

Second Sunday in Advent

REFINED

Malachi 3:1-4

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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. 2But 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; 3he 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. 4Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of old and as in former years.

DIAGNOSIS: Drop Outs

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Forgetful*

We might guess that the reason God is “sending [his] messenger” was because that the Judean's of Malachi's time simply had gotten distracted from their covenant relationship with God. After all, the circumstances of life have a way of pulling down our human beings' defenses, and drawing us toward other concerns: Conflict at home (marital discord, see 2:16) or concerns about daily business can consume one's attention, for example. And then, imagine, that the God you are accustomed to

hearing from apparently hasn't been speaking lately, and the only word you hear from your priest is confirmation that you can live the kind of life you already live-neglecting your neighbor, dispensing with your wife, calling evil "God's will" (2:10, 11, 16, 17). Wouldn't you imagine that there's little cause for change-particularly in relationship to an absentee God (2:1)?

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : "Lame" Offerings and Lies

God's harsh retort indicates that the Judeans are actually off course in this assumption: God declares that the covenant he made with Levi is a true covenant, and that the lips of the priest are supposed to guard knowledge, and the people should seek out that covenant knowledge, because the priest is intended to be the messenger of the Lord of hosts (2:7, 8). The problem is not with God, the problem is that God's people have neglected the covenant. The problem is that the Judeans in Malachi's time were anything but faithful. ("You have wearied the Lord," 2:17). In fact, despite their objections to God's absence, they are not surprised by their present state of suffering; they just don't see any reason to change their behavior if God remains absent from the scene. Even the priests are haughtily putting their defense before God: "How have we despised your name?" (1:6), they ask defiantly. But God (being omniscient and all) sees it the way it is, so he responds to their defiance directly: You priests make lame offerings (1:7, 2:13, the priests were placing blemished animals on the altar for sacrifice-a clear indication that they believed God had turned a blind eye to their efforts). God says it would be more honest to just shut the temple doors and not kindle the fire at all (1:10).

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : God Is Coming-But Who Can Endure It? (vv. 1, 2)

So when Malachi says that the Judeans soon will meet the Lord "whom you seek" and "in whom you delight," he is being ironical

(3:1). The people can only experience dread at God's coming (in the same way that a once-conscientious teenager might experience dread at getting caught drinking by her parents). Malachi's words are pure warning; which is why he immediately asks, "Who can endure the day of his coming?" (v. 2). Not one of the prophet's hearers can endure God's holy presence. All-even the priests-are "despised and abased before all people" (2:9). Not a single sacrifice they offer will satisfy God's anger (2:13). God has had it, and the only holy response is for God to "put you out of my presence" (2:3). God's wayward people know, if you get too close to God's anger, you get burned.

PROGNOSIS: God Drops In

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *As Refiner and Purifier*

But God's anger is not God's final word. In fact, God has no intention of "scrubbing" his plans for his people; he just wants to refine them (v. 2). So God comes as the "messenger of the covenant" (v. 1). God will deliver his promises directly to his people-you could say God comes as messenger and as covenant message. (He not only gives the covenant, but he alone embodies that promise faithfully.) His covenant is one of life and well-being (2:5). In other words, the God whom Malachi announces is a God whose word has flesh. And the flesh that God puts on his promise is revealed in Jesus, whose forgiveness first acknowledges sin and then announces sin's cure. Jesus comes as God's "messenger of the covenant," not by white-washing sin, but by recognizing it and cleansing those whom it has stained. Jesus is born into the world not to ignore our imperfections and rough existence, but to refine us. And he does so by enduring the very refining fire that should be ours (death), and giving us the polished perfection of his resurrected life. His birth into the world is God's judgment and acquittal. This "messenger of the covenant" born into our world is not safe, but he is definitely

good (see C. S. Lewis's Chronicles of Narnia series).

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Confessing Our Lamé Offerings*

It's hardly the "deck-the-halls" kind of message that we expect to hear at "the most wonderful time of the year." But for those with the faithful ears to hear, it is the message that we Advent people anticipate: God has work to do on us, refining, cleansing, preparing us for his purposes. For we, like our Judean faith ancestors, know two things about ourselves: We have forgotten to listen, and we stopped listening because we thought God wasn't talking. But now that God has caught our attention and our imaginations with Jesus, "the messenger of the covenant," we are eager to hear. And knowing full well what Jesus has been willing to endure for us (incarnation and death), we figure that we need all the refining and scrubbing that God has to give. And, while we are certain that we will not be able to endure the day of the Lord's coming alone (v. 2), we know that Jesus has endured the ultimate judgment, and joins himself to us so that, held by him, we will stand on that final day.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Listening for Messengers*

So we seek the Lord (v. 1) in these Advent days, not because we are smart enough to come up with the idea on our own, but because Jesus ("the messenger of the covenant") points us back to the Lord-who comes as fullers' soap and refiner's fire. And, rather than being lulled by the holiday hypnosis of our culture (get what you want, pay no attention to God, be kind for a season), we listen for the prophetic messengers (Malachi among them) who call us to expect that God is up to the heavy-duty work of refining us and our world through Christ. And that, we trust, is a very good thing-both for us and for our world.