

Sara Anne Berger, First Presbyterian Church, Natchitoches,
12.9.18, Malachi 3:1-4, Luke 1:68-79, Philippians 1:3-11, Isaiah
12:2-6

Sermon Resources:

[http://hwallace.unitingchurch.org.au/WebOTcomments/
AdventC/Advent2Mal3.html](http://hwallace.unitingchurch.org.au/WebOTcomments/AdventC/Advent2Mal3.html)

<http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/CEpAdvent2.htm>

William Barclay, "Philippians, Colossians, Thessalonians"

[http://worshipingwithchildren.blogspot.com/2015/07/year-c-
second-sunday-of-advent-december.html](http://worshipingwithchildren.blogspot.com/2015/07/year-c-second-sunday-of-advent-december.html)

Last week I shared a story told by my seminary president where his daughter had been told to clean her room and instead had just hidden the mess away and her mother discovered the hidden mess and told her she couldn't just do that, and said, "I am not settling for less than complete transformation". And last week's texts had pretty obvious themes of transformation in them, but even though it's less obvious, today's passages are also about complete transformation

In our scriptures today from Luke, Malachi, Philippians, and Isaiah, we hear transformation. In Luke, Zechariah looks at his new baby boy and sings the strangest lullaby you ever heard: a song about how Lord is coming with forgiveness and salvation. Malachi picks up the same theme of the Lord's coming with salvation, but that salvation would take the form of purifying and refining. In Philippians, Paul picks up the thread of purifying, saying that their relationship with the Lord will

lead to them being pure and blameless, enabling them to love other people better. And finally, Isaiah talks about the Lord's coming, the Lord being in the midst of them, with salvation, and how that salvation will free them to sing, dance, and praise.

Basically, the Lord is going to come with a salvation which will purify us and that will help us praise God and love each other better.

However, one of those passages, Malachi, has some pretty scary images. The Lord is coming, but who may endure that, who can stand when the Lord appears? Because the Lord is going to purify and refine like fire, the Lord is going to purify and refine like fullers' soap, that is lye, really strong soap. What a cheery passage for this holiday season! I know that sometimes those images are used to terrify, to subdue, to keep people frozen with fear, afraid of the fire and the fuller's soap of the Lord.

And there's no disputing that they are scary images, and they were meant to be scary to people who were full of themselves, doing whatever they wanted, being disrespectful to the Lord and the temple, and refusing to change. That's Malachi's intent. But being terrifying isn't always helpful, and I don't think it's the only aspect of these images that's true. Because Paul, in Philippians, also talks about purifying, but he talks about it along with love and relationships. So, I think these images can also convey an intense, fierce love, and by that I don't mean an obsessive hurtful kind of love, I mean the kind of love like a parent has for a child, an overwhelming, focused love, a love so intense that the fullness of it would be like fire,

would be almost painful to bear if you felt the fullness of it, a love that if embodied would be like a wave.

But God's love is not just human parental love. So, yes, it is like an intense love, but it's an intense purifying love. God's love is the kind which loves us too much to keep us how we are, loves us too much to let us keep being our worst selves. A parent can't purify or refine a child, and that's not their job, but God can, and it is God's job. God's intense love purifies the worst parts of us, washes us off with the most effective soap, it removes that which needs to go, so we can truly feel God's love, so we can love each other better.

We actually have a theological name for this, it's called "sanctification". And again, that's a term which has been used sometimes to terrify, to subdue, to keep people frozen with fear. Other times it's been used as a way of being judgmental, of casting judgment on other people, think of the word sanctimonious. Often when we think about sanctification, we don't think of transformation, we think about having to be perfect people, of not ever being able to mess up, sanctification seems like something that limits your life, and limits your movement, and shrinks everything down and asks you hide away your true self.

Sanctification actually is becoming who you were meant to be. As Presbyterians, we see baptism as the beginning, not the end of the process. You're baptized who you are, and that process of sanctification begins, and, as then we say, at your death, that you have completed your baptism, that is you then are fully sanctified.

What we miss when we portray sanctification as never messing up, or limiting what you're able to do or say or be, to getting to be really judgmental, when it's viewed as narrowing your life, is that sanctification is meant to be freeing. Paul talks about being pure and blameless, so sanctification relieves you of the burden of shame and blame. Zechariah talks about a light of salvation shining, so you don't have to worry if you trip or stumble, you'll always be able to find your way. Malachi talks about being purified so we are able to present offerings again which will please the Lord, freed from worry that the Lord will be angry. Paul links that purifying sanctification with love that overflows, love that leads to knowledge and full insight, that helps us to know the best thing to do. If anything, sanctification opens us up, frees us, it is the epitome of complete transformation, but transformation into the best parts of ourselves, the best version of who God made us to be. Sanctification frees us to be able to sing and dance and praise, because we are not weighed down or hemmed in or filled with all those things which have limited us. It's like that old Vacation Bible School song, "He's still working on me", meaning God, that God's still working on me, to make me what I ought to be. That's sanctification.

And that sanctification comes from the intense love of God, the love that will not let us keep being our worst selves, the love which purifies like heat and soap, the love which leaves us pure and blameless, so our love can overflow and abound for others. We are sanctified, we are purified so we can love better—so we can truly feel God's love without anything in the way, so we can

truly love the Lord without anything in the way, so we can love each other, without anything in the way.

That's really how we'll know we're being sanctified—not when we start keeping a list of rules or limit our activities or stay absolutely still and perfect and unsoiled, or start judging everybody else's behavior—the way we'll know we're being sanctified is when we start to love better. When we feel more free to love God and each other. When we start to be transformed in how we show love, who we open ourselves up to love. When we feel more free to be ourselves, to love in a way that isn't calculated or obsessive or hurtful. That's our sanctification, our purification, that's the beginning of our complete transformation.

And it starts with ourselves. The Lord is coming, so there will be purification, but not just in the world around us, and not for us to look and say “Good, I hope the Lord fixes you and makes you more tolerable and easier for me to love.”

Sanctification is personal transformation, too. Paul talks about the Philippians themselves being pure and blameless, and THEN they can produce a harvest of righteousness for Jesus Christ. The offering won't be worth it if we just work and work at something outside ourselves, perfecting it and purifying it, while we, in our own souls, remain who we have always been, remain our worst selves.

The primary purification will be in our own lives, our own souls, our own selves. The Lord will purify us, beginning that complete transformation. The sanctification will be seen in our relationship with the Lord, in how we feel God's love and love

God more freely, in how we praise and worship. And then, out of that, we'll be purified in our relationships with other people—that sanctification will be seen in how we love them, how it abounds and overflows.

But this process of purification isn't going to be easy. There's a reason Malachi goes for the image of fire and soap, there's a reason that it's compared to removing impurities from silver. We haven't felt the intense love of God if we haven't changed anything ever. The intense, fierce love of God is going to burn and wash some things away. It will burn away the old opinions we hold, the old assumptions we've made, the old judgments we're clinging to. It will also wash away the old perceptions of ourselves, the things we thought we could never be, or never do, the limitations we put on ourselves. It will burn away and wash away, too, those things we have been doing that we want to stop, the ways that we were not loved well, and the love we learned that is dangerous or obsessive or hurtful. We will be refined and purified, freed and transformed into people who feel God's love shining down on them, who love the Lord with praise and worship, who love other people better.

The thing is though that we are not metal, we are not silver, we are not objects to be scrubbed with lye. There's a reason we trust in metaphor to make points, but don't follow it literally. There's not real silver, real fire, real fullers' soap involved, thank goodness. But there are real human lives, our real souls, involved, and people, we are a slow process. Our sanctification is a slow, life-long process. The transformation will be complete, but it will be lengthy. Becoming who God wants us to be won't

happen overnight. And because it's so slow, our instinct might be to give up. Let the world be terrible, and our relationships be troubled, and our souls damaged. Nothing is going to get better.

That's just not what we believe. We will not settle for less than complete transformation. We believe in a sanctification which will transform us and our relationships and the world around us. But it's not easy and it's not quick. And we'll have to be willing to endure it, to feel the intensely fierce love of God, to go through the purification, to be refined into the people God calls us to be, to let go of those things we've been holding tight to, so we can feel God's love, so we can be freed to worship and praise, so we can love other people better.

Becoming sanctified looks like loving better. All of it supposed to make you more loving—salvation, forgiveness, sanctification. If we're not more loving, we're doing it wrong. A love that overflows with grace and mercy, a love that brings peace and confidence. A love that inspires us to serve others and care with passion and be charitable. A love which makes us encouraging and gentle, affirming and welcoming, a love which leads us to befriend people and feed and tend to them. A love that makes us approving and fond of each other, a love that leads us to delight and joining together, a love that makes us loyal and attentive and genuine, a love that stops us from pursuing tiny things to death and making things into more than they are, a love that advocates for other people and protects them, a love that inspires words of praise, a love that makes us calm and forgiving, a love that appreciates and is thoughtful and purposeful and intentional. That kind of love comes from being

sanctified, being purified and refined by God's intensely fierce love. And it will be the beginning of our complete transformation and the complete transformation of our world.

It is a slow process, a life-long process, but we don't have to give up. The light from on high will shine, the Lord has come with forgiveness and salvation, and we can trust that God is still working on us, to purify and refine us, to make us what we ought to be.

So, let's be transformed. Let's be sanctified. Let's watch it show up as love and freedom and praise. Let's not give up or accept that nothing can change. Let's endure the fire love and let go of that which needs to be washed and burned away. Let's let go so we can be refined, and feel God's love, let's be purified so we can love God with praise and worship, and let's be sanctified so our love can overflow and abound for each other. Amen.