin and temptation.

The people of Malachi's day were, like us, **looking for God** to make things right in the world.

A God to eliminate evil and bless the righteous.

But Malachi was surrounded by corruption and injustice,

so God sends this word about **a refining FIRE and fuller's SOAP**.

Malachi and John the Baptist are both **God's messengers**,

which is why we hear their words during **Advent**,

the month of **preparation** for Christmas.

Malachi reminds us that our preparation in Advent

is **not just about what WE do** to get ready for Jesus,

but what **GOD DOES inside of us to help us get ready**.

Malachi's image of the refining fire and fuller's soap

is a **tough and surprising** Christmas message—

but a very **IMPORTANT** one.

It is actually *God's grace* to all of us—
Because it's the *preparation we REALLY need* to see Jesus—now, and in the end.

We all have things we do at this time of year to prepare for the season.
Are there any *Christmas movies* that you have to watch every year?
My all-time favorite is *White Christmas*,
but I also love *It's a Wonderful Life*, *Elf*, and *The Family Stone*...
and *National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation*—
with Clark Griswald plugging in his outdoor lights!

Have you ever thought about what most Christmas movies
have in common?

Isn't there usually a *dysfunctional family* involved?
Think about it—all the famous Christmas movies have some kind of trouble
in the family or other relationships.
Which is probably why we like them!
Because we all have dysfunctional families!

Most of us have *wacky relatives* like Cousin Eddie or Clark Griswald, right?
We have complicated relationships,
And 100% of us have families that are not perfect.
So maybe we are drawn to these movies because *they are familiar!*

Which brings us to *Malachi*.
What if we *need his message*, as much as we need our favorite Christmas movie?
What if we need this message of God's *refining fire*,
because we are *broken, and our lives are a mess!*

We might need the *fire* of God,
that melts and draws out all the impurities in our lives.
We might need the kind of *soap* that is so strong it can bleach anything.
Don't we need God to be our refiner?
the one who melts and molds our lives the way they should be?

Do you know *how* a refiner of silver knows it's ready?
It's when *his own image* is reflected perfectly in the shimmering surface of the
liquid metal, like a mirror.

What if that's what God is trying to do in us—
 in our hearts and homes this Christmas?
 What if God is trying to *melt and mold us*
until we reflect the image of God in our lives?
 Wouldn't that be amazing?

Again and again in the Bible, we see how God works to make the people who they
 were *created to be*.
 God is always using lessons and experiences
 To teach us *to trust and be faithful*.

Scottish pastor George MacDonald once said,
because we ARE the sons of God, we must BECOME the sons of God.

We believe that God's love for us is very much like a *parent's love* for a child.
 It *doesn't always feel good*,
 Because it includes boundaries, consequences, hopes, and plans.
 it includes *melting and molding*—so that we can grow and mature in our faith.

When we say God loves us,
 We mean that *God wants what is BEST for us*.
 Which is more than just good feelings.

God loves us,
 AND God is all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-good,
 In other words, God is *HOLY---*
So, God wants us to be holy too!

We don't talk about that a lot.
 We don't talk about the *judgment* of God very much either—
 because we don't believe in a 'wrathful judgmental' God.

But we do know that *God is holy*.
 Which means, God is against sin.
 God judges all human behavior—including ours.

Of course God loves us, despite our sins.
 But God is *against* sin because God is *for* us.

God *has a desire for us to be holy*, just like Jesus.
That's where the refiner's fire comes in, to purify us.

C.S. Lewis once said,
*To ask that God's love should be content with us as we are
is to ask that God should **cease to be God**:
because He already loves us, He must **labour to make us lovable**.
We cannot even wish, in our better moments,
that God could reconcile Himself to our present impurities.....*

Lewis says our *happiness* is not what God wants for us,
God wants us to be who we were created to be, **THEN we will be happy....**
C.S. Lewis in The Problem of Pain. Christianity Today, Vol. 32, no. 15.

The truth is, our brokenness, our dysfunction,
our sin *hurts* us—and it hurts God.
It's hurts the entire *family* of faith!

So what do we **NEED**?
We need God's *love*.
And we need to be *refined* by that love.
We need a *Savior*.
Who can *make us more like* the God who created us!
That's a perfect message for Advent—this time of preparation.

And that's what the refining fire is all about.
God *doesn't just HOPE* we'll do our best,
and love us without any discipline or consequences.

God gives us *free will*—to act like complete fools,
which we do,
and when we do, God is not pleased...

So, out of love, God--*refines us*.
*And because of Jesus, through this refining,
we are forgiven*, regardless of what we've done---
We can start over! We can be made new!

Fire and soap is a strange but powerful Christmas message.
 But it's the reason Jesus came to earth as a baby--
 to *save* us from sin.
 It's why Jesus died and was resurrected.
 To *save us, and change us.*
 To make us the people we were created to be.
 To transform us!

Jesus *didn't* come to make us feel *guilty*.
 Jesus came with *love and grace---to help us CHANGE.*
 To help us *BECOME the people* God created us to be!

Think about the *people who love you--*
 Don't they want you to become a *better person?*
 The person you were *meant to be?*
 The Love of God is even more that way!

George MacDonald said once that God
 Is a consuming fire, and God's "*love loves unto purity*"

That's why God the refiner melts and molds us,
 until the surface of our heart *shimmers*,
 and God's image is reflected right in our lives.

I always remember Flannery O'Connor's short story called "*Revelation*"
 when I read Malachi.

She writes about a proud and arrogant white woman in the old South
 named Ruby Turpin, who sits in her doctor's office chatting and smiling,
 friendly and talkative on the outside,
 all the while she is *harshly judging* everyone around her in that room....
this kid is just trash, that dark boy is stupid,
that old man is dirty, that ugly woman is strange.
 She is especially disturbed by a large young woman with terrible acne,
 who is reading on the sofa, *rudely ignoring* everyone else.

So, Mrs. Turpin quietly *congratulates Jesus* for making her the way she is:
 "*He had made her herself and given her a little bit of everything*".
 She then, *thanks God she is white, and that she's not poor, or ugly, or rude.*

Suddenly the girl (who happens to be named Grace!) takes her book,
and ***throws it at Mrs. Turpin....***

Mrs. Turpin goes home hurt,
thinking about ***her rightful place*** on top---in this world, and in heaven.

Then the sky suddenly turns red, and Mrs. Turpin has a vivid ***revelation***—
a vision of people marching into heaven.

And the singing line of people are ***not who she expects...***

Oddly, the people in the ***FRONT*** of the line,
are all like those in the doctor's office that she judged so harshly.

Finally at the ***END of the line she sees 'her kind'*** of people.

She sees them marching with dignity,
accountable for good order and common sense.

They alone are singing on key.

Yet she could see by their shocked and altered faces,
that ***even their virtues were being burned away.***

refined in the fire by God....

Flannery O'Connor. "Revelation" in *The Complete Stories*. New York: Noonday, 1995. Pg. 488-509.

We may not be Mrs. Turpin, but we ***all have places*** in our hearts,
In need of God's refining fire—
even those places we feel are 'OK' need God's transformation,
so that we can become the people we were created to be!

A refining fire is ***not the Christmas card*** that we envision,
When we sing and cook and decorate and gather in December.
But it's part of finding the true ***JOY*** of Christmas.
The refining fire can make us people of joy!

Sometimes the refining fire ***happens in the circumstances*** of our lives.
Sometimes God uses difficult things for our good!
The truth is, God can bring ***good*** out of anything we might face!
God can use anything for ***refining and purifying.***

In Isaiah 43:1-5 God talks about walking with us through life:
Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;

I have called you by name, you are mine.

²***When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;***
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you,

*when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,
and the flame shall not consume you.*

³ *For I am the Lord your God,
⁴ ... You are precious in my sight,
and honored, and I love you....*

⁵ *Do not fear, for I am with you;*

***What if we believed in God's power to walk with us,
Through everything in life?
What if we believed that the fires of life *wouldn't destroy us,*
but could be used to *refine us?****

And what if we really believed that last phrase:

"Do not fear, for I am with you"

It's found hundreds of times in the Bible--***With good reason.***

We don't need to fear anything now, or in the future.

Because God IS ***with*** us.

God is ***refining*** us,

God ***isn't finished*** with us yet!

And that's our ***Good News of the Gospel!***

That's the kind of Good News we need,

as we prepare our hearts and homes this Christmas!

And for that, all God's people said, amen.