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When the Lord Comes Near, He Leads His People to Receive Him

In the Season of Advent, we think about the coming of Jesus and how we will receive him. We consider our celebration of his birth, our reception of his Word, and our anticipation of his coming again in glory. In the Gospel for this week, John the Baptist urges us to rid our hearts and minds of sinful distractions so that we will be able to receive him in faith when the Lord comes near.

Sermon Malachi 3:1-7

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.

But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver. Then the Lord will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness, and the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be acceptable to the Lord, as in days gone by, as in former years.

"So I will come to put you on trial. I will be quick to testify against sorcerers, adulterers and perjurers, against those who defraud laborers of their wages, who oppress the widows and the fatherless, and deprive the foreigners among you of justice, but do not fear me," says the Lord Almighty.

"I the Lord do not change. So you, the descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed. Ever since the time of your ancestors you have turned away from my decrees and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you," says the Lord Almighty.

Introduction – There are some things that just seem essential at Christmastime. That's true at my house and it's probably true at your house, too. The manger scene that sits under the Christmas tree: it has to be there. The Christmas cookies with the chocolate stars on top? The pinecone Christmas wreath on the front door? We've always done it that way and we'll always do it. As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be. Can't have Christmas without it.

But sometimes essentials become unessential. Once upon a time we thought Grandma's fruit cake recipe was essential for Christmas, but nobody really ate it so we stopped making it. Once upon a time we couldn't imagine an artificial Christmas tree, but the one they sell at Costco is a lot easier to put up and the lights are already on it. The years pass and we discover there are some traditions we can set aside and still have Christmas.

But whatever we do, we can't get rid of the fire and the soap. You heard right. Fire and soap are essential for Christmas. I didn't make that up. If you listened carefully to the First Reading this morning from Malachi chapter 3, you heard about fire and soap. The kind of fire Malachi mentioned isn't the open fire you roast chestnuts on and his idea of soap isn't the set of gift soaps you give to your neighbor. Malachi's fire is hot enough to melt metal and his soap is tough enough to

remove blood stains. Malachi's fire and soap don't seem so nice to talk about in sermons, but they're essential for Christmas. We can't set them aside and still have Christmas.

When the Lord come near, he leads us to be ready to receive him. That's where the fire and soap come in. The Lord comes near to us whenever we hear his Word. From everything we can see, the Lord's final coming is near, too. But our minds are on Christmas right now, that day when the Lord came near to us as a baby in Bethlehem. And Malachi want us to know that

Fire and Soap Are Essential for Christmas

1. So what about Malachi? Well, he's the last of the Old Testament prophets; only about 400 years separate Malachi from Jesus. He preached at a time in Old Testament history that most of us don't know much about. Remember that God's patience with his people finally wore out? He sent a foreign invader to destroy Jerusalem, burn down Solomon's temple, and lead the people into captivity? OK. So a about a hundred years pass and the people return to Jerusalem to rebuild the place. At first everything went well, but pretty soon the people fell into old habits. Malachi told them: **You have wearied the Lord with your words.** You defend your sins and you mock the Lord. And then Malachi looked ahead 400 years and he quoted the Lord: **I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me.** That's John the Baptist, right? And here is Jesus: **Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come.** God was going on record to say that the God from God and Light from light would become truly human and would come to his people. He would come just as they had known him in the past; he would come as the holy God and he would come as the loving Lord.

The problem comes with the clash between God's holiness and our sinfulness. Malachi knew it. **Who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears?** No matter how and when Jesus comes to us, sin is always the problem. God can't stand sin, especially since he created people not to sin. God is perfectly within his rights to damn people who do sin. We're in that bunch, aren't we. The trouble is, we don't always see it and we don't always admit it. What's wrong with me? I try my best. I do good things. I go to church. I bring my offering. The sin that lives inside of us is never honest. It plants a lie in us. Satan waters that lie and our society fertilizes it. And we start to think that sin doesn't matter or at least it doesn't matter much. We're not so bad and God is so unfair to think that we're so bad.

That's the kind of thinking God's fire needs to burn away and the kind of attitude God's soap needs to clean out. Malachi saw it: **For he will be like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap.** The Lord comes near to us with his law and lets us know how things really stand. The fire is hot and burns us; the soap is course and makes our skin raw. That kind of self-analysis hurts. And God doesn't speak to us in bland generalities, either. He didn't with these people; he had a list: **So I will come to put you on trial. I will be quick to testify against sorcerers, adulterers and perjurers, against those who defraud laborers of their wages, who oppress the widows and the fatherless, and deprive the foreigners among you of justice, but do not fear me," says the Lord Almighty.** If God made a list that applied to us, what sins would be on it? I can just about imagine the sins that would be on my list and you can probably come up with your own list. God insists that we face up to the reality of sin. He insists on honesty, no matter how much it hurts. So the fire and soap are essential. This was the same message John the Baptist spoke and John was quoting Isaiah. **Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him. Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth.** Whether it's fire or soap or dynamite and a bulldozer, God needs to **destroy** our pride so we can long for his salvation. And that's why God's law, the fire and the soap, are essential for Christmas.

2. Fire burns but it also refines; soap chafes but it also cleans. Not everyone in Jerusalem repented and turned away from their sins, but some did. Malachi looked ahead and saw how the Savior would work on his faithful people. **He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver. Then the LORD will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness, and the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be acceptable to the LORD, as in days gone by, as in former years.** Malachi was writing in temple language here and this isn't so easy for us to understand. The Levites were the ones who carried out the sacrifices in the temple. In Malachi's day most of them were cheats and hypocrites and their sacrifices were worthless. But God's fire and soap would change all that. Fire turns ugly ore into precious metal. Soap turns filthy clothes into gleaming garments. Fire and the soap not only hurt, they also heal

and that's what Jesus did. He came to revive us and restore us. This is the good news, and the good news is essential for Christmas. It's like Malachi said: **I the LORD do not change. So you are not destroyed.**

Jesus came to our world as a baby so he could be like us and take our place. He lived like us but he also lived for us and his life was perfect. He died like we die, but he also died for us and his death paid the price for our sins. Jesus was the perfect and final sacrifice. He came back to life and assures us that we have life with God now and forever.

Feeling lonely this Christmas? Jesus is here and he's your best friend. Wanting the sadness to just go away? Jesus invites you to find comfort in him. Making a wish that can't possibly come true? Jesus hears your prayer? Mourning a loved one from Christmases past? Jesus promises a reunion in heaven. Wondering if this Christmas may be your last? Jesus assures you a place at his side. There are no Christmas traditions that are really essential: no manger scenes, no cookies or decorations, no trees and no cherished recipes. None of that can do for Christmas what Jesus does.

And that's why the fire and the soap are essential for Christmas. The fire of God's law must burn away our pride and ignite any ideas that we can go it alone with God. The soap of God's anger must rub our arrogance raw and wipe out any hope of saving ourselves. We must let that fire burn in Advent and we must let that soap do its work. We need to be honest about sin. We need to regret sin and see its horror. And then, when all our self-hope is gone, we can return to Jesus. Christmas gives us hope that comes from Christ. The fire of his love renews us and the cleansing of his forgiveness restores us. With Jesus we are pure and blameless before God, not only at Christmas, but forever. And so, when the Lord comes near, let the fire burn, and let the soap do its work. They're essential for Christmas. Amen.