

He Is Like a Refining Fire
Malachi 3:1-6
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It's always darkest before the dawn....

I don't like that aphorism at all. First, because it's wrong. The vast majority of mornings in a given month, the sun is up before the sunrise, so it's not actually true. Second, because it seems to be saying, suffering is a prerequisite to any experience of light or brightness in one's life. The first person to coin the phrase was a 17th century theologian, Thomas Fuller, writing, of all things, a Biblical travelogue of his visit to Palestine in 1650.

I'm not sure I believe the phrase is true, but it certainly is an accurate description of the final book of the Old Testament, named for the prophet we know as Malachi, though that almost certainly is not the name of the one who wrote this short diatribe against the people of Judah in the 5th Century BCE. Malachi means, very simply, my messenger. So, today's passage, which opens with the promise of Yahweh sending my messenger, actually reads "Malachi."

At various times, in Christian interpretation of the Old Testament, we've interpreted this passage as speaking of John the Baptist or, most commonly, as in the Messiah. "My messenger" is the Christ child, the one who will be the refiner's fire and the fuller's soap. Those are two powerful images for the Hebrew People. The refiner's fire melts precious metal and burns away all impurities. And it brings to mind the many times the Hebrew people have used a refiner's fire to NOT do God's will, as the time when they melted their gold and jewels to create the golden calf in the wilderness while Moses was away receiving the 10 commandments; or when they melted down the gold in the temple to pay ransom to the kings of Assyria and Babylon, thinking they could take care of themselves without seeking Yahweh's guidance or assistance. The refiner's fire has burned them more than once when they sought to wield it. But now, now it is God wielding that fire and this all-consuming fire will be born within the child we await.

I'll admit, I get that imagery, but it doesn't resonate with me. But the second image certainly does, fuller's soap. This was the lye soap of the 5th century BCE. It was used by fullers, a special kind of launderer who prepared new fabrics to be worn. And the fuller's job was to use this acrid and burning soap to prepare new garments for wear. They would be stiff and scratchy, and the fuller would literally beat the fabric with this soap until the garment could be worn comfortably. Lye soap has a long history for rural people like my maternal grandmother's family. My great aunt Addie used to tell stories of how the lye soap would be made from ashes and renderings from a slaughtered pig, and how it would burn so on her skin. But a lye soap clean was REALLY clean.

The two things the refiner's fire and the fuller's soap have in common is that they are preparing something for use. They are taking what is a useless hunk of rock and burning away everything except the precious metal within and they are taking raw clothing and making it fit to wear for a long, long time.

Jesus is described as one who will prepare us, burning away the useless things and refining that which is valuable, so that it is its most authentic, pure self, and leaning and scrubbing away all that make a garment uncomfortable or even impossible to wear and making it usable and worth keeping and caring for.

On this peace Sunday, how are we to take all this talk of refining fires and burning soaps and judgment against all of these great sinners:

“the sorcerers,
the adulterers, those swearing falsely,
those who cheat the day laborers out of their wages
as well as oppress the widow and the orphan,
and those who brush aside the foreigner”

It doesn't sound very Christmassy does it? But it forces us to confront the divine reality that the Incarnation was not simply some great loving and gentle act of a benevolent, but not very present, deity. It was the radical inbreaking of the very presence of God, enfleshed and real, right here among us, and not just for us to worship but to show us that we can't do this on our own. That left to our own devices, we will inevitably surrender to things that soil our souls and rot the righteousness designed into our very being when we were created in the image of God. It doesn't mean we should walk around beating ourselves up all the time, or shaming ourselves or anyone else, or using refining fire references to talk about damnation or burning or anything like that, because the great launderer has already come, and the refining fire has appeared already.

Malachi's words are words of a frustrated and angry prophet who sees hope only in the thing that God will do in the future to bring the people back to the covenants we've been talking about since September. And we, who live some 25 centuries beyond him, are not caught in that almost hopeless place – at least when we are in our right minds and in the right spirit we are not. This is because the Messianic hope that is born in Isaiah and Malachi and so many other prophetic texts of the Hebrew Scriptures has been fulfilled, just not in the way anyone expected.

Today we welcomed Owen into the family of faith. He reminds us not only of the vulnerability and the possibilities present in the birth of every new child, but also their seeming powerlessness – except to charm us anyway.

A child is coming into the world as the symbol of Malachi's hopes fulfilled. He will not be a great king but a carpenter's son. And yet, he will become a refiner's fire and fuller's soap, calling those in power to see how they have corrupted God's gracing messages with their political scheming and petty quests to get and keep power. His gracing, loving, challenging teachings will scrub away at myths of self-sufficiency and pride until the garment of the disciple is all that remains.

I don't like to repeat sermon illustrations, but the same one kept coming up for me this week. It was from three years ago. So, with your indulgence, I want to remind us all of how C.S. Lewis depicted this idea in the Narnia novel *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*. It was the third of the Narnia books produced by Professor Lewis after *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* and *Prince Caspian*.

If you've seen the movie, please erase it from your memory, for Lewis would be deeply upset with how they dealt with the character of Eustace. As Lewis put it in the opening chapter of *Dawn Treader*, "There was a boy called Eustace Clarence Scrubb and he almost deserved it." Eustace is depicted as coming from a modern home. Lewis was not fond of modern child-rearing techniques and he demonstrates that by making Eustace a stuck-up, whiney, jerk who can't handle delayed gratification and who is hopelessly self-centered, narcissistic and greedy.

Magically transported to Narnia with two of his cousins who have been there before, at first Eustace is almost comic relief in his bumbling arrogance, except we see how easily, how thoughtlessly, or even how intentionally he, like most bullies, hurts people, belittles strangers, and reviles what he doesn't understand or can't control.

When they reach one particular island on the sea voyage at the center of the novel, Eustace stumbles upon the cave of a great dragon, now dead. The cave is filled with gold and Eustace immediately sees all of it as his rightful property. You know, finders' keepers? He places a gold bracelet on his arm and falls asleep, content in his riches, not unlike Malachi, who seemed to think the people's faith had fallen asleep due to apathy and disinterest.

When Eustace awakes, the bracelet that had fit so nicely on his arm the night before now digs into his skin and scales! Eustace has been transformed into a dragon. Desperately seeking help from his cousins and fellow travelers on the *Dawn Treader*, he is almost killed until his youngest cousin, Lucy, realizes it's Eustace. Almost reluctantly, he is convinced to use his new power to help the crew survive on the island. After all, dragons can fly and do all kinds of things.

But Eustace is still a dragon, and as the ship is getting ready to leave, he knows he cannot go with them. There is no place for a dragon on board. But then, Aslan the lion, Lewis' Christ figure in all of the Narnia novels, shows up and after some discussion with Eustace, Aslan begins to scrub away at his scales and at the rough claws and pads of his feet, like lye soap burning away the dragon skin of Eustace's old arrogance until all that is left is once again a little boy, a little boy for whom Aslan then provides a healing, cooling bath. Sometimes Lewis isn't so subtle with his metaphors...

Today, on this Sunday of peace, we are invited to consider – is there any part of our lives where we have allowed the dragon king to grow back? Is there a part of ourselves we keep from the world? More importantly, is there a part of ourselves we keep from the gracing love of God? Can we let the refining fires burn away fear, resentment, bitterness, shame, or hatred? Can we surrender to the scrubbing, but ultimately, to the healing burn of our divine fuller as he makes this life we put on as disciples both clean and easier to wear?

The Sunday of Peace is a Sunday of preparation. Peace is not something that just happens; it is not the absence of conflict. It is a way of managing, living with, living beyond conflict and difficulty. It takes much preparation. And the coming Christ has done most of that preparation already. Grace is already here; the healing waters of baptism have already been given to most of us and are ours to reclaim now and every day.

Eustace will appear again in two later Narnia Novels, once to protect a bullied friend back at school and a bullied Prince of Narnia, and then again when great sacrifice is needed to defend truth. And he will be ready. He will be strong and still a bit pigheaded. But he will be loving and brave and whole because he never forgets who he is. He never forgets that refining encounter with the Prince of Peace.

As we prepare to rehearse the birth of that Prince who will become King of kings and Lord of lords, may we remember that his refining love is ours as well. And it can prepare us for the work that lies ahead for each of us and all of us. Thanks be to God.

Benediction:

So remember, where Malachi says that after he comes, the Messenger will then judge all of those acts of injustice, here's the secret. I think we are the judgment, those of us who follow him, for we are sent out to confront and to transform. I don't think that judgment is a condemning one, but a transforming one. And so, let us go, undertaking that great task, knowing we could never do it on our own. We go with one another and in the company of the God who made us, the Christ who even now is redeeming us, and the Spirit who will journey with us in every moment. And all God's people said, Amen.