

“Changed for the Better”

Advent – Wednesday

Malachi 3:1-4

December 2, 2009

Years ago, when in college and trying to be a mechanic at home, my stepfather had this special soap, some kind of cleaning solution like soft soap. It would remove the oil, as well as any kind of grease, that you might get on your hands. It had some kind of grit, maybe pumice, something. When you finished cleaning your hands they were red and raw from the soap. But nothing cleaned as well as it did.

When our lesson speaks of “fuller’s soap” it is speaking of a super cleaner, like borax, or the soap I used to get my hands cleaned. Fuller’s soap was a harsh soap made to clean garments.

When Malachi warns his hearers of the coming judgment: "But 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", it is to this image, along with a refiner’s fire, that is used to give the hearer the picture of the dirt, the slag (dross in this case), the impurities out of garments and precious metals like gold. Like one who burns away the dross in order to refine gold, God will burn away all the evil within us. Like one who uses harsh soap to clean a garment, God will bleach out the stains that sin leaves in us. Refining gold and cleaning clothes are positive activities, but from the perspective of the gold and the clothing, the process holds the prospect of much pain.

It is not an easy process, of course. There is pain involved in refining and cleansing. There is pain involved in dying and rising. But it is a process that is designed for our good, for our well being, to prepare us for the coming of the Lord. God comes into our midst as Emmanuel, comes to destroy the evil in us and in the world, comes to draw us out of death into life. And though that is an alarming prospect, it is also one that should fill us with great joy.

Let me give you an example of how this works itself out. I would like to use a familiar Christmas story. You know it well. Charles Dickens, “The Christmas Carol”, with Ebenezer??? _____ (“Scrooge”). And Bob??? _____ (“Cratchit”) and Tiny??? _____ (“Tim”).

As we all know Ebenezer Scrooge was the most miserly, penny-pinching, money-loving tightwad who ever lived. The total preoccupation of his life was his work and his money. Nothing else mattered to him.... including Bob Cratchit who worked in his office and the sadness of his crippled son, including Tiny Tim and the poverty of that family. Ebenezer truly didn’t see ... any of this, for his total focus was on his work and counting his money. But it was the night before Christmas, and on that night, as you recall, he was visited by three ghosts. The ghost of Christmas past, the ghost of Christmas present, and the ghost of Christmas future, and all three ghosts confronted him with his sin that was deep within.

The first Christmas ghost was the ghost of Christmas past, and the ghost reminded him of a past love relationship that he had with a young woman. The young woman had loved Ebenezer; there had been the potential of tenderness, kindness, shared intimacy and love with her. But Ebenezer? He was so preoccupied with the work of his hands, the money in his hands, the busyness of his hands that he missed the chance for love. He was being confronted with his sin that was deep within. Sadness overwhelmed him. A grand possibility had been lost. And suddenly there was the ghost of Christmas present and there Ebenezer saw Bob Cratchit trying to provide for his family; he saw Tiny Tim with his

cane; he saw the poverty of the Cratchit family; and he saw the ridicule and the disdain that they had for him as a human being. Sadness overwhelmed him, all because of his sin that was deep within. And suddenly there was the ghost of Christmas future, and Ebenezer saw his grave and the chains of his business partner Marley. He saw how no one grieved his death. He saw that all his accumulations of wealth he had worked so hard for were dissipating away...and...and....and...Ebenezer woke up from this dream. He woke up from this nightmare, threw open the windows and shouted out into the street: “What day is this? Is it Christmas Day? Have I missed it? O, Thank God, it is Christmas Day, and there is time for me to visit the Crotchet’s and bring them the biggest turkey in town and hold Tiny Tim.”

Importantly, you and I begin to see that there was no Christmas morning without the night before Christmas without the ghosts of Christmas that confront us and cleanse us from our sin which is deep within. It is only as we are freed from that sin which is deep within that we experience the joy of Christmas morning.

God always sends us messengers to be like “fuller’s soap” or “refiner’s fire.” For Ebenezer Scrooge, the messenger came in the form of a dream that confronted him with his sin that was deep within. For us, our divine messenger may be a pastor, a husband, a wife, a parent, a grandparent, a child, a friend, a co-worker, a counselor, a coach, and a teacher. But be assured, God always sends us messengers to confront us with our sin that is deep within.

I don’t know the shape of the sin that is deep within your life. But be assured that God will always send you messengers...friends...family...someone...somewhere...God will send you messengers for you to confronted with your sin which is deep within...in order for you to be cleansed, and purified and forgiven.

Amen