

# **The Promise of Better Days**

## **The 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Advent**

**Malachi 2:17-3:5**

**December 10<sup>th</sup>, 2006**

Some of you have already heard about my 9<sup>th</sup> grade basketball coach, Mr. Hammerstein, or as we called him behind his back “The Hammer.” “The Hammer” was a gigantic ex-marine with hands the size of grizzly paws. Most of the time he acted with a quiet gentleness, but at times – usually when we had it coming – he could explode with righteous anger. In one game, for instance, we were playing a team we should have been beating; instead, we were down by eight points at half-time. It was probably the most uninspired and unmotivated game in my brief basketball career – but I was perfectly content with my lackluster efforts. During half-time, as “the Hammer” lectured us about basketball fundamentals, drawing little diagrams on his whiteboard and asking for more hustle, I was having one of my finer ADD moments: my mind wandered, I stared out the door of the locker room and then I let out a huge yawn. “The Hammer” suddenly stopped talking, grabbed me by the jersey, lifted me off the bench and started shouting two inches from my face, “And Woodley, you’re playing like you’re bored stiff. If I don’t see more hustle out of you, I will personally take you out of the game, pour gasoline down your shorts and light you on fire. You got that, son?” Suddenly, from deep within me, I found motivation and focus. During the second half of that game I played with unrelenting intensity.

I mention this story because you just heard a Scripture reading from “The Hammer” of the Old Testament. His name is Malachi the prophet and you’ll find his story and his message in the last book of the Old Testament. When God’s people were treating their spiritual lives with careless contempt, when they were unmotivated and uninspired, bored and distracted, yawning in the face of God, they needed a serious wake up call. They needed someone to pour gasoline down their shorts. Or in the words of Malachi, they needed to meet the God who is a Refiner’s Fire (see 3:2). So God sent Malachi to say, “You were made for better days. You weren’t made to coast in your spiritual apathy. God has better days coming.”

**The Big Picture of Malachi.** Before we explore our Bible reading, let’s back up and get the big picture of Malachi’s story. Once again, just like Jeremiah whom we met last week, Malachi is a real, historical figure. Last week we heard from Jeremiah that God would send his faithless people into exile. That’s exactly what happened. So 586 years before Jesus was born, the Babylonians broke through the walls of the capital city of Jerusalem, captured the King of Israel and gouged his eyes out, and then uprooted most of the citizens and sent them into exile. Then a few generations later, just as God had promised, the exiles started streaming back home. In 536 B.C. 50,000 Jews returned to their homeland. It took about twenty years, but they finally finished the temple in about 515 B.C. It’s hard for us to understand the importance of the temple for their lives: it was the center of their spiritual lives; the glory and presence and personal care of Almighty God was revealed through the temple. Then about sixty years later, another wave of exiles came home and it was their job to finish the temple by beautifying it (this brought

about very intense but mixed reactions, creating what appears to be the first worship war in church history – see Ezra 3:11-13).

Now we get to Malachi's time period. Over a hundred years have passed since that first wave of exiles returned home. The temple has been rebuilt. Most of their goals have been achieved. But now reality has started to settle in. The optimism of the early days of the exile's homecoming has started to wane. If you read through the entire book (it's only 55 verses), you can track the spiritual state of God's people. It started with their worship practices, which God said had become defiled. Read verse 8. Their worship was sloppy, careless and ho-hum. They were supposed to bring their very best to God; instead they brought the leftovers – whatever it took to just get by with God. The people – including the pastors, the worship leaders, the Sunday School teachers, the ushers - straggled in with bored looks on their faces. So Malachi said (see verse 8b), “Try bringing that attitude into your job on Monday morning. Your boss won't buy it. Try saying, ‘Yea, whatever, boss, but the sky is grey so I can't be there’ or ‘I don't like the new phone system so I'm not going to try hard for the next few weeks.’ But for some reason we think that God is okay with our lackluster, passionless, ho-hum approach to worship.”

Their whole approach to worship was so lackluster and unmotivated that Micah said (see verse 10), “Oh, that you would shut the temple doors, so that you would not light useless fires on my altar!” Just keep the doors locked and let everyone go home. Instead, God said, “My name will be great among the nations, from the rising to the setting of the sun. In every place incense and pure offerings will be brought to my name ... (See also verse 14) For I am a great king and my name is to be feared among the nations.” Worshipping God should be the most exciting thing we get to do all week long. We should be tripping all over ourselves to hear God's word, to learn, to grow, to catch a glimpse of God's glory, to welcome those who don't know Christ, to teach our children. It should be an incredible privilege; instead they were bored out of their minds (see 1:13).

The same attitude that they brought into worship - ho-hum, whatever, yawn - spread to other areas of their lives: their marriages, their financial generosity, their parenting. And chapter 2:17 says, “You have wearied the Lord with your words.” Can you imagine God saying, “You know, I hear you guys talk and talk and sing your songs and go to your meetings and complain but your words are just wearing me out?” So they shot back, “How have we made God sick and tired?” By saying, “All who do evil are good in the eyes of the Lord, and he is pleased with them.” You have everything backwards and upside down. You call evil good and good evil. You're spiritual lives are all out of whack. It's called spiritual drift or spiritual ADD or spiritual apathy. We're like the 9<sup>th</sup> grade boy, sitting in the locker room during halftime; we're in the midst of a crisis (our team is going down!), we should be paying attention to our coach, but our heart isn't engaged and our head is somewhere else and we're yawning in the coach's face. It happens so easily that we can live in spiritual drift for years and not even know it.

**You are Loved.** During these stages in our spiritual lives, we need someone to pour gasoline down our shorts and start us on fire. Enter Malachi. He is the prophet of God's

holy, refining fire. Read 3:2. But before we get to chapter 3, notice that this book begins on a positive note. In the first verse of this book God tells his people, “I have loved you.” Isn’t that a great way to start? We are loved and we are chosen. The New Testament always begins in the same place: we are loved before we are confronted; we are chosen before we are challenged; we are embraced and accepted before we are told to change. The New Testament sees this demonstrated most powerfully at the cross of Jesus, the place where God displayed his holy judgment on our sin and at the same time he displayed his holy love for us. He loved us while we were still sinners.

Why is this so important? Because love – not guilt, not pressure, not demands or manipulation, but love - is the best motivation for change. I have a friend named Larry Raab who works for a wonderful local ministry called Long Island Youth Mentoring. In his recent newsletter Larry tells the story of visiting a group of teenage boys in jail. When he first came to visit these young men they were angry and defensive. Their whole attitude said, “What are you doing here? What’s in it for you?” But as they continued to visit and continued to show unconditional love to the boys, their defenses started to melt away and they opened their hearts to the volunteers. Larry summarized it this way: “People will only be real when they feel safe.” God knows that. So the Gospel, the good news about Jesus, is all about feeling safe before a Holy God. There is nothing to hide because God knows it all, Jesus died to forgive it all and the Spirit lives within you to reveal it all.

**The Love of God Refines Us.** So the spiritual journey with Christ begins and always returns and restarts itself by coming back to Malachi 1:1 where God says, “I have loved you.” But love does not mean that God ignores our spiritual apathy and tolerates our spiritual drift. Quite to the contrary – and that’s where we pick up the story of Malachi in chapter 3:1 – *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. In 2:17 they were complaining with a sneer, “So where is this God of justice?” Okay, says Malachi, the God you’re looking for is going to show up. First, he’s going to send a messenger ahead of him. Who’s that? The New Testament makes it abundantly clear that the messenger is none other than John the Baptist. Then who’s it talking about when it refers to “The Lord you are seeking will come to his temple?” Clearly, that’s Jesus. He came to the temple right after his birth. He also came to the temple right before his death.

But when he comes, you may wish that he had chosen to just stay away. When Jesus shows up, will he be a nice, sweet 90’s kind of guy or will he be more like Coach Hammerstein, ready to pour gasoline down my shorts and light me on fire? According to Malachi he’s going to be more like “The Hammer.” Read verse 2a – “But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears?” Who can stand when he appears was a term for people in battle who keep standing in the heat of an intense battle – and it implies that we won’t stand in the battle. The other side is too overpowering. So these people who had been whining and complaining about God’s apparent absence, demanding that God show up now and do something are told, “God will show up alright, but you’re going to get blown away. Be careful what you ask for.”

Notice the two images for: God is like a refiner's fire and God is like a launderer's soap. First, let's look at the refiner's fire. Verse 3 says that God "will sit as a refiner and a purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver." Notice that it does not say that Jesus will be like a forest fire or an incinerator's fire. Both of those destroy indiscriminately and violently. There's nothing left by the time the fire gets done. Many of us are afraid God is more like a forest fire or an incinerator fire. Once I let Jesus into my life, he'll burn up everything and they'll be nothing left of me. No, that's not what God is like. Actually, God gives us a promise in Malachi 3:6 that he's exactly not like that – "I the Lord do not change. So you, O descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed." God wants to change us, but He doesn't want to destroy us. A refiner's fire is a slow, patient, controlled process of transformation. You can't rush a refiner's fire. It takes time because love is slow like a refiner's fire, not fast like a forest fire. God's love is slow and patient.

By way of a side comment: sometimes people are concerned that religion, especially Christianity, always leads to hurting other people – the Crusades, the Inquisition, the destruction of the earth and the obliteration of Native American culture. What do we say to these charges? First of all, we admit that these things have happened and that many times people do awful things in the name of religion or the name of Christianity. But, secondly, we have to say that the people who committed these atrocities had a seriously distorted spirituality. When it comes time for refining fire in our lives, God wants to start with us first. Worry about your own shorts. God wants to light a fire within us – and it's a fire of love, not a fire of hate and judgment.

And it's also a fire that doesn't destroy; it's a fire that refines and purifies and draws out the gold within us. The process of refining went something like this: the precious metal was valuable but it contained impurities. So the Refiner would heat up the metal, melt it down even, until the impurities rose to the surface. In the pressure of the refinement process the impurities are clearly identified but then they are dealt with. The master Refiner would skim the impurities off the surface. He knew the process was over when he could see his own face reflecting back from the precious metal.

The next image is also found in verse 2 – God is like "launderer's soap." In our culture we have many kinds of soft and gentle and sweet soap. (Hold up a few examples: Caress, Irish Spring, ...). All of these are so sweet and nice. Launderer's soap wasn't nice. This was tough stuff. It was really called "fuller's soap" or "fuller's alkaline." It was the stuff they used to wash the hands of blacksmith's or to wash deep dirt out of stiff clothing. A refiner's fire is hot and untouchable, but laundry soap is intimate and close. Malachi gives us this picture of God: God is like a tribal mother washing her family's clothing in a stream until everything is fresh and clean. It's a hands-on labor of love.

God is like the refiner's fire – hot, intense, passionate, burning away all that is not gold in our lives. God is like a launderer's soap – he takes us in His hands and plunges us into the soapy water, churning and turning until the dirt in our lives has been washed out. But this can be so abstract and impersonal and remote unless we ask this question: Okay, so

how does God refine us and wash us? I can't think of a nicer way to say it: it's called suffering. The Bible has a name for these times of refinement and cleansing: trials. But for a follower of Jesus, the suffering and the trials are never just random or the work of fate. They are places in our lives by the hand of a loving heavenly Father. 1 Peter 1:6-7.

We may not like this process; we may resent it and rail against it, but through the refining fire, God is changing us. C.S. Lewis has given us a powerful description of this refining love of God:

*When Christianity says that God loves man, it means that God **loves** man: not that he has some 'disinterested,' because really indifferent, concern for our welfare, but that, in awful and surprising truth, we are the objects of His love ... (God is) not a senile benevolence that drowsily wishes you to be happy in your own way ... nor the care of a host who feels responsible for the comfort of his guests, but the consuming fire Himself, the Love that made the worlds, persistent as an artist's love for his work and despotic as a man's love for a dog, provident and venerable as a father's love for his child ... because He loves us He must labor to make us lovable.*

That, my friends, is God's refining love in action. He will refine us. Perhaps some of you here this morning feel the heat of the refining fire of God. It hurts. It sings. You want to escape it and just walk away. Perhaps the devil or some other voice is whispering into your head, "You are not loved. God has forsaken you. There is no hope for you." Don't believe it! God's says, "I have loved you." The Gospel declares, "God shows his love towards us that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). Trust in the love of God for you. He is for you – so much so that his love is like a refiner's fire; his love is like a launderer's soap.

I promised that during this Advent season I wanted us to ponder more questions than answers, so here are three more questions for you this morning:

1. Do you give God your very best – even in less than ideal circumstances?
2. Do you know that you are deeply loved? Malachi is a tough book filled about a God who wants to burn away the dross and wash out the dirt in our lives. He will even allow suffering to enter our lives for the ultimate goal of our holiness and our deep happiness. That is not an easy process. But God does it because he loves us. "I have loved you," God says. "I have loved you," Jesus said and then he died for our sins in order to set us free. Do you know how much he loves you?
3. Do you want to let God change you, refine you, wash you? Do you ask for it and expect it?