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Malachi 1:1-2a, 6-14, 3:1-4, 16-18
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Malachi: Messenger of God

Well ... here we are ... finally ... the LAST Minor Prophet (YAY!!!!!!!)

In the Christian Bible, Malachi is also the last book in The Old Testament. By contrast, the Jewish Scriptures (often called the Old Testament by many Christians) end with 2 Chronicles.

The books in each are the same. There are 39. But their order is different.

The Hebrew version of scripture ends with King Cyrus of Persia being commanded by God to release the Babylonian captives and rebuild the temple in Jerusalem (2 Chronicles 36:22-23). Which he does.

Don't you just love happy endings?

The Christian version of the Old Testament ends a bit more somberly. Malachi describes at length the failures of the temple system and the corruption of its priesthood (Malachi 1:6-2:12).

He then closes his book by predicting Elijah's return and the coming of "the great and terrible day of the Lord" (Malachi 4:1-6). Yikes!

Malachi is a prelude to the gospel identification of John the Baptist with Elijah, the epistle to the Hebrew's depiction of Jesus as our great High Priest (chs. 5-8), and the Christian emphasis on Christ's second coming.

Malachi also sounds a kind of universalistic note. Verse 1:11 depicts all nations worshiping God. Which, of course, is a precursor to Jesus' command to the disciples to take the gospel to the ends of the earth.

Malachi means "My Messenger". Although, there is some debate amongst biblical scholars, it is widely accepted that Malachi was not actually the name of an individual, but rather a title.

He is mentioned nowhere else by name in the Bible. And the Jewish historian, Josephus, who wrote sometime after the death and resurrection of Jesus, mentions all the other 'players' in the period, but makes no mention of Malachi.

The writing of the book is, therefore, widely attributed to Ezra.

Malachi was written around 460 BCE, when Israel was a subject nation of the Persian empire, ruled by a governor (1:8).

The situation is this – The temple has been re-built, the walls have been re-built, the priesthood has been re-established, and sacrifices have recommenced at the temple.

They are reasonably secure from their enemies, so, all should be looking rosy!

And yet Malachi calls out a corrupt priesthood (Mal 1:6-8), who were accepting the poorest of the herd or flock for sacrifice.

And, many people were murmuring that serving the Lord was meaningless. God seemed to be indifferent to what was fair and, indeed, was not a God of justice at all (2:17 and 3:13-15).

Adultery was commonplace. Lying under oath was a frequent experience in the courts.

The poor were oppressed, laborers were cheated by their employers. Hospitality to the stranger was rare.

Magicians and sorcerers were consulted more than the Lord (3:5).

They were tired of waiting for God to do something great among them. They were beginning to wonder if God really blessed people for their faith.

It seemed to them that evil people prospered better than the faithful did. And, they wondered if their faith was worthwhile. Was it worth the effort?

Because of their despair, they lost all enthusiasm for their worship. Malachi seemed to be especially concerned about their empty worship.

People began to offer blind animals to God rather than the very best that they had. Even the priests had become lax in their behavior.

They gave as little time as they could. They did their duty, nothing more. Their worship became ritualistic, humdrum, mechanical, and familiar.

Hopefully, that doesn't describe our worship today.

But, do you ever come to church and say: “How long is this going to last?” “Why do we have to sing so much?” And my personal favorite, “Why is the preaching so long?”

Do you come to worship and instead of really worshipping, make a mental list of what you’re going to accomplish when you get home?

If we come to worship only out of duty or of a desire to be seen; if we come to sleep through the sermon when God’s Word is being proclaimed; if we do not join in the singing of his praises, and pay attention to the words we say in the prayers; then we are saying that God is not worth our attention and devotion in worship.

Years ago, Henry Ward Beecher, was one of the most famous preachers in America. People from all over the nation came to worship at his church.

Well, one Sunday he was absent, and a visiting preacher substituted for him. When the visiting minister came to the pulpit the people realized that Henry was gone. Some of the people started for the doors.

The minister said, “May I have your attention. All those who came this morning to worship Henry Ward Beecher may now withdraw from the church. All who came to worship God may stay.”

Worship is, first of all, an attempt to focus our attention on God.

But the Israelites weren't. And when they did, they weren't giving God their best. The animals they presented for sacrifice weren't the best, they were the worst, the castoffs, the leftovers.

What does it mean when we give less than our best? What does it look like to give to God last, instead of first?

It's when I spend an hour in an evening reading the Mercury News cover to cover and then in the five minutes before I fall asleep I read a chapter in the bible or say a short prayer.

That's offering God the leftovers.

It's when we bring to our careers our best energy, our best talent, our best motivation, but when it comes to serving the body of Christ we either sit on the sidelines or look for something that requires the least amount of energy.

It's when we spend a lot of money on ourselves for a summer vacation, but when it comes to giving God an offering we look at the budget and say, "Sorry, I got nothin' left!"

It's when we watch the 49ers score a touchdown and leap off the sofa in jubilation, but in worship we sit passively with our hands on our lap.

It's when we love our kids so much there is nothing we wouldn't give them, but if we're honest our heart doesn't beat that fast for God.

And so, Malachi has a message of warning. “The Lord of hosts comes,” thunders the prophet, “like a refiner’s fire and like fuller’s soap.” Fire burns. We all know that.

And if we’re scrubbed too hard, soap can sting.

When you think about it, Malachi’s prophecy sounds just that--a bit too hard. It sounds to us more threat than promise. Where’s the Good News?

But maybe that’s not giving him enough credit. Malachi is more precise than that. He says our redemption will come like fire, but he is not talking about just any fire.

Not a kitchen fire, not a forest fire. Not a fire that scorches or consumes or destroys, but one that purifies.

It’s a Refiner’s Fire, a fire that melts away the crud to reveal something essential and precious and pure.

An article shared a story about a group of women who were studying the book of Malachi.

As they were reading chapter three, they came across verse three which states: “He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver.” (Malachi 3:3)

This verse intrigued the women and they wondered what this statement meant about the character and the nature of God.

One of the women offered to look into the process of refining silver and get back to the group at their next Bible study.

That week she contacted a silver smith and made an appointment to meet with him and to watch him at work.

She did not mention anything about the reason for her interest in silver beyond her curiosity about the process of refining silver.

As she watched the silver smith, he held a piece of silver over the fire and let it heat up.

He explained that in refining silver, one needed to hold the silver in the middle of the fire where the flames were the hottest so to burn away all the impurities.

The woman thought about God holding us in such a way over the fire then she thought again about the verse, "He sits as a refiner and purifier of silver."

She asked the silver smith if it was true that he had to sit there in front of the fire the whole time the silver was being refined.

The man answered that yes, he not only had to sit there holding the silver, but he also had to keep his eyes on the silver for the entire time it was in the fire.

If the silver was left even a moment too long in the flames, it would be destroyed.

The woman was silent for a moment.

Then she asked the silver smith, "How do you know when the silver is fully refined?"

He smiled at her and answered, "Oh, that's easy when I see my image in it."

We are all going through the process, we are all going through the refiner's fire. We are each called to be transformed ... into the image of Christ.

God is calling us to be Christ-like, to be the reflection of Christ to the world.

The great writer and theologian C.S. Lewis put it this way:

"Once we give God permission, by surrendering our lives to Him, He will not stop that process of purifying us, no matter how painful or unpleasant it may be."

Many of us don't want a God like that. We want a God who intervenes boldly and dramatically, who pulls the strings of the human heart, who moves the chess pieces of human history.

But according to Malachi, God does not control or manipulate. God refines.

This means, I think, that God rarely intervenes, but when God does, it is careful and precise. And it's so subtle we may barely even notice.

It also means that God is not passive. God is still. But, that's a different thing. You see, it is in that eternal stillness that allows God to attend to each one of us.

That's who God is. The Refiner God who remains still before us ... in love.

And then Malachi says our redemption will be like soap. But not just any soap. Not Ivory Soap, not Tide, not a soap that merely cleans surface stains or covers surface smell.

This is Fuller's Soap--the kind of soap that scours and gets underneath each individual fiber of wool making them not just clean but pristine and strong.

Fulling is the process of shrinking a garment to size. The wool goes through a series of hot and cold baths and is scrubbed with a special soap made of alkaline and lye.

It's stretched and pulled and in the process, all the dirt and oils are washed away. The wool fibers interlock tighter and tighter.

The result is a garment of fine tweed. One-third its original size but also three times as strong.

True strength only comes when we allow ourselves to become small enough to be placed into his hands. We're not the crud. We're not the dirt.

However much of that nasty stuff covers our souls and crusts over our hearts, that's not who we really are.

We are like an antique chest--in need of a good stripping before refinishing can begin--but much too valuable in the eyes of our Creator to be ever cast aside.

The prophecy of Malachi may sound harsh, but it's meant to reassure. The very first words, after all, in the Book of Malachi are these, "I have loved you," says the Lord.

This prophecy, you see, is merely an extension of that central claim. "I love you too much," says God the Refiner, God the Fuller, "to ever leave you as you are."

Fire burns and lye soap stings--that's true, but the thing to remember is that it's not just fire and it's more than soap. This is *Refiner's* fire. This is *Fuller's* soap.

The possessive noun makes all the difference. A thug's switchblade and a surgeon's scalpel are both knives. The difference lies in the intent of the hand that grasps them--the purpose of the cut.

One of the best opening lines in young adult literature has to be from C. S. Lewis's book *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*.

"His name was Eustace Clarence Scrubb." That's how the story begins, "Eustace Clarence Scrubb and he almost deserved that name."

Well, no little boy deserves a name like that, but Eustace did come pretty close. He is selfish, he's spoiled, he's aloof, he's indifferent to everyone's feelings except his own.

And in the strange world of Narnia, poor Eustace takes on the form that matches his character. He becomes a scaly, fire-breathing dragon, and nobody can stand to be near him.

But thanks to the Christ-like lion, Aslan, Eustace doesn't stay that way. Aslan leads Eustace to a secret well with huge stone steps that lead down into a bath of water.

As soon as he sees it, Eustace longs to get into the water. He senses somehow that it can heal him.

But he also knows that the healing water will do no good unless he can shed the thick, gnarly skin that covers him.

So, he begins to scratch and to tear at his dragon skin. But try as he might, it is no use. The scales that cover him are too hard, too encrusted to peel away.

But then Aslan steps forward in the moonlight. "You'll have to let me do that," he growled.

"I didn't much want him to," recalled Eustace. "I was afraid of his claws. But there was no other way. So, I lay down; I let him do his work.

"The first tear was so deep I thought it had gone right to my heart. And when Aslan began pulling the skin off, it hurt worse than anything.

"The only thing that made me able to bear it was the feeling of having that beastly stuff peel off of me, once and for all.

"And there I was lying on the grass, as smooth and as soft as a peeled switch. Smaller than I had been before, but stronger too.

"And then Aslan caught hold of me and I didn't like that for I was very tender underneath all that skin.

“He threw me into the water. And it smarted like anything! But only for a moment. Then it became perfectly delicious. I started swimming and splashing about. All the pain had gone.

“And then, I saw why. The scales had fallen away. I was no longer a dragon. I had become my true self again.”

How we long to be healed like that! To become our true selves again. To have those brittle, crusty layers--the ones we think protect us but only weigh us down--to have them peeled away.

And then to be tossed into the stinging waters of redemption.

Malachi beckons us to place our lives in the hands of our Refiner, our Fuller, our Redeemer. It's going to smart a little -- refining, fulling, redeeming always does -- but in the end, it's worth it.

In God's hands, we become our true selves again. As clean as a switch. As pure as silver. As taut as the finest tweed.

And then our worship will take new light, for we will realize who and why we worship an all-loving and grace-filled God.

Amen!