

The book of the prophet Malachi is very short—only 55 verses. And it only comes up in our readings twice every three years, unless February 2 falls on a Sunday, then it's three times in those three years.

Yet, though it is short, Malachi hits our radar screens in several ways, especially this time of year. First off, there's a section in Malachi that talks about giving to God a full tithe. As you might imagine that part of Malachi is often quoted in stewardship sermons towards the end of the year.

But three times, Malachi impacts our Advent and Christmas celebrations.

First off, Malachi is the last book in our Old Testament. And the last verses of this last book speak of a new Elijah who is to come to before the Lord comes.¹ And in most Bibles, you flip a couple pages to the New Testament, and lo and behold, in the Gospels a new Elijah figure shows up wearing an Elijah outfit. He tells the people to repent to prepare for the coming of the Lord. He is John the Baptist, whom we read about every Advent, including today. So Christians see the end of Malachi pointing directly ahead to the coming of John.

Malachi also speaks poetically of another way God comes:
"For you who revere my name the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings."

This image of Jesus as the Sun of Righteousness makes it into 2 seasonal hymns. One of the verses of "O come, O come Emmanuel" contains a reference that gets obscured in the translation from Latin into English:

*O come, thou Dayspring from on high
And cheer us by thy drawing nigh...²*

But the Sun of Righteousness image is explicit in the last verse of "Hark, the herald angels sing." That great hymn says about Jesus:

*Risen with healing in his wings,
light and life to all he brings,
hail, the Sun of Righteousness!
hail, the heaven-born Prince of Peace!³*

We'll sing both of those verses soon in upcoming weeks at St. Paul's.

But today we hear from Malachi chapter 3. Our Old Testament lesson was only 4 short verses. But 3 of those verses are heard in many, many places this time of year. And that's thanks to the great Charles Jennens.

¹ Mal 4:5, "Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes."

² #56, *The Hymnal 1982*

³ #87, *The Hymnal 1982*

If you're not familiar with Charles Jennens, he compiled a masterful text, a libretto, based on combining 80 verses from the Bible. Most of those verses are from the Old Testament. And yet together they paint a portrait of Jesus Christ. Charles Jennens' texts were then set to music by his more famous collaborator. George Frederic Handel put glorious music to Jennens's libretto to form his magnum opus, *Messiah*.

And the section from Malachi comes fairly early, in what is nicknamed the "Christmas" portion of Handel's *Messiah*. In fact, it's part of the 2nd cluster of texts in the work.

Messiah opens with a Sinfonia, a musical overture. Then there's a cluster of texts from Isaiah 40:

"Comfort ye my people...

"Every valley shall be exalted...

"And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed..."

And then in the second cluster of texts, before we get "Behold the virgin shall conceive and bear a son," before we get "For unto us a child is born," before we get "There were shepherds abiding in the fields," we get Malachi.

The second cluster opens with a brief bit from the prophet Haggai about God shaking the heavens and the earth, and how the desire of all nations, that thing which the world longs for shall come.⁴

And then comes Malachi. In scripture, Malachi has been concerned with abuses in the temple. The people are being stingy and greedy. They're not giving their full tithes to God. The priests are being sleazy and greedy. They're keeping the best animals for themselves, and only offering the defective animals in sacrifice to God.

Over and over Malachi calls the people to repentance. But then in ch3, there is a new message from God.

And it's with this new message that *Messiah* dives immediately into this morning's section from Malachi:

"The Lord, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to His temple, even the Messenger of the Covenant, whom you delight in; behold, He shall come, saith the Lord of hosts.

"But who may abide the day of His coming, and who shall stand when He appeareth? For He is like a refiner's fire.

"And He shall purify the sons of Levi, that they may offer unto the Lord an offering in righteousness."⁵

God speaks basically saying, 'You've been seeking for me. You say that you delight in me, you say that you desire me. Well, I'm coming. I will come to you.'

That's a wonderful promise. God promises to come.

⁴ Hag. 2:6-7

⁵ Mal. 3:1-3

But then Malachi asks the tough question. "But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?"

Malachi is asking, 'Are you ready? Are you really ready? You want God to come. But are you really ready? Can you really stand up and face God when he comes?' A tough question.

At first it seems that Malachi is saying the equivalent of, "You'd better watch, you'd better not cry, you'd better not pout, I'm telling you why... God is coming to town."

And if Malachi stopped there, this message might seem rather dire and harsh. But Malachi doesn't stop there. The message continues, "For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap."

God is coming, but he's coming like refiner's fire and fuller's soap.

Refiner's fire at the time was the hottest fire around. It was the white-hot fire you get when you blow a strong stream of air on the coals. And that hot fire was used to refine metal. It was used to remove impurities. It was used to get rid of the crud and keep the good stuff.

Jennens and Handel omit the fuller's soap part. I'm not sure how well it would sing: He is like fuller's soap-----

But Malachi talks about it. Fuller's soap was the strongest soap known at the time. It was a very strong lye soap. It was used to clean and to bleach garments white. It was strong stuff, but it got clothes their whitest white.

God is coming, but he's coming like refiner's fire and fuller's soap.

God is coming to get you cleaned up. God is coming to help you, to get rid of your impurities, to get rid of those things in your life that hold you back from being all that you were created to be.

Malachi continues: "(God) 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."

The descendants of Levi, the priests, and their assistants, will be purified until they are doing what they're supposed to be doing. God will make them right, so that they can present their offerings in righteousness.

The Good News in Malachi is that God himself will come and do for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

Of course, we can make one of two mistakes.

1. We can say, "Well, I'm in pretty good shape. I don't need God's cleansing." That's a common mistake.

But if we're honest, then we can admit that we're not always as clean as we think we are. None of us is perfect. All of us stand in need of God's cleansing and purifying. We all need God's refining fire. We all have parts that get in the way of being fully human. All of us have tarnish that keep us from being the bright shiny people God created us to be.

For those who say, "I'm in pretty good shape; I don't need God's cleansing," the message of Malachi is "submit." God is coming to do something extraordinary for you. Submit to it. Let him cleanse and purify you.

The other common mistake is to say, "I'm so screwed up, there's no hope. There's nothing God can do for me."

If you think that, remember who we're talking about here. We're talking about the creator of the universe, the Living God. What can possibly lie beyond God's power? God offers refining spiritual fire, strong spiritual soap.

Being purified may not be easy. In the chemistry lab it takes extremely hot fire in a red, glowing, ceramic crucible to remove impurities from metal. And yet a strong fire can do it.

If you think, "I'm so screwed up, there's no hope" I would remind you of what the Angel Gabriel said to Mary: "Nothing will be impossible with God."⁶

The message of Malachi is that we have to trust God's power, God's cleansing fire, God's spiritual detergent. In the end, "God will purify."

We heard a similar message in our Gospel. The key sentence in our Gospel lesson is Luke 3:3:

"John went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins."

That's the essence of John's teaching: repentance, submission, forgiveness, and cleansing. Repentance and submission are the things we do. Forgiveness and cleansing are the things God does.

The Greek word for repentance is "metanoia," which literally means a change of mind. We have to have a change of mind, a change of heart, a change of will and intention. Then we have to submit to God's cleansing water.

That's our part.

⁶ Luke 1:37

But when we do, God promises both forgiveness and cleansing.

And this is not a one-time deal. This is a continuing process throughout our lives. None of us is perfect. All of us are under spiritual construction. But God promises that the end result will be wonderful. That's the key verse in our epistle lesson, Philippians 1:6:

"I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ."

God has begun to work with us. And God will keep working with us, if we'll let him.

So let's get cleaned up for Christmas. After all, that's the natural thing to do.

What's the first thing you do before you hold a newborn baby? You wash your hands.

Let's get cleaned up to meet the baby in the manger.

In the next two and a half weeks, let God's refining fire, God's cleansing soap, God's purifying water wash over you. Prepare yourself for the coming of the Messiah.

Offer your heart to God that he might cleanse it.

Open your heart to God that he might dwell there.

Jesus is coming.

Let every heart prepare him room.