

Polishing the Silver
Malachi 3:1-4
December 6, 2009

How's your "to do" list going? Are you checking things off in a timely fashion?

There are so many things yet to get done before Christmas Day--Houses to decorate; shopping to finish; cookies and pies to bake.

And, for those of you who still like to put on a Christmas Day spread in the classic, formal fashion, there's the silver to polish.

What's that you say? You haven't done that in years? The silver stays up in the china closet year after year, the tarnish darkening it so that nary a gleam of light shines through?

What's that some others of you say? You don't even have any silver? Too much work to keep up, you say?

I understand. I'm right there with you. I try to make the days leading up to Christmas as easy as possible, because there's so much to do.

In truth, isn't that one of the goals of many of the industries and businesses that make up our modern world—to try and find ways to work less and to make the work we do easier.

That's why internet retailers are rolling in the green stuff more and more year after year—because we like the idea of avoiding the hard work of battling traffic and crowds in the malls by doing our shopping in the comfort over our own home, making our choices with just the click of a computer mouse.

And we give thanks for Central Market and Albertson's and all grocery stores who prepare gourmet Christmas dinners to order so that our stove tops and ovens don't ever have to be turned on and dirtied, and we can sit back and watch all the football games.

None of this is bad—it's just not the way the Hebrew prophets prepared for the Feast of Advent.

For some crazy reason, I decided to preach using the Advent scriptures from the prophets this year. I don't know why I did that. Their harsh words clang and clatter about in dissonant ways, rubbing us the wrong way in this time when we want to be lulled by the sweet sounds of Christmas carols.

Most of us are more like the character Ricky Bobby than the prophet Malachi. You may remember that name from the 2006 movie Talledega Nights starring Will Farrell as a race-car driver trying to win on the circuit. We just watched a clip from the movie during our contemporary worship service last week—the part where the family has all gathered for a holiday meal, and Will Farrell's character leads the prayer.

"Dear Lord Baby Jesus" he intones, thankful for the feast that is arrayed before them—pizza from Dominos, KFC and Taco Bell. "Tiny Infant Jesus" he prayerfully utters, thankful for the family members and friends gathered at the table.

At this point, he is interrupted by his wife who encourages him to get on with the prayer, and not to forget that Jesus grows up into a man. "With a beard," grandpa mutters.

Will Farrell explains that he knows all that, but he likes the Christmas Jesus, all cute and cuddly baby. His best friend chimes in that he likes to pray to a Jesus dressed in a tuxedo t-shirt, a sign that the Lord Dude can party. One of the young boys at the table says he likes to pray to Ninja Jesus wielding a Samurai sword.

Farrell then calls them all back to attention, states that he's the one praying, and he's going to pray to the Jesus he wants to. He continues, "Dear 8 lb, 6 oz sweet baby Jesus with your golden fleece diapers."

We can't blame Farrell. We like the sweet baby Jesus, too. For one thing, we feel safe with the image of God as an infant—accessible, sensual as we hold the

baby in our arms. Theologically, we like the surprise of God coming to us not in power and might, but in vulnerability and dependence.

However, Malachi would not have bought it. His image was more like the Samurai image of Jesus that the child, Walker, liked to pray to in the movie.

In fact, the last prophet in the Hebrew scriptures speaks with disgust at those who try to weaken God's power and might with their words. In Ch. 2 vs. 17, he says, "You make God tired with all your talk.

"How do we tire him out?" you ask.

By saying, "God loves sinners and sin alike. God loves all." And also by saying, "Judgment? God's too nice to judge."

"Look! I'm sending my messenger on ahead to clear the way for me. Suddenly, out of the blue, the Leader you've been looking for will enter his Temple—yes, the Messenger of the Covenant, the one you've been waiting for. Look! He's on his way!" A Message from the mouth of God-of-the-Angel-Armies.

But who will be able to stand up to that coming? Who can survive his appearance?"

And here, if Malachi were sitting at Ricky Bobby's table, he would spit out his image of Messiah to whom he prays.

"He'll be like white-hot fire from the smelter's furnace. He'll be like the strongest lye soap at the laundry. He'll take his place as a refiner of silver, as a cleanser of dirty clothes. He'll scrub the Levite priests clean, refine them like gold and silver, until they're fit for God, fit to present offerings of righteousness. Then, and only then, will Judah and Jerusalem be fit and pleasing to God, as they used to be in the years long ago."

Whew! White-hot fire from the smelter's furnace. The strongest lye soap that will peel your skin off if you touch it for too long. Those are tough images, even

frightening. At first hearing, the Lord is gift of God's judgment, not gift of grace.

But then, when you stop to think about it, wasn't that what we heard from a later malachi? Malachi literally translated means "messenger", and there was one who came preaching several centuries later, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand—the voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight."

Malachi's image of the coming of the Messiah sounds tame compared to what John the Baptist proclaimed. "I baptize you with water; but he who is mightier than I is coming, the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor, and to gather the wheat into his granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

No sweet lullabye Away in the Manger. This is Mighty Messiah coming to town.

Frankly, texts like these make us uncomfortable... and yet—they tell us the truth about Jesus. We can't dumb him down. We can't tame him. He is Immanuel, the Messiah, the Son of God.

And we must prepare for his coming.

But even at its harshest, is it really that bad? Are we really challenged with an impossible task of preparation?

Look at the images Malachi uses this morning. The Lord's advent into the world is like the white-hot fire from the smelter's furnace, refining metals like gold and silver.

What Malachi is referring to is the process of metallurgy, taking ores high in metal content, heating them at such high temps that the softer metals melt into a pure liquid form. Then, as the liquefied metals cool, they can be shaped into whatever design or tool we need, hardens into usefulness.

The heat causes the purifying of the rock. The dregs are separated from the pure metal so that in the ends, what is of highest value, shining beautifully.

Most of you are wearing some form of a purified metal now, whether it is on your wedding ring finger, or belt buckle, or even in your mouth. In order for them to be of use, to be of value, to shine, worthless debris has to be shed.

Likewise the grime and dirt which weighs us down, brings disease, and hides the beauty of the original material whether it be cloth, flesh or soul, must be cleansed with soap and water. Haven't we heard that this last year with the onslaught of the H1N1 virus? The best preventative is to wash your hands with soap and water.

Jesus' advent into the world is a process that purifies, cleans up, makes precious and whole again. And yes, the process, like the polishing of silver, is hard work, takes a lot of elbow grease. But in the end, it's worth it. In the end, we're worth it.

A retired ministerial colleague has spent half his lifetime trying to take Malachi's words to heart. Most of us would think of it as the strangest of Christmas lists. Frank called it "My Refinement List." He first made one out when he was 45 years old. He worked at it faithfully for 29 years. In all that time it had remained a secret, that is until he was 74 and a grandfather.

He had been working on it one Saturday in Advent when the grandkids dropped by. He left this year's list on his desk in his study. Sometime that afternoon, his youngest grandchild came into the room with the piece of paper clutched in hand and asked, "What's this?"

"A special Christmas list," answered Frank, a bit vaguely.

"Is it what you want?" asked the boy.

"It's not that kind of a list," answered Frank.

"Is it what you're going to give other people?" the boy asked, wishing he could read.

"Well, no, it's not that kind of a list either." Then groping for words to explain something he felt was important and wanted to pass on, Frank lifted the boy into his lap.

"A few weeks before Christmas I just write down the things I'd like God to help me get rid of, like selfishness, or being impatient with your grandmother, or wanting too many things for myself. I figure the more I get rid of things like that, the more I'll be able to rejoice in the good things God gives us all."

We all have "to do" lists floating around our homes. With each gift bought, each chore done, we check them off and move onto the next item. We want everything to be ready by the time Christmas day arrives.

But are we ready for the day Christ arrives? If you were to make a "Christmas Refinement list" what would you put on it? Was Grandpa Frank's list of trying to rid himself of selfishness, impatience and covetousness familiar to you? Or are there other items that make the list?

Malachi had made a list, too—not so much for himself, but for his whole community. He wanted them to rid themselves of religious faithlessness, of moral erosion, and of the whining and complaining. He urged his people to regularly attend worship, to take what was taught in worship to heart and live their lives righteously in God's way, and to quit belly-aching about how hard life was.

In order for us to savor and enjoy the Feast of Advent, a lot of hard work has to be done. There is silver in all of us that has tarnished through of years of neglect. There is something shining and beautiful in all of us that has been hidden with the grime of years of addictions, or narcissism, or cynicism.

We're on God's to do list. God is ready to work with us—if we allow—to clean up. That might mean having to go through some hard days of change—changes in attitude—fighting our prejudices about people who are different

from us; changes in our choices of how we earn our money, and how we spend it; changes in how we treat ourselves and others.

What is it that you would like God to burn out of you—to purify you with that laser-love that excises all that tarnishes your soul?

I would like to invite all of us this year to make one more list—our refinement list. I suppose it is kind of like those lists we make for new year's resolutions—and indeed, Advent marks the start of a new year in the Christian Calendar.

But instead of thinking of the list as giving something to ourselves—or even to others--how about thinking of how we make ourselves ready to give to our Lord and Savior.

May you shine as newly polished silver on the day Christ is born.