

**Second Sunday in Advent – December 6, 2015
Good Shepherd Ev. Lutheran Church**

Pastor Charles Heup

Malachi 3:1-4

The LORD Comes to Clean House!

“See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come,” says the LORD Almighty. But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver. Then the LORD will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness, and the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be acceptable to the LORD, as in days gone by, as in former years.

In Christ Jesus who is the King of glory, dear brothers and sisters in the faith,

Will you be hosting a holiday party this year? Are the relatives coming to your home for Christmas dinner? If so, I suppose you'll be spending some time cleaning the house. Can you imagine how embarrassing it would be to have your guests spot those unsightly stains in your living room carpet, or the cobwebs that are dangling from the dining room ceiling? What about that clutter that tends to accumulate on places like the dining room table? There are sinks to scour, floors to scrub, carpets to vacuum, clutter to stow away and of course bathrooms to sanitize. Maybe I've exaggerated just a bit but with Christmas coming, it's time to clean house perhaps even a bit more carefully than we might normally do.

The Lord Jesus feels the same way-not about his home in heaven, but about the places in which he dwells here on earth. Jesus chooses to live in human hearts-but only in hearts that are pure. Would you describe your heart as a palace fit for such a king, the King of glory? No sinner could rightfully make such a claim for himself. Try as we may, we can never prepare our hearts to receive such a heavenly guest. But as it turns out, we don't have to. For this Christmas guest is willing to do his own scouring and scrubbing. As we learn from the Prophet Malachi-

THE LORD COMES TO CLEAN HOUSE! How does he go about this work? As we shall see, 1) he comes to remove all sin; 2) he comes to refine our faith; and 3) he comes to receive our thanks.

The words of Scripture which we are meditating on today are some of the last that God spoke to his Old Testament believers-people with whom we share so much in common. Now unfortunately that's not exactly a compliment. These people were waiting for the LORD as we are. But while waiting, they grew impatient as we so often do. They became impatient because they mistook God's promises of peace and prosperity to mean that their lives here on earth would be filled with nothing but happiness. That in and of itself wouldn't have been so bad. But sadly these people fell into the trap of defining happiness in very earthly terms. For them being happy meant living a rich, painless, and care-free existence.

I'd like you to encourage you to take some time this week to read the book of Malachi. It should take much more than 15- 20 minutes. (But you might be interested in reading it a couple of times to soak in everything the Lord says.) In its four short chapters you will find people who stop at nothing to make themselves happy. When marriage makes them miserable, they get a divorce. When the balances in their bank accounts aren't as high as they'd like them to be, they try to make up the difference by holding back offerings from God and taking advantage of others. This same selfish spirit drives them to constantly compare themselves to everyone else around them; and when it seems that they are not as happy as their neighbors are, they have the

nerve to criticize God, accusing him of causing the wicked to prosper while ignoring the needs of his own people. **"Where is the God of justice?"** (*Malachi 2:17*) they demand to know in the verse just prior to our text. In other words they were voicing the complaint: "It's not fair."

It's not fair. Where is the God of justice? How often haven't we asked the same question for the same selfish reasons? We spend way too much of our time living with the mistaken notion that God wants to make us happy with the same things that make unbelievers happy. God never says, "I want you to be happy like them." But he does say, **"I want you to be holy like me"** (*Leviticus 19:2*). That's the message of the Prophet Malachi and of the messenger named John whom the LORD Almighty sent to prepare selfish hearts like ours for the arrival of the Christ, the Son of God.

It has been said, "Be careful what you pray for, you might just get it." The people of Israel asked, "Where is the God of justice?" Those foolish sinners got their answer. God himself told them, **"See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come"** (*Malachi 3:1*). Where is the God of justice? He's coming soon enough. **"But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap"** (*Malachi 3:2*).

Do we really want to be visited by the God of justice? Do we really want God to be fair, giving us what we deserve? What has our selfishness earned us? What do we have coming to us for our stinginess toward God, for the way we take the time and the talents and the treasures he's given us and use them almost entirely for ourselves. What do we deserve for the horrible way in which we trample over one another's feelings as we make gratifying our own selfish cravings the primary goal of every relationship we're in? Are these the terms on which we want to meet our God, demanding that he satisfy our greed and lust. If so, then we must receive him as he is, with winnowing fork in hand ready to throw us sinful chaff into the blazing and unquenchable fire of his judgment. If we insist on letting sin have a home in our hearts, then, look out! For the LORD comes to clean house! He comes to remove all sin and he can do it for as Malachi says, he is like a launderer's soap, powerful bleach that does away with all sin and sinners.

That's not what we want is it? We don't want God to destroy us. We now know that we deserve his wrath, but we plead for his mercy. We beg him to remove everything that would prevent him from making and keeping his home in our hearts. This is the first part of repentance. The Holy Spirit uses God's law proclaimed by Malachi, and John the Baptist, and all who speak God's truth to convict us of our sins and to strike fear in our hearts over God's threats; and, then, the same Spirit of God uses the Bible's good news to turn our hearts away from love for sin to faith in Jesus and his blood-bought forgiveness.

The Spirit of God always points us to Jesus. Because Malachi is the Spirit's servant, he does the same. Malachi points to Jesus as the one who would arrive on the scene after John the Baptist had preached God's message of repentance. This same Jesus, says Malachi, is a messenger himself, the messenger of God's covenant. He came as the fulfillment of the covenant God made with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He came as the one who kept perfectly every law that God gave his people through Moses at Mount Sinai. Jesus came to establish a new covenant, a covenant in which God promised to turn his blazing fire of his justice against his own Son until the every sin was paid for by Jesus and God could declare all sinners innocent on account of the sacrifice of their holy substitute. Sinners have peace with God through Jesus.

So back to Malachi's question: Who can endure the day of the LORD's coming? You can for he comes to clean house today, not by destroying you along with your sin. No, he comes to your heart through his gospel, and washes away the guilt of your selfishness and all your sin with the stain-removing power of Christ's blood. For as St. John says in first epistle: **"The blood of Jesus, [God's] Son, purifies us from all sin"** (*1 John 1:7*). This is God's promise-the very same promise by which he has brought you to faith in your Savior.

But if you are like me, you may still have some sinful doubt that comes to the surface every once and a while. We wonder if Jesus is enough. Is there something we still have to do in order to be saved? Such doubts weaken our faith. But God who has worked this good gift in us wants to see our faith through to completion until the day we are standing at Jesus' right hand. So the LORD comes to clean house. He comes to refine our faith.

Malachi writes, "**He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver**" (*Malachi 3:3*). The Levites were the people's priests. As such they represented the people's spiritual life. In these New Testament days, God says that all Christians are his royal priests (1 Peter 2:9). He comes to purify us all. But how does he do that? The Apostle Peter explains in his first epistle: "**In this [God's gift of faith] you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith--of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire--may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed**" (*1 Peter 1:6-7*).

In his great love for us, God uses the trials we Christians experience in life to help refine our faith. Through sickness and hardship and every other kind of trouble God teaches us how powerless we are to save ourselves. God chops down every crutch that we would lean on until only he is left. And then, often as a last resort, but always by God's invitation, we call on him in the day of trouble and he delivers us as promised. Like a refiner, God heats up our faith with fiery troubles, skims off the impurities of doubt and then allows our faith to harden once again, purer than it was before. God will repeat this process day after day, week after week, year after year until the faith he has worked and refined sees us home to heaven to the praise, glory and honor of Jesus our Savior.

This faith alone saves us, but faith is never alone. For where there is a heart filled with trust in God's saving promises, there also is a heart filled with a desire to live for and serve the Savior. But how can we sinners hope to offer anything of value to our holy God? On our own we cannot, but we are never on our own. The LORD comes to clean house. He comes to refine our faith. And he comes to receive our thanks. Malachi prophesies: "**Then the LORD will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness, and the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be acceptable to the LORD, as in days gone by, as in former years**" (*Malachi 3:3b-4*).

The good news of Christ's love for us changes our hearts. It deadens our selfish impulses and compels us to live for him who died for us (2 Corinthians 5:15). We live for Jesus by striving to live the righteous life he wants for us. We thank him by offering ourselves to him--our time and treasures and talents. We thank him by giving these same things to one another for in this way we allow the Savior's love to touch the lives of those we know and meet.

Will our selfishness still taint these gifts to God? It will as long as we live on this side of heaven. But here too we can count on God's help. For just as the LORD in his grace cleans house, so he purifies our gifts to him. By the time our tributes reach heaven, the selfishness has been removed; God sees the gifts we offer him always through the filter of Christ's holiness, holiness that God credits to us through the faith he gives us. And so through faith in Jesus, the thank-yous we offer God are acceptable and pleasing in his sight.

What a gracious guest we have living within us! As we spend some time in the weeks ahead getting our houses ready for Christmas, may we also spend some time reflecting on how the LORD cleans house--how he uses Christmas to make our hearts his home until he makes heaven our home, for Jesus' sake. Amen.