

***The Refiner's Fire***  
**Malachi 3:1-4; Philippians 1:3-11**

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Ancient mythology tells the story of Daedalus who was shut up and imprisoned in a tower. As he sought means of escape, he realized he was not able to leave either by land or sea. Undaunted, he said, "Minos (my captor) may control the land and sea, but not the region of the air."<sup>1</sup> Daedalus made wings for himself and secured the wings with wax. He made a set of wings for himself and his young son Icarus, and then taught his son how to fly. When the time came for their escape Daedalus cautioned Icarus not to fly too low for the damp would clog the wings, nor fly too high, for the heat of the sun would melt the wings. Keep a moderate height. But exhilarated by the thrill of flying Icarus flew too close to the sun, the wax melted, the wings came off, and he plunged to his death. Certainly one of the warnings we draw from this famous myth is do not fly too close to the sun.

The sun, that great ball of fire, has the power to destroy. Fire itself has the power to destroy. That reality is enough to capture our attention when the prophet Malachi speaks about a coming one who will be like a refiner's fire. In a religious context the image of fire is frequently connected to judgment and condemnation, as when one is credited with preaching fire and brimstone. The prophet alerts us that the fire is a force to be reckoned with, asking, "Who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears?" If you encounter the heat of this refiner's fire, will you be plunged into death and destruction like young Icarus?

Malachi awakens images of two people who play a central role in the work of God. The use of the phrase "my messenger, who will prepare the way before me," (3:1) and the later promise to send the prophet Elijah who will turn the hearts of the parents to their children, and the hearts of the children to their parents (4:5,6) brings to mind the messenger who plays such a prominent role in the Gospels, the one we know as John the Baptist. Because the messenger is associated with John the Baptist, the one he prepares the way for is of course Jesus.

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Bulfinch, *Bulfinch's Mythology*, 146.

If that is the case then Jesus would be the one who comes with the refiner's fire. The note of urgency found in Malachi about this refiner's fire warns us not to take the coming of our Lord lightly. But to link the word refiner to the word fire gives us hope that the ultimate intention of our Lord's fire is not to destroy and bring death. A refiner's fire burns away the impurities and leaves something pure, in terms of a relationship with God, something holy. Encountering the refiner's fire might well be very painful, but the promise is that it yields a new life, a life where all that is old and destructive, hurtful and harmful is purged in the flames.

It seems to me that to encounter Jesus is to encounter the refiner's fire, a fire that makes pure and holy what was once impure and marred. In fact, whereas Icarus drew too close to the sun and met his destruction, those who draw close to Jesus are met with salvation. The Great Refiner cleanses impurities and brings new life, new creation, new beginning, and new hope. The old is gone, refined and purged, and new life comes. So it is that the prophecy of Malachi comes to a close by once again looking at the coming one and referring to him as "The son of righteousness who will rise with healing in his rays."

Peter preached a fiery sermon in Acts 2 on the Day of Pentecost. You can almost feel the flames licking the large crowd that gathered as he recounts the suffering and death of Jesus, the suffering and death that came at the hands of everyone there, the crowds, the Roman rulers and the religious rulers, so that at the end of the sermon he proclaims, "Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah." The rejection of Jesus by everyone was the ultimate betrayal of God, refusing to acknowledge and accept the Son of God who came to heal the nations. And yet the crucifixion of Jesus, the death of Jesus, was used by God to cover the sin and brokenness of this world, and instead of destruction, the Refiner's Fire brought a chance for a new life, for individuals, and for the whole world. Peter preaches his fiery sermon and it cuts to the heart. Fire burns. It cuts the people to the heart. With genuine remorse and contrition they ask, "What shall we do?"

The answer from Peter clearly spells the path to new life. “Repent and be baptized.” Repent is to turn and go in a new direction. To be baptized is to acknowledge that the old things in life have come to an end, have died...so we go under the waters of baptism...and the new things in life have come to life...we rise from the waters, taking our part in the death and resurrection of Jesus. Death...fire burns...and resurrection...draw near to the Refiner’s Fire and be made pure and holy. We truly rise with Jesus Christ into the newness of his resurrection life.

What follows in Acts is so important. Does the Refiner’s Fire purify? Does the Refiner’s Fire make holy? Acts 2:42-47 tells about a community of people, a community that repents, a community that is baptized, a community that lives a new life. They devoted themselves to God. They devoted themselves to Jesus Christ as God’s Beloved Son. They devoted themselves to living as a community that practiced the love of God in every part of their lives. They had been refined by the fire, and something pure, something holy, something true, something right emerged. When the prophet Malachi told of the refiner’s fire coming to purify, that prophecy is followed by a harsh critique of the people for some of the ways they were failing to follow God. The critique, the harsh critique is that in their community they were defrauding laborers of their wages, they were oppressing the widows and the fatherless, they were depriving the foreigners of justice. (Malachi 3:5) Those circumstances in a community do not stand up against the judgment of God. They need to be burned up and consumed so that a community of righteousness and justice and compassion and kindness can emerge, can flourish.

A sign that the church in Acts has encountered the Refiner’s Fire is the way they cared for every single person, sharing what they possessed, selling and giving to meet the needs. Instead of a community that ignored or overlooked the needs of the weak, the vulnerable, the stranger, the alien, and the oppressed, they lived into the fullness of God’s command to be openhearted and openhanded to those in need, so much so that at least for one moment in time, we read in Acts 4:34 that there were no needy persons. When you encounter Jesus, when we encounter Jesus, and the Refiner sets his fire on us, there will be a dramatic change in how we treat the least, the last, and the lost.

Another sign that the church in Acts has encountered the Refiner's Fire was in their devotion. They devoted themselves to the teaching of the Apostles, to fellowship, to breaking bread, and to prayer. In a real way they kept drawing near to the Refiner and to his Fire. They met Jesus again and again in studying the teachings of scripture, in gathering as the community of faith, around the table in worship and adoration of the one who gave his life so that we might have life, and in prayer. An encounter with Jesus is not a one-time experience, not something we do periodically or when convenient. He is an all-consuming fire, and we offer ourselves to him as living sacrifices. The death we die in baptism is a death to ourselves. As Paul said, "I have been crucified in Christ and it is no longer I who live. Christ lives in me." Christ does indeed live within us, and so the only worthy response is to offer our lives to him again and again and again, to be devoted to Jesus Christ. Icarus should have avoided the fire of the sun. We cannot survive without drawing ever closer to the refining fire of the Son.

The readings for this second Sunday in Advent include not only the prophecy of Malachi about the refiner's fire, there is also a short reading from the letter Paul wrote to the church in Philippi. I don't know why Philippians was included for this second Sunday in Advent, but it could well be that they were an example of a church, a community of believers who had not only encountered the Refiner's Fire, but continued to encounter the Refiner's Fire as they drew closer and closer in their relationship with Jesus Christ. Hear Paul as he says to this group of believers:

*I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus...and this is my prayer, that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory of God. Phil 1:3-11 selected*

Paul describes a community of believers living out their salvation, growing in their faith, letting something that has a beginning keep moving forward until that great and glorious end when our Lord returns once and for all. They are not stuck. They are not stagnant. They are not drifting away and complacent. They are drawing nearer and nearer and nearer, closer and closer and closer, deeper and deeper and deeper in their relationship with Jesus Christ. That is what happens when you encounter the one who is the Refiner and his Fire.

As we gather for worship this morning after yet another mass shooting, this time in southern California, the importance of being in a growing and life-giving relationship with Jesus Christ, allowing him to be our refiner, constantly purifying us and making us holy, filling us with his love and grace, stands out now more than ever. There have been so many shootings it is hard to keep track. All stand out for the terrible sadness and loss of life. Two in particular stand out for the response of the ones attacked. In October of 2006 ten young girls were killed in a one-room schoolhouse, an Amish schoolhouse. One of the ways the Amish community worked through their grief was by reaching out with grace and compassion toward the killer's family. "The afternoon of the shooting an Amish grandfather of one of the girls who was killed expressed forgiveness toward the killer, Charles Roberts. That same day Amish neighbors visited the Roberts family to comfort them in their sorrow and pain.<sup>2</sup> People asked how they could forgive. It was through their faith in Jesus Christ. When a young man opened fire in a South Carolina church after sitting with the very ones he attacked in a Bible Study, that church gave witness to the presence in their lives of the Refining Fire of Jesus Christ as they expressed their desire to offer forgiveness. People of God, even as we shake our heads and our hearts break over the violence that seems to be everywhere, the darkness and despair, let us not lose sight that now more than ever is the time to practice our faith in things like forgiveness and reconciliation and seeking healing and wholeness, taking our Lord at his word that "Blessed are the peacemakers." We will only find such enduring faith by drawing near to the refining fire of Jesus Christ.

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<sup>2</sup> LancasterPA.com website

While we are called to be peacemakers and to pray for the whole world, God does put us in a particular place at a particular time with a particular call and a particular purpose. Wednesday, December 2, 2015 (just four days ago) there was a long editorial in the Westerly Sun with the title, “A Mission that just won’t end.” In the article the executive director of Jonnycake is quoted as saying that on average they are providing food assistance to 150 more people per month than they did a year ago. The article talked about Jonnycake and the WARM Center, both in Westerly, and the Pawcatuck Neighborhood Center.<sup>3</sup> Now that 150 more people have needs than last year, maybe it is time to throw up our hands and say we will always have the poor among us. Maybe we throw up our hands. Or maybe we draw nearer and nearer to Jesus, who said whenever you did it to the least of these, you did it to me. Maybe we draw near to Jesus and his refining fire and let him set our hearts afire in new and deeper ways, so that instead of throwing up our hands we extend our hands.

And like those early believers, that early church, we devote ourselves to Jesus Christ. Their hearts were pierced when they heard about a God who would suffer and die so that we might have life. They asked, “What should we do?” The response was repent and be baptized. Repent and let the refiner burn away all the impurities and all the brokenness, all the hurting, all the shame, all the pride, all the failure, all that separates us from God and keeps us from living into the fullness of his grace and mercy, his peace and his love. Baptism was the sign and the symbol that our God does give new life.

A church had a baptism. At that church when there was a baptism an elder would ask the congregation who stands with the person being baptized. The church had a baptism and a good number of folks stood up for the one being baptized that day. Following the service a woman came forward and said, “Trina has had a baby, and well, the baby ought to be baptized, shouldn’t it?” Trina was the woman’s daughter. The pastor suggested Trina come with her husband and they could talk about baptism. Her mother said, “Trina has no husband. She was confirmed in this church, came to youth group, but then got involved with an older boy. Now she is pregnant. She is only eighteen.” When the pastor heard

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<sup>3</sup> Westerly Sun, December 2, 2015, p. A4.

there was no husband he mumbled and said he would have to meet with the Session.

When Session met there was more mumbling and questions about who the father was. Eventually they approved having the baptism on one of the Sundays of Advent, but the approval was reluctant. The Sunday came, the church was filled since it was almost Christmas. The rumored snow had not come and the crowd was full. The service proceeded until the point when the pastor announced for those being presented for baptism to come forward. An elder read from a small card, “Trina Corey presents her son, James, for baptism.” He awkwardly stared at the card. Trina got up from where she was seated and came to the front, holding two-month old James in her arms. The scene was as awkward as everyone expected. Yet it was Advent, and as this young mother stood there alone, with her baby boy, some couldn’t help thinking about another young, unwed mother, and the difficult circumstances surrounding the birth of her child. In another time and place, Mary and Trina seemed like close sisters.

True to their tradition the time came to ask who stands with the one being baptized. The pastor looked out on the congregation and said, “Who stands with this child?” He looked at Trina’s mother, dressed in her meager way, and nodded toward her. She came forward hesitantly and stood by her daughter and grandson. There they stood, the three of them, Trina, the young single mother, her baby boy James, and Trina’s mother. In a sense they stood alone. The pastor’s eyes returned to the book he was using for the baptism service. As he resumed reading he was aware there was some movement in the congregation. A couple of elders stood up. Then several others also stood. Then the sixth-grade Sunday school teacher stood. A young couple, new to the church, they stood up. And then, before the pastor’s astonished eyes, the whole church was standing, moving forward, clustering around the baby. Trina, the mother was crying. Her mother was gripping the altar rail. And the baby boy, little Jimmy, as the water touched his forehead, grew peaceful and calm. And the story ends, “The whole congregation gathered if this were their child, as if they were all family.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Michael Lindval, “The Good News From Northhaven, as appears with some adjustments from Will Willimon in Pulpit Resource, December 2006, p.55.

That image, a congregation standing up and coming forward, one by one until everyone was included, speaks to me of the Refiner's Fire. The waters of baptism draw us in, not a one of us worthy. But we come. We come to the Refiner because his fire does not destroy. His fire purifies and makes us holy. The old dies and passes away, and right before our eyes the new comes. That new life is in Jesus Christ, filled by his Spirit and shaped by his love. These days of Advent, may the fire of the Refiner burn bright. May we come to that fire day by day and moment by moment, letting him shape and mold us, fashion and make us, into his holy people, his beloved family, the church that bears his name.

May the refining fire of Jesus Christ shape and mold us into a community where not only single moms are welcomed, but where every person is welcomed. May the refining fire of Jesus Christ shape and mold us into a community where the depth of our faith leads to bold acts of forgiveness and reconciliation and peacemaking. May the refining fire of Jesus Christ shape and mold us into a community whose concern for the poor and suffering spills out into generous and sacrificial acts of kindness and compassion. May the refining fire of Jesus Christ shape and mold us into a community where every bit of our lives is devoted to our relationship with our Lord, where we are devoted with all our heart and soul and mind and strength to loving Jesus Christ and bringing him the best of our worship, the best of our adoration, and the best of our praise.