

Being refined

The text before us from Malachi this morning is probably one of the more unfamiliar ones in the Lectionary. And it uses some interesting terms; terms which would have been easily understood by the original audience. Refining which still carries much the same meaning of reducing impurities is one. Although we don't think of it in terms of using fire to remove other elements from silver, but more as a type of polishing or making more elegant. Fullers' soap is a term we probably have not encountered elsewhere. Unless we pursue its meaning, we can only guess at that meaning. We guess by using the connection and context within the verse so we attribute much the same meaning to it. Malachi is not a prophet whose words or context are often part of our studies of the prophets. We are much more likely to be familiar with the words of Isaiah and Jeremiah who were messengers before the exile. Malachi was a post-exilic prophet, for even after their return to the Promised Land and the rebuilding of the Temple, the people of the covenant strayed from God's ways. This prophet's words were placed at the end of the Hebrew Scriptures because early church leaders viewed them as predicting the coming of Jesus. Malachi 3:1: "See, 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." Using those words as the key element in the passage, it is easy to view Malachi's words as a prophecy—a prediction. This understanding then makes Malachi's words a foretelling of the arrival of John the Baptist to prepare the way for Jesus. This is then an appropriate way to end Hebrew Scriptures and begin those of the gospels which narrate Jesus' life, ministry, death, resurrection and ascension. Within the Jewish canon however, Malachi takes its place among the writings as a word from God to the people about their way of living. When we view this word from the Lord as a predictor rather than a truth teller we fail to understand that the mission of prophets Biblically was never about prediction the future. It was always about conveying a message to the chosen of the Lord; usually a message about how they had been disobedient; how they had failed to live into their covenant promises. Prediction of the coming of the infant Jesus—that probably was not the expectation of Malachi's writer. In Hebrew Malachi translates literally as my messenger. Unlike the writings of most prophets, there is no information given about the prophet who speaks this word from the Lord. It could easily be that this name attributed to the speaker comes only from the perspective that he viewed himself as God's messenger. One sent to bring a message to the people of his time. The literal meaning of Malachi may have been a Hebrew pun on his name; it may have actually been the prophet's name, or it may have been a description of the role God gave to him—to deliver this message to a people disobedient again. Malachi is not only the messenger of the Lord; he is a paragon of what a messenger is supposed to do. Through his ministry, he brings the message God will restore the world to purity once again. God's messenger is tasked with the mission of clearing obstacles to the Lord's coming. For Malachi those obstacles are given as being like impurities that require the use of the refining fire and Fullers' soap. Malachi assures the people that the Lord is coming to his temple—and coming suddenly. This sudden coming is a message which echoes throughout scripture reminding the people that there is no set time that they can anticipate the Lord's arrival. This sudden arrival indicates there is a need to always be prepared. The arrival is sure,

but the timing is not and cannot be known until it happens. After giving that assurance, Malachi like the pre-exilic prophets then issues a word of warning about what this coming of the Lord will mean. Malachi 3: 2-3: "But 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; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver." I think there this ancient messenger has a message for us that is still true which can be seen as more truth telling than prediction even for us today. Malachi speaks of the judgment that the Lord will make. Malachi 3: 5 states "Then I will draw near to you for judgment; I will bear witness against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired workers in their wages, the widows and the orphan, against those who thrust aside the alien, and who do not fear me, says the Lord of hosts." It seems Malachi is describing a two-fold process—first there will be a refining or purification, then there will be judgment against those who have not been "refined". What does it mean to be refined? Why does the Lord of hosts see this as a necessary step? And how does the Lord accomplish this purpose? These are three questions I would like to lift up for us to consider. First, what does refining accomplish? In Malachi's example, the fire burns away impurities leaving behind a purer piece of silver. A Fuller was someone who cleaned and thickened freshly-woven woolen cloth. The soap used was an alkali made from plant ashes and used to scour the cloth. The Fuller used this and Fuller's clay for cleaning, bleaching, wetting and beating the wool fibers into a desirable condition. I have not viewed either of these processes, but I can see how this process in many ways describes the process which God uses in each of our lives. There are many references to judgment in our sacred texts, but I think that doesn't fully express what God intends to do with us. The purpose of refining, whether it is applied to precious metals or fine wool, is to remove any impurities that might weaken or disfigure what is being refined. In Malachi the refining is to happen "until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness." The refining is to change our behavior so that those things listed which are examples of disobedience to God's ways are no longer part of our behavior. So God desires a relationship with us which has the goal of making—transforming—us to becoming all that we were meant to be—beings made in God's image. The judge who is coming will look carefully at just how we have been treating those members of our community who are on the margins, who struggle for daily bread and fulfilled life. That aspect of our lives is fundamental to the relationship with God for we are to love God with all that we are and our neighbor as ourselves. Establishing that relationship with others is necessary for us to also have that relationship with God. The images used by Malachi indicate something about the why God sends messengers to do this refining. The metaphors involve things that are precious—the fire refines gold and silver, the Fullers' soap refines fine woolen cloth. God sends prophets and messengers because we are precious to God. The how this refining is done seems obvious. The various prophets who brought the message were never completely successful. So God sent another messenger to prepare us for the refiner who has come and whose arrival we celebrate this season. The process of refining is done through the presence of Jesus Christ. Refining us involves instilling in us qualities that shape us into the image of Christ. When the early church leaders made the connection between the writings of Malachi they were recognizing a truth about Jesus Christ. Our gospel passages come from Luke's narrative. The first passage is known as Zechariah's

song where the priest Zechariah offers praise and thanksgiving for the salvation which his vision tells him is coming. In this litany of praise, Zechariah speaks of the role that his son, John the Baptist will play. Luke 1: 76-77—“And you, child will be called the prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins.” Like the image given by Malachi, the messenger’s role was to “prepare the way”; to remove the obstacles which existed between the coming Lord and the people. And the way John was to prepare the people was to speak a call to repentance for the forgiveness of sins as recorded in Luke 3: 1-6 which refers not to Malachi but to Isaiah. The message given about repentance was not just a call to be sorry, but a call to a life-changing repentance, a call to be refined. Those who had more than enough were to share with those who didn’t have enough. And those who had power were not to abuse it. The types of changes John spoke of were like the kinds of changes that are like the purifying of precious metals. This preparation—this refining—would prepare the way for the light to come. Preparation for the Lord’s ways would give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, would guide feet into the way of peace. Advent is a time of looking forward as well as looking back. Luke 3 begins with a clear defining of a specific event within historical time naming seven individuals of power and rank. Yet the word of the Lord comes not to them, but to the son of a priest Zechariah who was in the wilderness, not a seat of power. Just as Emmanuel arrived not in a palace born to royalty, but in a manger to a poor couple living under the oppression of the Roman Empire, the Word of God comes suddenly and unexpectedly among us. We are so precious in God’s sight that he dwelt among us, and still does through the presence of the Holy Spirit. As we walk this Advent journey we need to consider how Emmanuel is working to refine us. The Spirit sent to guide us, to give us hope and peace as God works within history, in unexpected ways and places to refine us, to prepare us for the second coming. Thanks be to God.