

## Refiner's Fire, Children's Steps, and Peace

Malachi 2:17–3:7

During the medieval period, the four Sundays in Advent were not structured around hope, peace, joy, and love but instead the so-called last things—death, judgment, heaven, and hell. That's a very different wreath.

I'm not advocating that we go back. I'm sure the death, judgment, heaven, and hell Sundays gave rise to plenty of fearmongering sermons to “clean up your act or else,” which is not the gospel of Jesus Christ, who truly is hope, peace, joy, and love.

At the same time, Malachi is a serious book. It is prophetic in the sense of speaking truth, often uncomfortable truths. Malachi's message afflicts the comfortable, rather than comforts the afflicted.

Malachi is structured as a series of questions from Israel, which are then answered by the Lord of Hosts. Our reading in Malachi 2:17 posed the question, “Where is the God of justice?”

Remember that Israel had suffered defeat and exile at the hands of the Assyrians and then the Babylonians. While the Psalms repeat assurances again and again, “The Lord is good; God's steadfast love endures forever,” where is God's love in times of national tragedy?

I remember the day after 9-11 when the campus chapel at my college was packed. Our chaplain, who was a faithful man and good-hearted servant, read from Psalms. It was not the time for Malachi. As I filed out of the chapel, a fellow student asked, “Do you think that God still loves us?”

Such a question rises when people do awful things, when the greedy few take even more from the masses, when water and land are fouled for cheap energy, and when the innocent suffer through no fault of their own. Where is God's love? Where is God's justice?

These are questions of lament, which have their place in the Hebrew scriptures. They have their place in our worship and our prayer life.

However, they are not in Malachi. In this prophetic book, God's response is unequivocal: “I, the Lord, do not change... Ever since the days of your ancestors,

you have turned aside from my statues and have not kept them.” The point is about afflicting the comfortable.

Now, perhaps you are thinking, *well, that's fine for some. But not me! Ok, I might not have followed all the commandments, but I'm mostly a good person.*

Yes, I'm sure you are. I am your pastor, not a prophet. I'm not here to judge or condemn you. I'm not going to give Malachi as a watchword to any of you, much less my own mother!

I would invite all of us to receive Malachi's words as a challenge. Malachi gives the metaphor for this challenge as a refiner's fire. Precious metals are burned in scorching heat in order to remove the faults. The point is for them to shine their brightest and be their most valuable. To get there, however, is a searing process. The metaphor is that, as metals are tarnished and blemished, so humans have transgressions and sins. Burn them away.

There are other metaphors, however, that might reframe sin in less hellfire and brimstone ways. Padraig O Tauma, an Irish poet and theologian, defines sin as “being less than ourselves.”<sup>1</sup> We are created in the divine image, which God called “very good.” Each person has eternity in their heart. Every single one of us has sacred worth.

Sin is falling short of this divine blessing. We, as individuals, as people of faith, and as a nation, have settled with being less than ourselves, less than who we were divinely created to be.

In Malachi, the Israelites have their shortcomings named by the Lord of Hosts. Individuals fall short with certain behaviors, like adultery and lying. There are also ways that the entire society is less than who they were created to be, such as underpaying workers and neglecting to care for orphans and widows. These are sins of shortcomings.

The irony, however, is that less can be a blessing. If we desire less, we might be more at peace. Take it from Wendell Berry: “All goes back to the earth, and so I do not desire pride of excess or power, but the contentments made by those who have had little.”<sup>2</sup> Less can be more.

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<sup>1</sup> O Tauma's book, *In the Shelter*

<sup>2</sup> Berry, “The Want of Peace”

Malachi speaks to more than just individual attitudes of consumption. He addressed societal sins and shortcomings. The Lord decries how the Israelites “thrust aside the alien” or immigrant. Why is God burning hot with anger? The people knew better. In Deuteronomy, the Lord tells the Israelites to care for the immigrants, for “You were once slaves in the land of the Egyptians.” We ought not to judge the ancient Israelites. It is a sad, sorry aspect of human history that the oppressed often become the oppressors.

Yesterday marked 83 years since the attack on Pearl Harbor. The brutal, surprise attack on December 7, 1941, plunged the United States into World War II. Obviously, the Japanese attack was sinful. Yet, what is also undeniable is the brutal treatment of Japanese Americans. Law-abiding citizens were forced into internment camps. We fell short of our moral standards? Have we learned from these mistakes?

Phil Klay, a Marine who served in the Iraq war, described the torture of Iraqis in the infamous Abu Ghraib prison.<sup>3</sup> In 2003, thousands of Iraqi soldiers had surrendered to American forces, confident that they would be treated well. Abu Ghraib changed that. American interrogators used techniques designed to humiliate and degrade prisoners. By 2004, insurgent attacks had increased. General Stanley McCrystal claimed mistreatment of detainees in Abu Ghraib “was the single most important motivating factor” convincing jihadists to wage war. Falling short of our highest moral standards bear violent consequences in the long run.

Klay speaks as a Marine and a truth-telling prophet to the heart of the issue much larger than one war: “If we choose to believe in a morally diminished America, an America that pursues its narrow, selfish interest and no more, we can take that course and see how far it gets us. But if we choose to believe that America is not just a set of borders, but a set of principles, we need to act accordingly.”

What might it look like to act accordingly as a person of faith? “Return to me,” says the Lord through Malachi, “and I will return to you.” That is covenant language of the biblical prophets, which placed a high responsibility on human commitment to a set of principles and standards of justice.

Again, I don’t believe sermons about “clean up or else” are true to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. I also believe that the church should act accordingly to our faith. If we say that we believe in grace, if we say we believe that Christ is with us, if we say

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<sup>3</sup> Phil Klay, “What We’re Fighting For” found in *Uncertain Ground*.

we believe that Christ is not dead but a resident in each and every human heart, then our actions must be about love, period. Not easy love. Not cheap grace. Costly grace. Sacrificial love.

This past week, South Koreans showed us the power of democracy. When their elected president declared martial law, the people rose up against that autocratic power. They did not settle for less. They put their actions behind their beliefs. They united and looked out for one another. This is how true peace is possible.

“Return to me,” says the Lord. What might that look like on a personal level? The other day, I had the delight of watching a very young child try to walk—emphasis on the word *try*. The little one’s efforts were not helped by the oversized, puffy coat that, though kept her warm, must have made her top heavy. She pitched head over heels into the grass several times. Unhurt and undaunted, the child continued to stagger and shuffle until she finally reached her destination—the open arms of her daddy, who scooped her up and tickled her through that marshmallow coat, causing the kids peels of laughter to bubble like carbonated holiness.

In the words of the Guatemalan poet: “As the years pass, we make ourselves into children.” We are all children of God, stumbling back to the Holy One, often falling short, yet assured of that love waits for us, longs for us with grace and compassion. Yes, this is a gentler metaphor, but don’t let it replace Malachi’s refiner’s fire. Lay both alongside each other; hold both as a complex picture of the mystery. Have a childlike faith; be humbled by the fiery rhetoric of the prophets. See how far that can take us. See how far we might journey together toward justice and true peace.

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