

GOD'S SUNRISE WILL BREAK – A 2ND Sunday of Advent Sermon, Year C, 2006

Malachi 3:1-4 (NRSV)

Luke 1:68-79 (Peterson paraphrase) - “And you, child, will go ahead to prepare the master’s ways of heartfelt mercies and forgiveness.” Through God’s heartfelt mercies, God’s Sunrise will break upon us, shining on those in the dark, those sitting in the shadow of death, and showing us all the way, one foot at a time, down the path of peace.”

Last Sunday, in our 8:45 AM discussion we kept noticing that for every topic we touched on that morning, we could readily think of a good related theme song. It makes for a great game. So to accompany our need for a strong sense of community, we’d sing “*We All Need Somebody to Lean On*”, and, to accompany the need to sometimes stand up alone, like the Old Testament prophets did, for an unpopular cause, we could sing, “*Jesus Walked That Lonesome Valley, He Had to Walk It By Himself*.” There’s a song for just about every mood and thought we’ve ever experienced.

You who love great classical music or who were churchgoers during mainstream American Protestantism’s peak years, hear echoes of the Bass aria from Handel’s Messiah whenever you encounter the words from the Old Testament prophet Malachi: *But who may abide the day of his coming? And who shall stand when he appeareth? For he is like a refiner’s fire.*”

The words to that carol are not sentimental. God save us, please, from artificial syrupy, cheap commercialized co-opting of this significant season supposedly dedicated to lives truly being radically transformed! And though I stubbornly resist the desire of many to sing the old familiar carols too early in the Advent season, I will confess that one syrupy sentimental song does come to mind for me when I hear the words of Handel’s bass aria. It may surprise you which one. It’s not a Christmas carol. It’s from the old Hollywood musical, *The Music Man*, and the song is, *Gary, Indiana*. (*Gary, Indiana, my home sweet home*).

For God is like a refiner’s fire – and my mind’s eye is drawn to the refinery fires of Gary, Indiana’s old fire-breathing steel mills. I often used to travel, via the South Shore train, right through Gary Indiana on my way up to see friends above the Indiana Dunes Lake Michigan shoreline. Even in those days, only a few refineries were still functioning there, but they made a lasting impression. To start singing the jolly old Music Man song as I sped through Gary, Indiana seemed ironic to the hilt. Sure, it’s still ‘home sweet home’ to some, but to most people it seems a rather dreadful place, a vast, harsh ghetto. It became much worse when, under the overly-permissive auspices of corporate ‘free trade’ in the Reagan era, Gary lost its once-thriving heavy industrial base to Mexican border towns. And when Mexican workers also started to organize for fair wages, benefits, and environmental safeguards, the steel mills just moved on to China and Indonesia. ‘Home sweet home’ Gary, Indiana became a desperate place upon their departure – Tijuana and Mexicali did too. Gary, Indiana is now partially prettified and financially reinvigorated by huge gambling casinos that float out onto Lake Michigan. But while I was there, some steel refineries along the south shore were still spewing flames of fire and air pollutants into the murky air. A refinery is, of course, an industrial plant for purifying crude substances, such as petroleum, ore, sugar, or fat. To refine, then, means “to reduce it to a pure state, to purify to free away coarse characteristics, to become free of impurities,” in the case of

steel to become stainless steel (an ironic adjective, stainless, since the impurities don't disappear, but rather stain the atmosphere). But I often found myself struck by a stark, contrasting kind of beauty that these fire-breathing old rust belt structures had about them, with the unique sandy lake shore ecosystem (itself endangered yet still very much alive) as a backdrop, and so close to old stately, often boarded up ghetto mansions. I doubt if I would find today's Gary, Indiana gambling casinos any more beautiful.

Since there are so few functioning steel refineries in the US now, it's important to restate what once would have been obvious. The passage from Malachi is saying that the messenger sent to prepare the way for God's entry into our lives comes like a refiner's fire. So getting ready for God during Advent may be like going through a harsh and dreadful place! Getting ready may even be like being in a boiler room furnace, smack dab at the center of a non-consuming flame. Not an easy thing, not sweet or glamorous at all to look down deep inside our souls, reducing, refining, simplifying and purifying what's there through prayer—even prayer of the sweating blood variety. But this kind of stark, roughly contrasting beauty is what Advent – as distinct from Christmas - is about. He is like a refiner's fire! It has to be that way. Trying to rush headlong to Christmas sweetness just doesn't cut it.

We also hear in the Malachi text of another profession strange to today's high-tech postindustrial world: we are told the Advent messenger is like a fuller's soap. "To full" means "to make full". Henri Nouwen says that two words describe our contemporary dilemma – we are both "filled" and "unfulfilled" at the same time. By "filled" Nouwen means busy, "like over packed suitcases bursting at the seams." And we all know what unfulfilled means. By contrast, in Biblical times, a fuller's job was to increase the weight and bulk of cloth by shrinking, beating, or pressing, to make it compact, to prepare cloth for usage." To be a fuller was to prepare cloth material, in particular, to pre-shrink it and to raise it's nap so it could be sold and used and in a way, fulfilled – made to have a fitting purpose. If God's messenger comes to us like a fuller's soap, our spiritual coming clean may pack a bit of a wallop too. We have to first get emptied out before God can enter in, before we can be fulfilled and fit for purposeful life. Maybe, like so much cotton cloth, we will get shrunken, scrubbed raw, beaten down, pressed flat, and bristled up in the process.

To receive the Advent messenger, then, might be a bit like being processed through a refiner's fire, or through a fuller's soap. Who may abide the day of his coming? Indeed! Unless one is an extreme masochist, sweating blood, being burned like raw metal or scrubbed down like unshrunken cloth are not things we look forward to. To the extent that you have ever felt beaten down, brushed off, burnt out, or made to feel small, you don't want to go seeking out more of the same. And to suggest that the messenger, Malachi or John the Baptizer or whoever it is that prepares the way for the love of God to enter our lives today, comes in like manner, is not a pleasant situation to contemplate, Who can stand when he appeareth?

But scripture offers us some less brutal Advent preparation imagery too. I started out reflecting on songs; let me add that our New Testament reading for today was also originally a song, the Song of Zachariah, and though I don't know the tune, it's words are powerful. It's about the surprising birth of Zachariah's son, John the Baptizer, the one who became the fiery messenger who announced the coming of the Christ. "And you, child, will go ahead to prepare the Master's

ways of mercy and forgiveness. And through God's heartfelt mercies, God's sunrise will break upon all of us – shining on all of us who feel we are in the dark; shining on all of us who feel we are sitting in the shadow of death; shining on all of us to show us the path to go on, one foot at a time, to peace.

Have you actually looked at God's sunrise anytime lately? It's one thing to mentally know that it rises at a different place in the sky in winter. But to see it on a clear winter morning is to experience it differently – as if for the first time. Notice too that you can't rush it I wake up and have to wait hours now for it. It comes later.

Take time to wait for and see the more stark and subtle natural beauty of this season. God's sunrise still breaks, but to catch sight of it, to be ready to appreciate winter beauty requires more of us. Zachariah's song, like that of Malachi, speaks of preparing the way, and preparation is, by its very nature, not something easy to do. Getting ready for a big change of any kind – a big move, a new job, a drastic loss, a dramatic change of priorities, these are tough things, but most important things are. Certainly getting ready for the coming of God into our lives is a tough thing too. And peace is as hard-won as any war – both the global sort of peace as well as the inner kind. Preparation of any significance costs us something.

But it makes a world of difference if our Advent preparation experience is of the self-emptying, refining and cleansing kind that prepares us to be filled with real peace. The more trivial and overly commercial kinds of preparation so prevalent in our culture at this time of year may only leave us with a sense of vague discontent, boredom, or depression, and may only prepare us for a constant repetition of the same, with continually diminishing returns. It's important to know what our discomfort in waiting—may be telling us. Advent's a time to consider how and for what we really are preparing – both what are our means and what is our goal! The clutter of more mundane expectations may not allow room for any refining or purifying of the spirit. Maybe the frantic busy-ness of Christmas only delays Christ's coming. Let every heart prepare...Prepare what? Prepare room, make space, observe Sabbath, find prayerful center, get in touch with inner peace, make room for God with us. Prepare for the good yet to be. Prepare how? Live in the moment, trust in God, be content with simple things, make all the way to peace and joy a way of peace and joy. Don't do the other kinds of preparation if they further distract you from living in and trusting the Advent moment itself, the preparation time, as much as the moment yet to come. Instead, let every heart prepare Christ room! Start fresh with needed confession; get at self-knowledge; even allow yourself to enter the refiner's fire, to be purified, emptied, in order to eventually be made as full as a fuller's finest and most colorful apparel; filled, finally, not with our many preoccupations, but filled, at last, with the peace of Christ. Then will heaven and nature sing! May it soon be so! Amen.