

"The Days of Future Passed"  
Sermon delivered 12-6-09  
Immanuel Lutheran Church  
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**Malachi 3:1-4**

*3See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts. 2But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap; 3he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the LORD in righteousness. 4Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of old and as in former years.*

The lesson from Malachi is well described by the *Moody Blues* in the album, "Days of Future Past", with the song, "Late Lament."

**Breathe deep the gathering gloom.  
Watch lights fade from every room.  
Bedsitter people look back and lament.  
Another day's useless energy spent.**

**Impassioned lovers wrestle as one.  
Lonely man cries for love and has none.  
New mother picks up and suckles her son.  
Senior citizens wish they were young.**

**Cold hearted orb that rules the night.  
Removes the colors from our sight.  
Red is grey and yellow, white.  
But we decide which is right,  
And which is an illusion.**

The folks in the Book of the Prophet Malachi struggled the same way many of you struggle when you come out of a tough situation wondering where God was in all of this. The folks in the last book of the Old Testament struggled with the questions, "Why Worship?" "What has God done for me lately?" "What do I get out of this God thing?" "What good does it do to worship, kept he commandments, and "serve" God?" "I have been worshipping all my life, so what is the pay-off?" Like the song..."deciding what is right, and what is an illusion."

The last three books of the Old Testament – Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi were written after the folks got back from the exile in Babylon. They didn't all get on the train at the same time. The first train left in 535 BCE, fulfilling the prophecy of Jeremiah of the Babylonian captivity lasting 70 years. They came back to Jerusalem and saw a city completely devastated, and started laying the foundations for the Temple. The Temple was completed during the time of Zechariah. Ezra conducted the train for the second journey home, and finally Nehemiah, in 445 BCE, lead the third group back to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. This time, Malachi appears on the scene. The view of the folks doing the rebuilding of the Temple and the wall was that "bad things seem to happen to good people, and good things happen to bad people. This is not fair, and where is God and justice in all of this?"

They were deciding which was "right", and which was "illusion." It is like we do when we make decision about God. They argued and questioned God's love, respect the covenant, justice, scarcity, and the pay-off of serving God. The Lord responded to them, and responds to us, with the words from Prophet Malachi, "he is indeed coming...who can endure the day of his coming...for he is like a refiners fire, and fullers soap." What a strange way to talk about the coming of God into your life - fire and soap.

Fire and soap are most appropriate symbols for Advent, the coming and awareness of God's presence in our lives. Most of us cannot see the presence of God because we are looking for God through the lens of deciding what is "right" in our eyes, and what is an "illusion." Filtering out the presence of God through the lens of our own egos, we become blind. This is also known as sin, separation from God, as opposed to the sins we commit. We are used to the situation, and few of us want to change, few of us are even capable of change. Most of us will never change...viewing what is right and what is an illusion, which may change from day to day.

In the heart of hearts, every one of you here this morning want the experience and the presence of God in your life. You may not know it, but most of the time we settle for junk food, and the soul is never satisfied. Perhaps just for a moment, but then we are hungry again. The Book of Malachi is not about you getting your act together, it is about God acting in your life through fire and soap, so that you can experience the presence of God in your life. The Saints called this "the sacredness of the present moment."

God is at work with you, struggling with you as he struggled with Jacob, to cleanse the stains of our sin, separation, by scrubbing the tub of our souls, so that God may have a presence in our lives. Advent is not just about he final coming of Christ, but experiencing the presence of Christ in our daily lives through burning and cleaning. Holy Scripture is about cleanings. Most of us want to be clean. We clean our houses, our cars, our desk, and our bodies, but we neglect our heart, spirit, and soul. I don't think this is because we haven't

tried. I would venture to say it is impossible for us to do this. Yes, we want the presence of God, but we're not sure about the fire and soap. We are accustomed to how we are "doing life" in the world we are living. Because of this, tension emerges with us.

So, like the folks returning from the exile, we need to ask the hard question. "What is the pay-off for having God refine and clean our lives?" We need to ask the question. Richard Rohr, in his book *Everything Belongs*, (a book I will be using through the six weeks in Lent) addresses this question by saying, "there is only one world....in a mature religion, the secular becomes the sacred. We not long have to leave the secular to find the sacred....there is only one world, and it is the supernatural." (159) What God does with fire and soap is a process of opening our eyes to seeing his presence in the world. The goal of Jesus was that his Joy may be in you, and be complete. Who doesn't want this? Who doesn't want to be joyful? This involves looking and seeing that, God is often closer to you than you are to yourself.

So often, God's judgment, fire and soap, is seen as punishment as opposed to a cleaning agent. God's judgment is more about the restoration of joy in your life than it is about punishing you. God is more interested in you and sends people like Nathan, who confronted King David, into our lives with stories, questions, and challenges. Through our families, friends, neighbors and others, God is at work in you. As the old question goes....do you want to be right, or healthy? God is sending people into your life to save you, to make you whole, so you can see the presence of God your life, and this frees you from being the judge of what is right, and what is an illusion. God is more interested in us being joyful, restored, and whole. For many of us, this will be a struggle. Most of the time, it seems God waits until we hit the wall, and then says, "I can."