

Sermon for Sunday, February 2, 2014 Feast of the Presentation Malachi 3:1-4, Luke 2:22-40 "Cleansed and Made Ready"

We are all about God's joy and love, aren't we? We've had the blessed reminder of God's gift to us, his only Son, Jesus Christ, as we have worked our way through the Christmas season and now into Advent. We've just heard the story of Mary and Joseph bringing the infant Jesus to the temple according to Jewish law, where the very first woman who recognizes the miracle of this baby is in fact blind, the prophetess Anna. But we've also gotten a hint of how hard the journey will be for the child, and for us. After identifying the child as the one for whom all Israel had been waiting, Simeon tells Mary that she will suffer great sadness – a sword will pierce her heart – and that conflict will attend the child's mission.

Not the sort of thing that any mother wants to hear, even one who knows that her child has a particular destiny defined by the Creator.

The story of Jesus' presentation in the Temple is not merely about ritual, not merely about his recognition by the two holiest and most righteous people in the temple, it is about the hard part ahead. We aren't in the land of singing choirs of angels and joy to the world anymore. We are in a hard place, and if we were not convinced of that, we need only look to the Old Testament reading from Malachi to be assured of it.

"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, until they present offerings to the LORD in righteousness."

Clearly, some clean-up work, some refining, some purifying, is to be expected if we are to meet the standard of being a righteous offering to the Lord. To receive God and God's word rightly and righteously, we must be prepared, and it may not be all sweetness and light. We must be stripped of our prejudices, our choice of the world over God, our eagerness for things rather than justice, if we are to be ready to stand before God. Not just warm fuzzy feelings. Not just "well, gee, I show up at church on Sunday, or at least most Sundays, or at least every now and again on Sunday."

No. We are to be refined, purified, prepared. The Lutheran pastor and martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer spoke of this in a sermon he gave in 1928:

"It is very remarkable that we face the thought that God is coming, so calmly, whereas previously peoples trembled at the day of God . . . . We have become so accustomed to the idea of divine love and of God's coming at Christmas that we no longer feel the shiver of fear that God's coming should arouse in us. We are indifferent to the message, taking only the pleasant and agreeable out of it and forgetting the serious aspect, that the God of the world draws near to the people of our little earth and lays claim to us. The coming of God is truly not only glad tidings, but first of all frightening news for every one who has a conscience.

Only when we have felt the terror of the matter, can we recognize the incomparable kindness. God comes into the very midst of evil and of death, and judges the evil in us and in the world. And by judging us, God cleanses and sanctifies us, comes to us with grace and love."

By judging us, God cleanses and sanctifies us, comes to us with grace and love...Just as Jesus was symbolically cleansed – He who needed no cleansing – when he was brought as an infant to the Temple and burnt offerings were made, we are cleansed and prepared by the One who could simply discard us as broken, too flawed to be of us. That's mercy. That's love.

I doubt any of us have thought about this process of cleansing and being made ready for God, a kind of dying and rebirth, when we have witnessed baptisms, another rite of initiation consistent with what the infant Jesus went through in today's Gospel, but in fact they are the same. What is baptism if it is not, as the Book of Common Prayer says, a dying in Christ as we are drowned of our sins and offenses in the water and a rising in Christ as we rise from the water, cleansed, an adopted child of God?

Now we Episcopalians don't do the full-dunk, full-body kind of baptismal ritual. Some just sprinkle, but I want to make sure those who are baptized feel the flow of the water on their heads. Because of that, I fear we miss some of the symbolism of this dying to our old ways and being reborn in our new life in Christ.

We need to be tried in the refiner's fire, as Malachi says. We need to be scrubbed with fuller's soap, cleansed of our old ways.

So who does this work that prepares us to be fit for Christ? Certainly we know that God does it – that is what happens in baptism. We know that our heavenly parent who loves us and wants the best for us works to assess, to cleanse, to prepare us.

But we are not merely passive recipients of God's beneficence. We are also expected to do some of this work on ourselves. Even in baptism, we are asked to affirm that we want this cleansing and gathering in. If we are baptized as babies, our parents and godparents affirm in our name, promising to make sure we are taught what these promises are, so that at a later point in time, we might reaffirm them as adults.

This shouldn't surprise us. It's just like when we were little ones, and our parents would bathe us before bedtime. They did this until we reached the age when we would clean ourselves up.

So, too, God does the cleansing, until we are ready to take more responsibility for our own spiritual lives. And during those times when we are too weak to do it ourselves, God continues to step in to care for us, just as we might receive assistance in bathing as adults if we were ill. Being ready to be in relationship with God is a partnership thing: God assesses and cleanses, we continue to strive to be righteousness, but we can always call upon God when it is beyond our capabilities.

So know that God does judge, but God also provides the means to correct. God gives us the tools we need to be in relationship with our divine Creator. God refines, and we are charged with the responsibility to maintain as best we can, the gift of our relationship.

Do your spring cleaning of your soul. Be prepared. Be cleansed. Be open to the gift of God's love. Be ready.

Amen.