

Those Presbyterians Sure are Refined People!

Malachi 3:1-6

Luke 3:1-6

It's 'eat my words' time: we've gone out of our way to make a distinction between Advent and Lent, we've changed the 'official' colors from purple to blue, and said that Lent is a time of penitence and Advent is a time of waiting and hope and anticipation. And that's true, but... today both Malachi and John remind us that now is a time not only to be watching, but to be getting ready. And while it would be nice to think that a day trip out in the wilderness and a quick dunk in the river is all we need to get ready, unfortunately, it's not as simple as that. It's probably more like what I imagine getting ready for a marathon or the Olympics is like, than what getting ready for a trip to Hawaii is like: exciting, but not particularly pleasant.

Here is Malachi's take on the subject: Getting ready is like being run through the sort of scrubbing process that sheep's wool goes through before it can be knit into a beautiful sweater or scarf – and when he talks about fuller's soap, he's not talking about Ivory or Dove or Johnson's baby shampoo. A good strong lye soap is more like it. Something fairly caustic and quite likely to leave you raw and tender for awhile.

Or if that doesn't sound so good to you, then how about being thrown into the metal worker's fire? Eventually you will end up all bright and shiny and beautiful, or at the very least, useful, but in the meantime it's going to get mighty hot and uncomfortable.

Not very Christmasy, is it? Between the furnace and the alkaline soap, it's a little too fire-and-brimstone for this time of year. But even if this was June you probably wouldn't enjoy a sermon on fiery, caustic, unpleasanties. Frankly, our branch of Christianity really isn't big on anything that remotely hints that God isn't flat-out thrilled with us just the way we are. Even though we are supposed to call ourselves Calvinists, our primary allegiance lies with Luther and his emphasis on grace; how we do love to rest ourselves in God's eternal willingness to overlook our failures and inadequacies!

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, never one to mince words, called that 'cheap grace'. "Of course you have sinned, but now everything is forgiven so you can stay as you are and enjoy the consolations of forgiveness." Cheap grace is lazy. It says 'why bother? What's the point?' God won't love me any more than he does now, or forgive me any less. I can stay just the way I am. I don't need to change. Bonhoeffer writes, "Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without repentance, baptism without church discipline... grace without discipleship." (The Cost of Discipleship)

That's John's wilderness message, isn't it? Repentance. Another one of those concepts we don't throw around much here. And maybe a word we don't understand very well, either. Here's the first thing you need to know about repentance: it isn't easy. Repentance isn't just a prayer of confession and getting on with your life. It's not just being embarrassed by or sorry for who we are and what we have done. It's being genuinely sorry, and then changing. Wanting to be different. Better.

And that leads us to the other thing you need to know about penitence: there are no shortcuts. TLC used to have a home improvement show on called Trading Spaces. Neighbors would drastically and dramatically redo a room in each other's house. They'd practically gut a room, change out flooring, hang new wall coverings, make new window treatments and slipcovers, all in about 24 hours' time. The results were pretty amazing. But from what I heard, pretty deceptive, too. All that glittered was not gold. For the TV cameras it looked great, but close inspection showed shortcuts and poor workmanship. The 'improvement' was only skin deep.

There's a reason that Malachi used the images of a refiner's fire and the fuller's soap, instead of a good coat of paint or a face lift. If you've ever seen a sheep close up, you know that their wool is full of sticks, and mats, and ground in dirt and all sorts of things that sheep who graze in the great outdoors are likely to get into. The impurities in both the wool and the metal are embedded. They can't be polished out or hidden or camouflaged. A dunk in a vat of dye won't cover them. A skilled and laborious process is needed to rid them of their imperfections and flaws. There are no shortcuts, no glossing over, no pretty or impressive embellishments to mask hidden flaws.

But isn't that what most of us try to do? Instead of dealing with the impurities and flaws and dirt deep inside us, we pretty-up the outside. Instead of doing the hard work of repentance, of going through the refiner's fire and the fuller's soap, we settle for being good, being a better person. In his book, *The Furious Longing of God*, Brennan Manning writes, "Where did we get the idea that...the kingdom that [Jesus] proclaimed [is] nothing more than a community of men and women who go to church on Sunday... read their Bibles every now and then, vigorously oppose abortion, don't watch x-rated movies...smile a lot, hold doors open for people...and get along with everybody? Is that why Jesus went through the bleak and bloody horror of Calvary?...To make nicer men and women with better morals? [No] He lived, died, and rose again with but one purpose in mind: to make brand-new creations."

Brand-new creations. That's what this whole process of getting ready is all about. Not making ourselves into better people, but letting God make us into new people. Letting God purify us. Refine us. Clean us, inside and out. It's the difference between deciding you aren't going to gossip or make snarky comments about people any more, and having that place inside of you that wants to see other people taken down a notch or two just disappear, be replaced by a love that wants only to build people up. It doesn't require will power or restraint; you don't have to set out to try to watch what you say. It's just the new you, or the real you; the one God created you to be.

Raging fire and caustic soap. Burning away and refining. Not a fun business. But the part that really frightens me is the fact that I am not the one picking and choosing what gets burned off or washed away. When I purge my house every year I know what needs to go – the junk, the old, worn out things, things that have proven useless. The good things, beautiful jewelry, my fine silver, my favorite, comfortable clothes, the books, those things I keep.

I could go around and put tags on a lot of the junk in me that I know needs hauling off. Pride. Insecurities. Doubt. Fear. What troubles me is that there are probably things God would also tag for removal that I always thought of as my good qualities. My strengths. In Flannery

O'Connor's short story, *Revelation*, Mrs. Turpin has a vision of a swinging bridge up from the earth 'through a field of living fire.' And on it, O'Connor writes, a 'vast horde of souls were rumbling toward heaven.' First there were the people she had always disapproved of, whooping and hollering and jumping around. Then behind them were the familiar people, people like herself, 'marching with great dignity, accountable as they had always been for good order and common sense and respectable behavior.' They sang on key. "Yet, she could see by their shocked and altered faces that even their virtues were being burned away."

They had always thought of themselves as refined people, but now, as they marched slowly through the living fire, they were.

Raging fire and caustic soap. Not nearly as cheery as angel visits to young women, and faithful fiancés who vow not to put her away. On the other hand, it is only with the sort of refining work that God puts us through that we might end up being the sort of person who, like Mary, like Joseph, would say 'yes' to God and his troubling, fanciful dreams.