

“What Will Jesus Find? Refinement”

Reading: Malachi 3:1-4; Philippians 1:3-11

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I was thinking in recent days about what a strange season Advent is. It's not a very “religious” season, as we typically think about religion. In fact it's a departure from a lot of what we normally teach and do. Many religions, and not only the Eastern religions, can preach the message of radical contentment in the moment; exist only in the now and learn to be content in all things. In the church, we spend most of the year offering words of encouragement and hope and trust in God. “Don't be afraid,” we say; we have a constant message that God can be counted on in times of trouble. “Be still and know that I am God,” as the Psalmist says. “Don't worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself,” Jesus says. And that's still true during Advent, since throughout the Christmas story in the Bible the message of the angels is still, “Don't be afraid,” and Christmas is indeed largely about hope and peace.

But even so, Advent is a departure from our regularly scheduled programming. Our message of hope and peace is tweaked to make us a little more uncomfortable than usual. We're not meant to be content in the moment, we're meant to be expectant. We're not content with what God has given us and with what God has already done; we're looking forward to what He has promised to do but hasn't done yet. We're called more urgently to self-examination, confession, repentance, and change. We shouldn't sit calmly in our seats, we should squirm a bit. It's not the expectation that our world has capitalized on, the expectation of more stuff and shiny packages and being entertained. No, it's the expectation of the arrival of Jesus. We focus on the past, and we celebrate Christmas as a remembrance of Jesus' first arrival, and we focus on the future, knowing that He has promised to return, and only then do we focus on the now. Our expectation motivates our examination of ourselves: if Jesus is coming back, what does that mean for us now? What ought we do?

In other words, the message of this season of preparation before Christmas is that Jesus has come, and He will return to complete what He started. When He returns, what will He find? There are all kinds of interpretations of exactly what's going to happen when Jesus returns, and many people have even tried (and failed) to predict when He will return, but the universal proclamation of the church from its very beginning is that Jesus *will* return. We can debate how and when, but the fact that it will happen is a settled issue in the church. Sprinkled throughout the Old Testament, we see a variety of promises and prophecies and assurances about the coming of the Messiah, many of which were fulfilled through the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Likewise, sprinkled through the New Testament we find references to Jesus' Second Coming. Often it's just sort of an offhand mention; it's just assumed that Jesus is coming back.

The story is not complete. Our Lord has come, and He will come again. So we ready ourselves in anticipation since we don't know when. When He arrives, whenever that is, what will He find? What are some of the things we can do to get ready for Him? When the writers of the New Testament mention this return, what are we expected to do to get ready for it?

We read a passage from the beginning of Paul's letter to the church at Philippi, and in those few short verses Paul makes a couple of mentions to the return of Christ. Specifically, he mentions “the Day of Christ” or the “Day of Christ Jesus.” That's another way of referring to the return of Jesus;

the Day of Christ is also called the Day of the Lord, when God finally completes His ages-long work of salvation and makes all things right. That work will be completed with the return of Jesus, so it is His Day. Paul is just getting his letter to the Philippians started, and he begins by expressing his confidence in this congregation of Christians: “He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.” It’s a phrase that illustrates our tension in this Advent season: we are waiting expectantly, but we are not waiting lazily. There’s stuff to be done, changes to be made, work to be completed. We’re not finished, and so we lean forward in anticipation of that Day of Christ Jesus when that work will be done. And at the same time, we live confidently, because this is not our work, it’s God’s work: God will be faithful to complete what He began in us, and so we do not wait futilely. We have hope and confidence in our time of anticipation.

Paul had confidence that God would complete the work He had begun in this congregation. It’s the simple yet foundational idea that there is a transformation taking place in the life of each and every person who comes to Christ, and likewise in every congregation of believers. What will Jesus find when He returns? If, God willing, you and I are alive to see that day, will Jesus find that the work He began in us has progressed nearer to completion? Paul was confident, and His confidence was in God because God is faithful. If the work of God in our lives has stalled, you can bet that He’s not to blame. From the moment you decided to begin following Jesus, He began a work in your life. That work is probably not finished yet. So how’s it going? Is it still progressing, or has it stalled, or even regressed?

Maybe we should back up and ask what that work looks like. There are bound to be all kinds of differences between us, because the grace of God can accomplish many different things and maybe you need a work of God in your life that is quite different than the work of God I need in my life. But generally speaking, what should we be looking for? I’ve titled our sermon “Refinement,” drawing from our Old Testament passage for today from the prophecy of Malachi. Again, the writings from before the first arrival of Jesus are full of expectations of what this promised Messiah would be like, and Malachi’s book includes some of the latest of those writings. He foretells one who “will be like a refiner’s fire or a launderer’s soap.” There were problems in the priesthood in Malachi’s time, and he says that this one from the Lord will “purify” the priesthood and “refine them like gold and silver.”

Refining is not an easy process. It requires putting a material under great heat or pressure or stress, so that any impurities can be melted off or burned up or boiled away. Promising that the Messiah will be like a refiner’s fire may be good news, but it isn’t necessarily pleasant news. It means that He has a work of purification that He intends to accomplish. He began a good work in them, but it got sidetracked or hindered or mucked up, and there’s refining that needs to happen.

Pastor Carey and I visited her family in western Pennsylvania for Thanksgiving, and this was our first big car trip with Junia. She did very well on the whole, but we really didn’t know what to expect. Foremost in my mind was the problem of space; I honestly wasn’t sure how we were going to fit two adults, a three-month-old, a border collie, and all of our luggage for a week into a Toyota Matrix and still have room to breathe. But we planned and packed carefully, and when we had everything loaded into the car, we actually had at least as much extra space as we had before Junia was born. And of course the difference was that we were much more careful in what we packed. We had more space because we didn’t take as much stuff, because we thought through whether we were

really going to need each item we packed. There was no need to take a bunch of stuff that might just come in handy in such-and-such a circumstance; no room for fluff.

That's the work of refining. There's something that you want, and anything that isn't that thing gets cut out or removed or burned away. It's not always an easy decision, and it's not always pleasant, but it's part of the work of purification. So what has God started in you, and what is getting in the way of that work? What will Jesus find in your life and in the life of our church?

Since throughout Advent we don't just look ahead to Jesus' return, we also look back to His birth, maybe we can also consider what Jesus found when He came the first time. If we were to continue reading in Malachi's prophecy, God says, "So I will come to put you on trial. I will be quick to testify against sorcerers, adulterers and perjurers, against those who defraud laborers of their wages, who oppress the widows and the fatherless, and deprive the foreigners among you of justice, but do not fear me." It's a pretty serious list of sins, and certainly that sort of thing was still going on when Jesus was born several hundred years later. But one of the most consistent things Jesus faced throughout His preaching was the self-righteousness and the false pride of many of the people He encountered. There were entire movements of people who decided that they would refine themselves of all of those awful sins Malachi and the other prophets preached about, but in the process they ended up making holiness less about knowing God and more about adhering to an ever-increasing list of laws. The spirit of the law was sacrificed to the letter of the law, and the letter of the law became a tool for gaining and maintaining power over the weak.

In other words, after Jesus' first arrival, He found all sorts of people who had added all kinds of things to God's definition of holiness, who came up with their own priorities and then tried to sanctify them as belonging to God. So the refinement that was needed was not only to remove the accumulated sin, but also to burn away the burdens people had added to knowing God.

So what does this refinement look like in our lives today? Paul speaks of it in Philippians as discernment. It's the ability, or the willingness to sift between what is worthwhile and what is not, what is good and what is bad, what is meaningful and what is futile. Discernment is judging the quality of the options before you, so that your choice of action is the best choice. "This is my prayer," Paul says to the Philippians, "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 and praise of God." Malachi preached of a refining fire burning away all the impurities that existed among his people; Paul preached of discerning what is best, what will bear the fruit of righteousness that is love.

So, when Jesus returns, what will He find in your life? What will He find in the life of this church? What work has God started in you that He will be faithful to complete, assuming you're being faithful to Him in response? There are times when God calls people to a specific task, a specific vocation, or a specific challenge. There are times when the work He begins in you is a mission He wants you to contribute your time and energy and resources to, when He invites you to bear the fruit of righteousness through a certain action or a cause. Maybe He is calling you to reach out to a neighbor or to participate in a ministry. There are other times when God begins the work of bearing the fruit of righteousness through a certain practice or virtue in your life; maybe He's calling you to be more patient or more loving in your words. Maybe there's a habit or a sin that He's calling you to give

up. But upon all of us there is the call to Christlikeness, to being refined until that which does not reflect the image of our Lord is removed. Upon all of us there is that call to transformation from what we are into what God created us to be, and what can only be realized as we welcome His faithful work in our lives.

In this season of Advent, as we prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus, we proclaim again with the church through the ages that Jesus will return. When He returns, what will He find? Will He find people concerned with self-righteousness, as He encountered the first time? Will He find you still at the beginning of the work He began in you? Or will you use this season of Advent to take stock, to examine yourself and the work God began in you, to see where He will take you?



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