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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, seeking a good God to make things right in the world. A God to eliminate evil and bless the righteous.

Malachi was surrounded by corruption, and God sends this word about a refining fire and fuller's soap.

Today as we hear the words of Malachi, we are reminded of John the Baptist and our Savior Jesus, which is why we hear these words in the season of ***Advent***, the month of ***preparation*** before Christmas.

John the Baptist was the one preparing the way for Jesus, and he too was a prophet with words of ***warning*** for the people of his day. He urged repentance, and he told the people to prepare to be changed—by ***fire***.

Malachi reminds us that the preparation of 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 talk of the refining fire and fuller's soap is a ***tough and surprising*** Christmas message—but but a very ***important*** one.

It is actually ***God's gift of grace*** to all of us—

Because it's the ***preparation we really need*** to see Jesus—now, and in the end.

What ***Christmas movies*** are your favorites?

My all time favorite is *White Christmas*,

but I also love *It's a Wonderful Life*, *Elf*, and *The Family Stone*...and even *National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation*—

with Clark Griswald plugging in his outdoor lights!

Which ones do feel like you have to watch at Christmas?

Have you ever thought about what most of our favorite movies ***have in common?***

Have you noticed that there's usually a ***dysfunctional family*** in the film?

Think about it—all the famous Christmas movies have some kind of trouble in their families and closest 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.

Most of us have complicated relationships,

And 100% of us have families that are not perfect, right?

So maybe we are drawn to the movies because ***they are like us!***

Which brings us to ***Malachi***.

We ***need his message***, as much as we need our favorite Christmas movies.

We need this message of God bringing a refining fire and fuller's soap, because we are ***broken, and sinful, and our lives are a mess!***

We need the ***white hot fire*** that melts metal and draws out all the impurities.

We need the ***lye soap*** that is so strong it can bleach any cloth.

We need God to be the refiner—

the one who melts and molds our lives,

until ***His own image*** is reflected in the perfect shimmering surface of the liquid metal.

That's how a refiner of silver knows it's ready—

when he can look into the shiny surface and ***see his own face!***

That's what God is trying to do in us—in our hearts and homes this Christmas—
 God is trying to *melt and mold us*
until we reflect the image of God!
 Wow.

God is trying to make us the people we were *created to be!*
 Scottish pastor George MacDonald once said,
because we ARE the sons of God, we must become the sons of God.
 Pastor John Eldredge says:
You are a child of God. Now you get to become one.

We believe that God loves us unconditionally.
 The Greek word is *agape*,
 which is very much like a *parent's love* for a child.
 It *doesn't always feel good* to the child,
 Because it includes boundaries, hopes, plans.
 And a kind of *molding*—so that the child grows to become an adult.

When we say God loves us,
 That means that *God wants what is good for us.*
 Which is more than warm fuzzy feelings.
 Because God loves us, and God is all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-good,
 God is *HOLY---*
 And *God wants us to be holy too!*

We don't often think about the judgment of God—
 because we don't believe that God is a 'wrathful judgmental' God.
 But we do believe that *God is holy.*
 Which means, God is against sin.
 God judges actions—including ours.
 God does love us despite our sins.
 But God is *against* sin because God is *for* us.

So, God *wants us to be holy*, like Jesus.
 Thus the refiner's fire and fuller's soap.

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***.

We need to be ***refined and cleansed*** by that love.

We need a ***Savior***.

Someone who can ***make us more like*** the God who created us!

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 happy...

So God out of love-- ***refines us, and cleans*** us,
like a refining fire and a fuller's soap.

Because of Jesus we are forgiven completely, regardless of what we've done---
we are made new!

Fire and soap.

It's a bizarre, and 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, to change us.***

To make us the people we were created to be.

Jesus ***didn't*** come to make us feel ***guilty***.

Jesus came with ***love and grace---to help us change.***

To help us ***be the people*** God created us to be!

Think about the *people who love you?*
 Don't they want you to be 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 allows us to go through the fires of life,
 to be melted, refined,
 until the surface of our heart *shimmers*,
 and God's image is reflected in us.
 God takes *everything* in us, and allows it to be in the refining fire.

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....
this one is white trash, that black 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 *thanks God she is not black, or poor, or ugly, or rude.*

Suddenly the girl (who happens to be named Grace!) takes her book,
 and *throws it at Mrs. Turpin*, and calls her a 'wart hog'.
 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 *revelation*—
 a vision of people marching into heaven.
 And the singing line of people are *not who she expects...*
 people in the front are black, white trash, ugly, and strange.
 Finally at the *end 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.

A refining fire is *not the Christmas card* that we envision for our lives.
 We sing and cook and decorate and gather,
 Wanting to experience the *joy* of Christmas.
 And God wants that for us too.
 We need the *joy of knowing Jesus* was born for us.

But as we prepare for Christmas,
 We realize that *true joy* can come from
 walking through the *waters and fires* of life with God.
 That is a joy that *lasts* far beyond December 25.

We are *ALL walking* through some kind of fire right now.
 The question is, *will we allow God to use it for our good?*

This is *NOT* to say that *God causes* the evil and suffering we encounter,
 But rather that *God walks with us no matter* what we face,
 And God can bring *good* out of anything we experience,
 If we allow that *refining and purifying*.

It's like the words of *Isaiah 43:1-5*:

But now thus says the Lord....

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;*

That last phrase, "***Do not fear, for I am with you***"
is found hundreds of times in the Bible.

With good reason.

We don't need to fear.

We don't need to fear God, or circumstance, or the future.

Because God is ***with*** us.

Because God is ***refining*** us

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

And that's some Good News of the Gospel!

That's the kind of Good News we need as we move toward Christmas,

And allow God to prepare our hearts and homes.

And to that, all God's people said, Amen.