

FIRST READING: Malachi 3:1-4

¹See, 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.

GOSPEL: Luke 3:1-6

¹In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, ²during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. ³He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, ⁴as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,

“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.

⁵Every valley shall be filled,
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,
and the crooked shall be made straight,
and the rough ways made smooth;

⁶and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’”

SERMON:

There's Softsoap and Dial.

Ivory and Irish Spring.

Mr. Clean and Mrs. Meyer's.

But peruse the soap aisle at your local superstore, and you will not find fullers' soap.

That is because fullers' soap has a very specific purpose.

Fullers' soap is used to clean raw sheep's wool.

See, when the fleece is shorn from a sheep once a year, it's covered in a waxy coating called lanolin.

Lanolin is actually what gives the sheep a waterproof covering, but it's got to come off before the wool is dyed with color or spun into yarn.

And you strip lanolin off the fleece by using fullers' soap, a very harsh chemical cleaning agent.

It's basically pure lye diluted with water.

In the old days, they'd make this mixture and stomp on or wash with it on washboard.

But that mixing and process must be precise.

Using fullers' soap to clean fleece must be done with precision and care or else the chemicals can burn you.

Using fullers' soap is therefore a dangerous, risky business.

And it's a totalizing project—all the fleece treated with fullers' soap will get some level of clean.

There's no protecting one spot over another from the chemical cleansing.

Similarly, with refiner's fire.

Refining by fire removes impurities from metals before working with them.

It also requires a lot of precision and care, for if you use too much heat, you'll ruin the whole batch;

and if you don't use enough, the impurities will not separate out.

Refining with fire is a dangerous and risky process.

And it, like cleaning wool with fullers' soap, is one that is totalizing:

when done right, the impurities always separate; there's no saving some portion inside the metal.

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On this Second Sunday of Advent, the prophet Malachi presents us with a picture of God's messenger working like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap.

From this simile, we get the impression that this messenger works with precision and care, takes on dangerous and risky tasks, and operates with a totalizing, universal sweep.

This is how God's messenger works, the Lord says to Malachi.

And if God's messenger is in this business, then it follows that God too works with precision and care, takes on dangerous and risky tasks, and operates with a totalizing, universal sweep.

We see this process of God and the messenger at work in our Gospel reading today, when with laser-like precision, God's Word cuts through the political tower built upon Tiberius and Pilate and Herod and Philip and Lysanias to come to John.

Yes, with great precision and care, the Word of God side steps even the religious establishment of Annas and Caiaphas to seize a camel-wearing, locust-eating prophet named John who lives on the fringes.

And like fullers' soap and refiner's fire, the Word of God that arrives in John's mouth is a risky one.

A dangerous one.

For whatever means you would use to flatten mountains and fill in valleys—probably slave labor then, most likely dynamite and cranes now—it is risky work.

Hard-hat-wearing kind of work, done with the potential for great danger to yourself and risk to those around you.

The coming of this Word is precise.

It's dangerous.

And the word that John proclaims is totalizing and universal in scope.

For *every* valley shall be filled,

and *every* mountain shall be made low

and *all flesh* shall see the salvation of God.

No thing or person is exempt.

There's no saving or protecting any part from the messenger's and God's project.

The precision, the danger, the totality of this message doesn't just affect its hearers.

It also affects God.

We tend to think of God as far off and protected from danger, doing what God wants to the select or elect to whom God wants to do it to.

But when God comes as the Word made flesh, when God comes in Christ Jesus, a human, suddenly God is exposed to all the same danger and totalizing effects of fullers' soap and refining fire.

This is how God, in Christ's coming, operates.

In Christ, God chooses to act and to speak with the precision of a surgeon with a laser scalpel.

In Christ, God scours and mills and fills the wool of the world like an expert washerwoman, and purifies the metal like a master blacksmith, and also suffers mortal wounds in the process.

With precision, God comes into the person of Christ, born as Jesus to Mary and Joseph. Risking divine holiness and endangering celestial protection, God comes to earth and dies on earth.

God dares to live with and among us, to die for us in order to save us.

Daring to save all of us and all parts of us.

For all flesh sees the salvation of God.

God's precision and daring on our behalf is a total gift.

We can do nothing to earn it, nothing to make it happen, nor can we resist what God has done for us.

We can't isolate some part of our lives from God's work, because God's gift of grace and salvation has totalizing effects.

And we can do **nothing** to adequately respond to this gift;

our whole lives are spent attempting a service and stewardship of it.

What we *can do* is service and steward this gift *in precise, totalizing, and daring ways*.

We can use Godly methods to render the materials at our disposal back unto God.

We may not have precious metal or sheep to shear, but we do have money.

And like working with refiner's fire or fullers' soap, turning our money over to God requires precision and care;

it means considering and watching our personal budgets as closely as many of us already do, but with more than just ourselves and our families in mind.

And turning money over to God is risky and dangerous, because it means entrusting to others with what we ourselves possess, and that typically is a very daring thing to do.

And giving money to give back to God is a totalizing endeavor.

We're typically inclined to compartmentalize our money for God.

We say, "Here's what I give to God," setting aside this money for God, giving God Sunday morning and a daily prayer doing a service project here-and-there; but nobody pretends that God wants or needs *all* of our resources.

Yet the truth is that giving God any of our money means recognizing that no sphere of human activity escapes God's scrutiny and work.

Yes, God asks for some portion of what we have.

Yes, this portion will never be enough to reciprocate what God has done for us.

Yet God's coming and asking for our preparation and lives has implications for **all** our money, because it forces us to recognize that **everything** belongs to God.

The season of Advent calls us to stewardship, because when Christ comes, God's grace permeates all of our lives, including our wallets and our bank accounts.

It is precise and risky and totalizing.

Because when Christ comes, Christ comes for all of our being.

And when we allow Christ to refine us, when we return ourselves *and the materials within our reach* back to God, then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem, the offering of Chesterfield and Lutheran Church of Our Saviour, the offering of you and me, is pleasing to the Lord as in the days of old and as in former years.

Today, God invites us into this offering.

Specifically, through the church asking for our financial commitment to the mission of Jesus as collectively witnessed in this place.

But there are other ways to participate in this offering.

For other aspects of our lives.

And I invite you to consider those too.

Even if you are not going to complete a Commitment Card, you can make a commitment.

You can imagine one precise and daring response to God's grace that you can make.

Maybe it's forgiving.

Maybe it's loving.

Or serving or worshipping or contributing creatively.

Think on it over the next week.

And come to worship next Sunday ready to share it with God.

For we all have ourselves to offer totally, precisely, and daringly.

AMEN.

PRAYERS OF INTERCESSION:

A: You fill us with joyful expectation. Make the church ready for the message that prepares the way, that with uprightness of heart and holy joy we may eagerly await the kingdom of your Son.

God of timeless grace, hear us and help us.

You promise that every valley shall be filled and every mountain shall be made low. Protect the beautiful resources of our commonwealth: its Shenandoah Valley, Blue Ridge Mountains, and Appalachian plateau. Where the crooked wish to exploit your creation, straighten their ways and smooth their roughness.

God of the holiness, hear us and help us.

Your saints long for one another with the compassion of Christ Jesus. Give food to all the hungry and drink to all the thirsty. Send light to those who dwell in the darkness of addiction, depression, anxiety, and grief. Fulfill the needs of those on our prayer list: Tim, Diane, Terry, Nancy, Whitten, Carmen, Sandy, Wanda, Charles, Helen, Ruth, Rachel, and Cindy, and all those we name to you with voice or in heart.

God of tender compassion, hear us and help us.

Your Word bypassed the emperors and governors and rulers and high priests and settled on John in the wilderness. Help us follow wherever you Word treks, searching out the alienated, the disenfranchised, and the dispossessed. Grant the spirit of knowledge and fear of the Lord to all those in political or ecclesial power.

God of the holy prophets of old, hear us and help us.

Generations show us your faithfulness and witness to your covenant. We thank you for the saints who have shaped our paths of faith, especially Herb. Shine your light on those who mourn and prepare us for that day when we will see you face-to-face.

God of our ancestors, hear us and help us.

We are confident that the Holy Spirit intercedes for us, so we bring to you these prayers and those unspoken to you, in the name of Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.