

First Week of Lent

(This week's devotionals come from Malachi 3:1-5)

Monday – *See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple.*

Malachi the prophet warned people of the coming of the Lord...the Jews of the day had become assumed the Lord's coming would bring great blessings because they did the right things. They were automatically 'in' with God. Think of the story of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector in Luke 18:9-14, where the Pharisee bragged about all the good things he had done—he fasted, he tithed, and he was not like those 'other' people. Whereas the tax collector, not even lifting his eyes to heaven, said, "Lord have mercy on me, a sinner."

What struck me most is the phrase, "The Lord whom you seek." Do we seek God, or do we fit Him in when it is convenient? King David, in Psalm 27:4, said, "One thing I ask of the lord, this is what I seek: that I may dwell in the house of Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to seek Him in His temple." David sought forgiveness from God and lived as a forgiven person. He sought God zealously. Are we zealous seekers of God?

Tuesday – *For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap; ³ 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.*

A group of women studying the Bible wondered about Malachi 3:3, "*And he shall sit as a refiner and purifier of silver.*" One of the ladies went to a silversmith and asked him about the process of refining silver, which he described.

"Do you sit while the work of refining is going on?" she asked. "Yes," replied the silversmith, "I must sit with my eye steadily fixed on the furnace. For if the time necessary for refining be exceeded in the slightest degree, the silver is sure to be injured. The process of purifying is complete when I see my own image reflected in the silver."

Christ's eye is always on us as we are being refined. When Christ's image is reflected in us, his work of purifying is accomplished. That process will not be finished here on earth, but between the time we accept Christ as Lord and Savior and the time we go to heaven, we are always seeking to grow more and more into the image of Christ. Are there any places in your life where you may be resisting purification, places where you want to hang onto your sin rather than be refined and grow more into Christ's image?

Wednesday – *⁴ Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of old and as in former years.*

Malachi said that once the people were refined and purified, they would present offerings to the Lord in righteousness. Their offerings would be pleasing to God.

One of the things we do in the Presbyterian Church is have our prayer of confession and silent confession before the reading of scripture. Even when we changed things around during the pandemic, confession was always before scripture. We take time to confess our sins, ask God for forgiveness, be cleansed, get back on the narrow path...and then we are better able to hear the Word. We are better able to hear from God.

As you have been confessing your sins since Ash Wednesday, as you have been able to receive your forgiveness from God, what has changed in your life? Do you have more joy? Is it easier to read scripture? Is there more peace in your life? Is it easier to listen for the still, small voice of the Holy Spirit?

Thursday – *⁵ Then I will draw near to you for judgment; I will be swift to bear witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers...*

Sometimes we get caught up in thinking that God is wrathful and vindictive and we need to cower in fear. Other times we think God the Father is a white-haired jolly grandfather-type figure who chuckles and waves away our sin. We think that because we have confessed Christ as Lord and Savior, then we really don't have to think about the consequences of our sins. After all, we've got our ticket to heaven, so why should we worry about what we are doing on earth?

While Christ has taken our sins in his body on the cross, it doesn't mean we simply live however we want to. God says in this passage that he will bear witness against sorcerers and adulterers. We know what adultery is, but what about sorcery?

Sorcery isn't a word we think about much today, but it is still something to be aware of. Now some things are just scams – psychics who will tell you your future for \$5.95 per minute. But sorcery claims to solve a problem we are supposed to be taking to God. For example, once someone has died, a séance will not help us connect with that person. That isn't something God wants us to do. We should not consult Ouija boards to get our questions answered. We should not consult fortune tellers, use tarot cards, or use astrology as our guide (horoscopes really do not tell our future). We take things to God in prayer and wait to see how He answers.

Where in your life are you going to someone or something besides God for answers?

Friday – ...*against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired workers in their wages, the widow, and the orphan...*

God also says He will bear witness against those who swear falsely and those who oppress others. Swearing falsely means to go to court and commit perjury for your own gain—depriving the honest person of what is due them. Oppressing hired workers means making a verbal agreement for a day's wage and then refusing to give it to them. Because nothing is written down, it is hard for them to prove you have cheated them. The widow and orphan were the most vulnerable people in society—women rarely had jobs outside the home and a widow would live in poverty if no family took them in, and orphans had no family to help them.

We most likely look at this list and say, "This does not apply to me specifically." But in what way are we tempted to cheat others, or do something a little shady for our own gain? How do we step up to help the vulnerable in our society, and is there anyone God specifically wants us to help?

Saturday – ...*and do not fear me, says the LORD of hosts.*

This week we have looked at purifying and refining and judgment. We see in this passage that God takes our sin seriously and that there will be a day of judgment.

But even knowing that, as Christians we do not have to fear as in be afraid of God. We want to have reverence for Him, but we can come before the Lord with confidence that He purifies us for our own good, not to harm us. He truly forgives us. He sees us through the lens of Christ.

As we continue through the season of Lent, as we continue to repent of sins, we should remember that we can do so without fear. We have not sinned so badly that God has rejected us. We have not sinned so badly that He no longer loves us. We can come to him as our Father, bringing our sins and hurts and pain to Him, and He will meet us.