

Date: December 7, 2003

SUNDAY: Advent 2

SERMON: In the Refiner's Fire

Text(s): Malachi 2:17- 3:4; Luke 3:1-6

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During two of the summers of my university years, I worked on the railroad. Learning to run a huge locomotive, how to read signals, how to couple and uncouple freight cars with finesse with all that power under one's fingertips was, in many ways, a little boy's dream.

Our job was to come out of the railyard to the main line and collect trainloads of iron ore that had been brought there from far away, and then bring that ore into the buildings of the steel mill where the blast furnaces were located so that the iron in the ore could be melted and separated from the baser substances. Afterward, we collected the giant bottle-shaped cars full of molten iron and took them to another part of the mill and emptied them into the molds and presses that would transform them into sheets of rolled steel plate that would then be sent to manufacturers all over the country.

Metals such as iron, copper, gold and silver, which we also use for tools, machines, appliances, jewelry and a host of other products have to go through such a refining process before they're useable. The iron ore that we took into the mills wasn't useful for very much in its unrefined state. Only after it went through the refining fires of the blast furnaces and the immense pressures of the rolling presses did it emerge as something useful.

Among the various dialogues between God and his people in the prophetic oracles we call the Book of Malachi, the dialogue we heard this morning has the refining process as its central concern. At the time this prophecy was uttered in the fifth century before Christ, Judea was a vassal state of Persia, and Persian culture and influence was at its height. The oracle is addressed to the tribe of Levi, the hereditary priesthood, who had come back from Exile, rebuilt the Temple, and now were happy collaborators, not only with

Persian rule, but with Persian mores and customs as well, to the point that Israel's special relationship to God, expressed through the keeping of God's commandments, was in danger of being lost due to the desire of the priests to be considered worthy and respectable servants of the emperor who had granted them the right to return their ancestral homeland. God's message to them through the prophet is that God is, as we might phrase it, "sick and tired" of their cynical religious piety.

The dialogue begins with the prophet's announcement, "*You have wearied the Lord with your words.*" The people are shocked. How could God possibly be displeased with them? They're "the righteous" after all. They've returned from Exile, they've rebuilt Jerusalem, they built a splendid new Temple in which to offer beautiful and appropriate worship. They ask incredulously, "*How have we wearied you?*" Then God replies that he is wearied by their cynicism, "*You have wearied me,*" he tells them, "*by saying, 'All who do evil are good in the sight of the Lord, and he delights in them.'*" In context, this appears to be a reference to their adoption of the Persian custom of easy and frequent divorce. *Also by asking, 'Where is the God of justice?'*"

This is not a message they want to hear. Their respectability and social position, not to speak of their political clout, depend on their maintaining the good will of their Persian overlords.

People who are convinced of their own righteousness never want to hear contrasting opinions. Edward Albee, the Pulitzer prize-winning playwright, speaking at a conference, said that the role of the theater is to hold up a mirror to society and show us the way we really are. "The problem is that most people these days don't think that art should tell us the truth about ourselves." Albee said, "They think art should be self-congratulatory. They want lies in politics and lies in their own lives." That preference for the comfortable lie rather than the uncomfortable truth is at the root of cynicism. Cynicism has no real hope for the future. Cynicism is a contemptuous rejection of a larger meaning or

purpose in the world beyond the circumstances of the present, and the cynic retreats into a self-centered world of easy compromise with whatever happens to be the reality of the present moment.

A heart-felt lament at the lack of justice is not what wearies God, but rather the cynical questioning of the very notion of God's justice. When we accept that injustice is the ultimate reality, and then self-righteously deplore the sad state of affairs while rationalizing our own acquiescence to injustice, that's cynicism. When we lose the capacity to be outraged or horrified or moved to action by the injustices we see around us because we have accepted that that's the way things are and always will be, then we are in danger of wearying God in the same way that the ancient inhabitants of Jerusalem did. And we will be as unprepared to hear God's word as they were. We will be cynically feathering our own nests, sure of our own respectability and worthiness, so that when that Day of God arrives for us, it will burst upon us as a Day of Judgment, a Day of fiery purification. *"But who can endure the day of his coming and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the Lord in justice. Then their offerings will be pleasing to the Lord as in the days of old and as in former years."*

The purpose of God's judgment is not destruction but refinement, not damnation, but purification. God is just, and God will not be pleased until we are just as well.

Flannery O'Connor, that wonderful storyteller from the American South, has a short story called *"Revelation."* In it, a woman named Mrs. Ruby Turpin and her husband Claud sit in the waiting room of a doctor's office. Also in the room are a stylish looking lady with an ill-mannered and sullen teen-aged daughter who is one of the homeliest children Mrs. Turpin has ever seen, as well as a woman and her little boy

whom Mrs. Turpin would classify as "white-trash." Mrs. Turpin, being a gregarious sort, starts up a conversation with the stylish-looking woman whom she regards as being her kind of person—respectable and deserving. As they wait for their turn with the doctor, they converse about many things. Mrs. Turpin feels more and more grateful that she is who she is. She's neither ugly nor poor white trash, and of course, as the conversation reveals, all the people in the waiting room are very happy they're not black.

At one point, the mother of the homely teen-aged girl tries to enlist Mrs. Turpin as an ally in making her daughter ashamed of her ill-mannered attitudes. Mrs. Turpin picks right up on her cue, and says, *"If it's one thing I am, it's grateful. When I think who all I could have been besides myself and what all I got, a little of everything, and a good disposition besides, I just feel like shouting, 'Thank you Jesus, for making everything the way it is!' It could have been different!"*

The sullen teen-aged girl suddenly erupts at this statement and throws a book at Mrs. Turpin, hitting her in the forehead, and then leaps at her trying to choke her. When the others pull her off Mrs. Turpin is so shocked by this action, that she is jolted, for just one moment out of her complacency. She suddenly feels that this girl knows something about her in some deep and personal way, so she asks the girl, *"What do you have to say to me?"*

The girl looks at her with burning eyes and says, *"Go back to hell where you came from you old wart-hog."*

Mrs. Turpin is shocked to the core, and immediately protests, *"I am not," she said tearfully, "a wart hog. From hell."* But the denial had no force. *The girl's eyes and her words, even the tone of her voice, low but clear, directed only to her, brooked no repudiation. She had been singled out for the message, though there was trash in the room to whom it might justly have been applied. . . The message had*

been given to Ruby Turpin, a respectable, hard-working, church-going woman.

For days afterward, Mrs. Turpin cannot get the girl's words out of her mind. She can't get away from the conviction that God has sent her a revelation, and yet she can't accept or make sense of it. How could she be given such a terrible word when she's such a grateful person for all God has blessed her with in life? One evening, a few days later, while she's standing outside in her garden, the sun is beginning to set, and a crimson streak of cloud appears in the sky. Mrs. Turpin begins to rage and shout, and it's clear that though she's ostensibly answering the ill-favored and ill-mannered girl in the waiting room, it's really God she's talking to. "Go on," she yelled, "call me a hog! Call me a hog again! From hell." A final surge of fury shook her, and she roared, "Who do you think you are?"

She stands there looking at the crimson streak of cloud in the evening sky for a long time, and then finally, she begins to break through to the mystery and truth of her revelation and realizes that the fire in her soul is the refiner's fire. *She saw the streak as a vast swinging bridge extending upward from the earth through a field of living fire. Upon it a vast horde of souls were rumbling toward heaven. There were whole companies of white-trash, clean for the first time in their lives, and bands of blacks. . . and battalions of freaks and lunatics, shouting and clapping and leaping like frogs. And bringing up the end of the procession, was a tribe of people whom she recognized at once as those who, like herself and Claud, had always had a little of everything and the God-given wit to use it right. They were marching behind the others with great dignity, accountable as they had always been for good order and common sense and respectable behavior. They alone sang on key. Yet she could see by their shocked and altered faces, that even their virtues were being burned away.*

Advent is a season that offers us a space in which to recognize the complacent and often

cynical virtues in our lives that need to be burned away in the refiner's fire. Advent calls us to a life of reflective prayerfulness and committed action as a way out of cynicism. Advent calls us to prepare to welcome the coming of God in a manner that confounds the world's cynical denial of justice—through the birth of a helpless infant in a stable in Bethlehem, and to see, by faith, in that birth, nothing less than God's promise that his just rule will prevail among human society. Advent calls us to bear witness that the world does not belong to the cynics, but to those who wait in patience and hope for God's justice and who work with faith and courage to allow that just rule to become visible in our lives and in our relationships.

Prayer, not the occasional, crisis-motivated variety, but prayer as a habit of life, prayerfulness as an attentiveness to God at all times and in all circumstances, is the means by which we recognize the signs of the presence of the God of justice, and begin also to recognize where the purification of our own injustice needs to begin. Such attentiveness to God will also make us newly attentive to the needs of our neighbors and inspire us to action. Rather than sitting in our comfortable homes lamenting the absence of God's justice, we will see, as Ruby Turpin saw, that our own salvation is inextricably linked with the salvation of our neighbors, and that the most painful experiences of our lives are occasions for us to allow God to purify us of our fundamental selfishness. The refiner's fire may be hot, but it is so in order that something precious may emerge to beautify both our lives and the life of the world.