

Let's Get Started!

The Second Sunday of Advent
The Reverend Nancy R. Easton

December 10, 2006
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Malachi 3:1-4; Philippians 1:3-11; Luke 3:1-6

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

“For he is like a refiner’s fire and like fuller’s soap.” That is how the prophet Malachi described the one he said was to come. This mystery man was going to come to the temple in Jerusalem and purify the entire priesthood of the Israelites. Maybe Malachi would have appreciated our current insistence on using antibacterial soap and hand sanitizers all over the place, because Malachi makes it sound as if the one he prophesied about was going to be just a wee bit obsessive-compulsive about cleanliness. Karen and Andy, wouldn’t Malachi’s messenger be great to have around your home? He’d make certain that anything Alex might put in his mouth (and he’ll probably put plenty of things in his mouth) would be sterile and pure. Now, Malachi actually uses **two** images of cleansing in this passage. One is of metal refining. When a refiner heats up metals, those metals become molten liquid. The impurities rise to the surface where the refiner skims them off. When the metal cools and hardens, it has been made pure. But Malachi also says the one who is coming is like someone using fuller’s soap. A fuller worked with newly-woven cloth, shrinking it, stretching it, dying it the right color. Except the fuller had to clean the cloth before he put the dye in, else traces of oil and dirt would remain. So he used a special soap to remove the impurities. Yes, in our dirt-conscious culture, we can certainly appreciate someone who would be zealous about cleansing. Someone like my mother . . .

My father loves to tell the story of the time when he was single, and in dental school. He was in the process of moving from one apartment to another. Being a very busy student, as well as having a couple part-time jobs, he did not relish the thought of packing up his belongings and moving to a new place. But my mother, whom he had recently begun dating said, “I’ll help you.” Then she asked, “You’re going to clean the old apartment before you move, aren’t you?” Well, he hadn’t really considered doing that at all. She said, “That’s the proper thing to do, you know. You clean the old place before you move into the new place.” Now, you need to realize she had never been in his apartment. Again, she offered to help, this time with the cleaning. They agreed on Wednesday at noon. So Wednesday morning dawned and my father got up and opened the window blinds, which he had never done before because he really just slept there, and then he went to classes and labs, and then to jobs to pay for the classes and labs. The blind went up, the light filtered in and he realized the place was kind of dirty. Dirty enough that he thought he ought to clean it up a bit before my mother arrived, to make a good impression. He did think she was cute. He went down to a local store and bought a broom, a mop, and a bucket. He asked the clerk what he could use as a cleanser. She mentioned Spic-and-Span powder, which my father purchased. Then he set to work. He swept dirt out of every corner; there were dust balls under the bed and under the chairs and in every nook and cranny. Eventually he had this pile of dust balls and dirt and he didn’t quite know what to do with it except he remembered he had some empty shirt boxes. See, he was a cool and fashionable bachelor, and with leftover money

from his part-time jobs, after he paid his tuition, he would go and buy shirts at these nice department stores. So he took his shirt boxes and filled them with dust balls and put them aside. He would take them down to the garbage later. Next he dumped a bunch of Spic-and-Span powder into a bucket of water, and worked on the bathroom floor. He discovered the floor was not, as he supposed, dark and light gray linoleum squares, but rather red and white squares. Looked pretty good, he thought. Then he decided he should clean off the tops of the tables and the furniture, which were to stay in the apartment for the next tenant. He used the Spic-and-Span. Okay, so the varnish began to peel, but they did look clean. On his way downstairs with the dust-ball-filled shirt boxes, my father noticed the hallway mirror. Written on it in soap was something from the previous tenant, and my father never bothered removing it. The mirror read, "Merry Christmas, the Dunleavy's." He washed that off, figuring the Dunleavy's wouldn't be coming back, and he didn't know them anyway.

It was just about lunchtime. Dad heard footsteps in the hall, heard the knock on the door. He proudly opened it and ushered my mother in. And my mother, whom he now knows much better, looked around, started rolling up her sleeves and said, "This place is a mess. Let's get started!"

That is Malachi's message. "This place is a mess. Let's get started." The Jewish people who heard his word recognized that God was sending someone who would begin that purifying process for them, making them holy in God's sight. Later on, Christians, too, could look at the prophecy of Malachi and interpret it as announcing the arrival of John the Baptist, who certainly could have been viewed as obsessive-compulsive about cleansing the people in preparation for the Lord. For John the Baptist, out in the wilderness, called on the people of Israel to repent of their sins and be baptized in the Jordan River, called them to holy living before the coming of the Lord.

And cleansing **was** needed. In Malachi's time, the priests in Judah sure needed cleansing. They offered far from perfect sacrifices to God in the temple. If you read all of Malachi, which is not a long book at all, you'll find a blistering account of what the priests and the people in Israel were doing in Malachi's time. They violated many of the laws of the covenant God established through Moses. They sacrificed not the best animals, but blemished animals; they were willing to be influenced by other religions if the price was right; they lacked fidelity in their marriages. They pretended to look spic and span, but in reality their linoleum **was** a dark gray.

Move forward a few centuries to the time of John the Baptist, who opens the window blind in Israel and sees the filth. He can see how the people are straying from God. He calls them to repent of their wrongful ways, and like my mother, rolls up his sleeves and says, "This place is a mess. Let's get started!"

Of course, you and I might hesitate a bit to open **our** blinds. What might we find? A host of dust balls, dirt in the corners, skeletons in our closets? Like Malachi's priests, we want to give the appearance of being spic and span. Outwardly we **are** clean, but here (deep inside here), things are not right. From deep inside here come our gossipy remarks, our envy, our excessive pride, our failures to love, our unwillingness to serve God and neighbor. We're not spic and span, and God is no fool.

But what are we to do? Malachi's prophecy took place a long time ago, John the Baptist isn't here, and my mother lives four hours away! Yet somehow cleansing and purifying will take place, but not by our hands. Actually, the clue comes in Malachi's words. Read that lesson carefully. Malachi appears to mention two figures. First he says there is a messenger who will prepare the way. Then immediately he switches to a discussion about the coming of the Lord God. He says the Lord God will come and do that cleansing. Christian scholars debate whether these two figures should be interpreted as Christ's first and second coming (his birth in Bethlehem and his return which we await), or, first, the appearance of John the Baptist and then Jesus. Either way, Malachi's words indicate the Lord God will be like the refiner's fire and the fuller's soap. And he's not coming as a fire to consume us, but as a refiner and cleanser to bring about our transformation. That is certainly our Advent hope for the future: Jesus Christ will come again, and will refine us, setting us apart for life with God. But Jesus has also **already** come, our incarnated One, the babe in Bethlehem. Jesus Christ **has** come and he has died for us, offering forgiveness for our sins—our accumulated dust balls, the dirt in our corners, the skeletons in our closets. That is our Advent reality in the present. God is absolutely, positively obsessive-compulsive about making us into his holy people. He invites us to gather with him here in worship, and what he intends to have happen in this place is one glorious cleansing. First, he's rolled up his sleeves, and with a bucket of water—I mean, the baptismal font—he's already gotten to work in the life of Alexander John. He's pouring out his Holy Spirit upon Alex so that he might grow in faith. And won't it be a joy to watch Alex in the years to come as he grows up, a child of God? Yet that's what we **all** are. God has begun such a good work in us all—all of his children—and he will bring it to completion at the end of all time. See, our Advent reality in the present, and our Advent hope for the future hang together.

In the meantime, today, gathered as his children, we'll share a meal, having been promised Christ's body and blood are being given to us and for us once more, for the forgiveness of sins. Through this meal we're being prepared for God to send us out into the world, ready to do his will. It's as if Jesus Christ is standing among us with a bar of fuller's soap in his hand. Or if you can't quite picture that, then just think of my mother, rolling up her sleeves and eagerly saying, "Let's get started." **AMEN.**