

Second Sunday of Advent
The Reverend John H. Brock

Saturday, December 5, 2009
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

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

Grace to you and peace from God who is, who was, and who is to come. Amen

The back story to the book of Malachi goes like this: The northern kingdom of Israel had fallen to the Assyrians around 721 BC, and the people who lived in the country of Israel, the ten of the twelve “Tribes of Israel” that lived in the northern country of Israel, were carted away and assimilated by the Assyrian culture. So all of those followers of YHWH, as a people, are no more.

Now the southern kingdom, the much smaller southern kingdom of Judah, wherein lies the city of Jerusalem, they hold out against the Assyrians, but they fall to the Babylonians in 587 BC (You don’t need to remember any of those dates, it’s okay). At the very least, though, the ruling elite of Jerusalem are carted away into captivity, in scriptural terms, we call that the “exilic period.” Now on the one hand, this is a very stressful time for the people. They are away from their land; therefore, by the thinking of the day, they are away from their god. They aren’t in the proper place to make the correct sacrifices, and what’s worse, who is there at home, who is guarding the ruins that were Jerusalem? But as often happens, regimes change, kingdoms fall, the Persians beat out the Babylonians, and a guy named Cyrus comes to power.

Under the prompting of a court slave named Nehemiah, Cyrus allows those Jews who are living there in Babylon, who want to return home to Judah, who want to go back to Jerusalem, to do so. Not only are they allowed to return to Jerusalem, but Cyrus okays for the rebuilding of the wall around Jerusalem (this was at a time in history when you built walls around your city). He also gives money from the Persian coffers to rebuild the temple AND even more so, he allows Nehemiah and some other of the priestly class (they’re called Levites, they are descendants of a guy named Levi), Cyrus allows Nehemiah and other Levites to go through the Persian store rooms and find all of the plates and bowls, whatever might be left that had been stolen from the temple in Jerusalem, to find them and bring them back to Jerusalem. That was unheard of in that day. It is an AMAZING bit of politics really for ANY time, let alone to be done by someone whom today we would consider to be a World Power.

So now those people of Judah, the last two tribes of the descendants of Israel, saw their country fall to pieces. They experienced the loneliness of exile, and then discovered what it was like to go home to a ravaged, ruined, bombed out shell of a capital. There was, however, an amazing bit of theological work that transpired for them there on the banks of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in Babylon. Because it was there, while they were in exile, hundreds of miles from their homeland, the people of Judah, the children of Israel, began to understand that their God was not a god of Judah alone. It was while they were far away in Babylon, without the temple, that this whole idea of synagogues began. The idea of continuing their faith, of teaching their children, of being faithful to the manner in which they themselves had been raised. This idea to persevere in faith, in the face of hardship. To continue forward in faith when it would have been easier to just stop or to go back. It was there, in the foreign land of Babylon, that the followers of YHWH learned that

theirs was a God, not of a place, but of a People. It was there, hundreds of miles from the resting place of Abraham - Abraham, the one with whom God had made that first covenant. The covenant of 'I will be your God, you will be my people and your descendants shall outnumber the stars in the sky.' The first covenant that God made, we call that the Abrahamic Covenant, it was while they were not in their homeland. But far, far away from Abraham's final resting place, there in Babylon, is when the people began to understand that Their God was NOT restricted by geography. In the day in which they lived, in the day in which Malachi wrote, the people of Harrisburg had their own gods and the folks up in Enola had their own gods, and the folks over there in Mechanicsburg had their own god, and of course here in Camp Hill we had a very special god, but all those other people had their own god and your god did not go with you when you crossed the river, we all know that. But your god didn't go with you when you went out west to Mechanicsburg or went south to Dillsburg. Your god was restricted geographically. They start to realize that their god **does** indeed go with them when they crossed the river, when they go west or north or south. Their God, the Lord God Almighty, could, would, and does, go with them anywhere, and more importantly, goes with **anyone** that the Lord God so desires to go with.

This is RADICAL. This is Amazing beyond ANYTHING of its day, and for many of us even today. But how had they gotten to this point? What did it take to get the people to understand this concept and to grab hold of this, we can almost say, this divine craziness? It took Pain. It took suffering, and hardship, and loss. The people to whom Malachi is preaching, those to whom he is proclaiming God's word, are those who have left Babylon. They've been living there for seventy years. Most of them were probably born there in Babylon. That was their home, but they left Babylon to return to the land of their ancestors. They left Babylon to go and rebuild Jerusalem, to rebuild the wall, to begin the cleanup. They began to reconstruct the temple. Malachi is preaching to the men and women who have been through, let us say, that hell of separation from their God, from their home, that separation from their heritage, only to find that now, that wound is being healed and they as a people are being made whole. For Malachi, the people needed to be refined, like silver.

I am going to go out on a limb here and guess that most of you don't have a metallurgy degree, because I had to look this up. So what is this whole refining silver stuff, what is that image that he's talking about? I found this example from a journal called *Emphasis*:

"There were a bunch of women who were studying Malachi 3. They puzzled over what it meant that God refined us like silver. So, one of the women offered to do some research. She went to a silversmith and asked to watch him work. She watched as the smith held a piece of silver over a flame. He explained to her that it was important that the silver be held in the hottest part of the flame to insure that all of the impurities are burned away. The woman asked the silversmith if he had to sit there in front of the fire the whole time and the smith replied that not only did he have to sit in front of the fire, he couldn't take his eyes off the silver for a moment, for if the silver was left too long in the flames, it would be ruined." The woman then asked him, "How do you know when the silver is refined?" "Oh, that's easy," the silversmith replied, "when I see my image in it."

Metal needs to be refined, it needs to have the impurities, the imperfection taken out, but in order to do that, it needs to be exposed to extreme heat. Kind of like the descendants of Abraham were as they were exposed to extremes while they were in exile in Babylon.

So let me ask you this: What is it that you need to be refined from? What impurities in your life, what imperfections in your own life, need to be burned away so that you can be a better follower of the Lord God Almighty? I don't need a show of hands, I am not asking you to say them out loud. I'll tell you a few of mine that I am willing to share. I know that I spend far too much time reading about and thinking about and playing with computers and handhelds and smart phones, when I really ought to be, at least I think, reading scripture or commentaries on scripture, or out visiting people, or spending time in prayer. I know that I spend far too much of an inordinate amount of time trying to think of ways to convince my wife to be intimate with me. Because I think she is an amazingly beautiful woman, and she smells wonderful, all in addition to her amazing singing voice. And then I hear the words of John the Baptizer, as we had them read to us tonight. "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight." And I think to myself, what am I doing to prepare for our Lord's coming? How am I being a witness of Christ to those around me? Especially as example when I'm driving down some slowpoke's tailpipe, or waiting impatiently at the two minute stoplight at the corner of Chestnut and 15? (And YES, it is two minutes, I HAVE timed it!)

We need to remember, though, that we are not trying to make ourselves WORTHY of God's love. When we seek to be refined, when we strive to make straight those paths, we have to remember that only God can – and HAS, by the birth of the one whom we are preparing to celebrate – made us worthy of God's love. Still we are called by the waters of our baptism. We are called by the bread and wine that we will join together within a few moments. We are called by the birth of the one whom we will soon celebrate, to strive to prepare ourselves, to refine ourselves, to allow ourselves to be refined, to do the best that we can, to get ready for the Advent of God on earth, the Birth of our Savior. We're called to face the fire. To know that there will be those times in our lives when we think that we just can't go on, but know, too, that in those times, God is with us.

A few years ago on a website called Ravi Zacharias International Ministries, a man named Os Guinness wrote this in one of the sections on that website:

"You know the argument: 'After Auschwitz there can be no God.' But as Victor Frankl points out, the person who wrote that declaration had never been to Auschwitz. In fact, more people deepened or discovered faith while in Auschwitz than lost it."

That refiners fire, the straightening of the path. Get ready God says, because Emmanuel, God is with us always.

Amen.