

“A Harvest of Righteousness”

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December 6, 2015 Advent 2 Year C

Malachi 3:1-4

Philippians 1:3-11

If you haven't listened to Handel's "Messiah" yet this season, I recommend the part inspired by the words from Malachi Leah read this morning: "I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me ... the messenger of the covenant... He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, (that they may offer unto the Lord an offering in righteousness.)"

What do these words mean? The messenger comes to prepare the way for the Lord. And he does it by arriving suddenly and purifying the sons of Levi... that is, the tribe that served as priests in those days, the religious leaders. It was the priests who were in the hot seat, because they were the ones who represented the people in making offerings to God. And if the priests were corrupt, the offering was not acceptable.

Presbyterians have a different view of religious leaders. We believe that everyone who is following Christ is called to some kind of ministry, whether it is paid or volunteer. Some people are called to be pastors, but working as a nurse or teacher, a car mechanic or computer technician, all of these things can be calls from God. We may be called to work for justice, or simply to provide hospitality. But we are all called to show God's love in our own way in the world. And we all have equal access to God. The clergy are not the only ones to make offerings. You all offer your prayers, resources, time and yourselves to God. And we are all called to be ready for the messenger.

How do we get ready? Well, Malachi says it's like the process of refining silver and gold. Silver is perfected by heating it up until the impurities come to the surface and can be removed. And people are purified the same way. When we are heated up or under pressure, the impurities, the flaws, the sins rise up and are revealed.

I began to understand this after I had my third child, over 27 years ago. Before Zoey was born, I managed to do a good job of being a mother, with a few lapses I chose to ignore. But when I suddenly had a baby, plus a toddler and a 4-year old, my sins and flaws came to the surface in such a consistent way, I could no longer deny them. I was always exhausted and outnumbered. And I was not in control of what was going on around me. So I lapsed into yelling, in the hope that if I yelled loudly enough, everyone else would just shut up and do what I wanted. That may work once or twice, but it's not a good long-term strategy. After a while they stop listening, and I had to face my own impatience and anger. I could have blamed my children or my husband. Instead, it brought me to my knees, where I found forgiveness and grace to help in time of need. It didn't take the problems away, but I had a more realistic view of myself, and I was able to learn from my mistakes and sins. A few good books about conflict resolution also helped a lot.

We may think heat is our enemy, exposing our vulnerability and making us look weak or flawed. Almost everyone manages better without stress. But when the heat is on, it can be an opportunity to face our failings and sins and turn away from them. That's the refiner's fire.

Churches also can be refined or purified during times of stress. Many churches today are stressed out by shrinking membership and loss of money. Some respond by becoming defensive or rigid, holding on to the past and refusing to face reality or change. Many of those churches are closing now. But other congregations decide to see it as an opportunity. They take a hard look at their message and how they communicate it to their neighbors and the world. They challenge themselves and invest in spiritual growth and outreach. And many of them discover new life. That's the refiner's fire.

This church went through a period of stress before I came here 15 years ago, and you came through stronger than before. And now you will be going through another time of stress and uncertainty after I retire in January. Most people would never seek out uncertainty and stress. But inevitably it comes, and when it does, it can be a positive time of refining. If you stay and rise to the challenge, take the time to look honestly at yourselves, it is an opportunity for great learning and growth.

How we respond when life starts to heat up says a lot about who we are. Last Wednesday there was yet another horrible mass shooting, this time in San Bernardino, California. And as is usual when these things come to our attention, people respond with compassion, offering their thoughts and prayers for families of the victims, and their appreciation for the first responders. But where do we go from there? Senator Chris Murphy from Connecticut said, "Your 'thoughts' should be about steps to take to stop this carnage, and your 'prayers' should be for forgiveness if you do nothing — again." Can we "refine" our thoughts and prayers, so that as Malachi wrote, they can be offered to God in righteousness?

Now, when I use the word "righteous," I don't mean "self-righteous." If you are self-righteous, you believe you are right and everyone else is wrong. To be truly righteous means you meet standards of right and wrong that exist apart from yourself. And in the Bible, the standard for righteousness is the covenant relationship, that is, God's promise to watch over the people and be their God, and the people's promise to honor God by keeping the commandments. Righteousness is fulfilling the responsibilities of a relationship, whether that relationship is with other people, or with God. Any act which preserves the covenant relationship is considered righteous. And any act that breaks the covenant is unrighteous. So a righteous person in Israel was one who cared for and defended the poor, the fatherless and the widow, was generous, took care of travelers, treated work animals kindly and servants humanely, was a good steward of the land, and lived at peace with neighbors.

But what is a righteous response to a mass shooting? Ever since it was announced that the perpetrators in California were Muslim, and one had expressed sympathy with ISIS, American Muslims have condemned the violence as inhuman and a distortion of their faith. Still, once again they themselves have become the targets of violence and intimidation. It happened after 9/11. It spiked again, a few weeks ago, after the massacre in Paris. And now again, women wearing head scarves are being attacked, Muslim children are being bullied,

people are receiving death threats, and mosques have been vandalized. Someone shot bullets at a mosque in Connecticut. And a gun-toting crowd of protestors surrounded an Islamic Center in Texas, and later listed the names and addresses of Muslims and what they called “Muslim sympathizers” on Facebook.* What’s the purpose of that?

Then we have political leaders fanning the fire, calling on our government to step up the war on terror, send more troops and more bombs. Governor Christie declared, “Our nation is under siege. What I believe we’re facing is the next world war. This is what we’re in right now already.” And many other presidential candidates are saying similar things.

Is that a righteous response? The refiner’s fire is not there to burn others. It’s there to expose our own weaknesses and flaws so that we can be purified. Those who are purified or refined, have no delusions about anyone’s goodness, not even their own. We know that everyone is capable of both good and bad, and that we are all vulnerable under pressure. If we just lash out, looking for people to blame and punish, we deceive ourselves and are strangers to the truth. And we will have no legs to stand on, when God appears. The refiner’s fire is a call to look at ourselves, reflect on our life together, to confess where we have gotten it wrong, and change. That’s how we prepare the way of the Lord. It’s the call for this second Sunday of Advent, and the call of your life together as a church. Things may heat up, but God is at work calling you to offer your best with integrity and righteousness.

Jonathan read from Paul’s letter to the Philippians this morning, a prayer that they would produce a harvest of righteousness. That’s not just one little act of righteousness, but a whole harvest, a whole field, or life, or community of righteousness, honoring commitments to God and responsibility to others. Paul prayed with joy for all of them, with confidence that God would complete the good work that was begun there. And he prayed that their love would grow and overflow with knowledge and full insight to help them determine what is best.

That’s a good prayer. I pray it for you. You pray it for yourselves, that God would complete the good work that is started here, and that you would grow and overflow with knowledge and love, and discern what is best.

Today we gather at the Table of our Lord. At this table we welcome each other, each an important part of the body of Christ. We come with open hearts, willing to recognize and confess our sin, our weakness, our failures. We come with gratitude, and embrace the forgiveness, grace and love that God offers here. Doubts are welcome too. But we also bring confidence and joy that God is here working within and among you to increase your knowledge and love for each other and for the world, and lead us in the way of righteousness and life. Amen.

*“Muslims in America Condemn Extremists and Fear Anew for Their Lives,” by Laurie Goodstein, [the New York Times](#), Saturday December 4, 2015.