

Refinement

First Reading: Romans 5:1-5

Second Reading: Malachi 2:17-3:4

We don't hear that much about the book of Malachi, perhaps because we just do not want to get in the middle of that argument. I know that if I come across a couple arguing in the chips aisle at Harris Teeter, my first thought isn't — "Let us reason this out together." No, my first thought is — "Maybe I don't need those Cheetos after all." No one relishes getting caught in the crossfire. And what we have here in Malachi is a dispute. God's angry. The people are indignant. Tensions are high.

Malachi begins with a squabble. "I have loved you, says the Lord. But you say, 'How have you loved us?'" Not a good opening to a conversation, and it goes down the toilet from there. Context is helpful here. The book of Malachi is set during a time after the Israelites returned from the Babylonian exile. In 587 BCE, Nebuchadnezzar laid waste to Jerusalem and its temple, and cast the Israelites into exile in Babylon. Yet, it is not like the attack came out of nowhere. For generations, the prophets had been warning Israel's leaders and people that a combination of vainglory, moral indifference, and injustices toward the vulnerable were cracking the foundation of the covenant they had formed with God, and God was weary

of their antics and might just let them suffer the consequences of their hypocrisies and iniquities.

So, it was not exactly a surprise when Nebuchadnezzar found Israel to be such easy prey, and the people of Judah found themselves languishing in exile, wistfully reminiscing about the good old days back in Jerusalem. “By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept as we remembered Zion.” Yet, with God there is mercy, and the Lord promised a way for them to return home. Jeremiah tells them the good news — *“The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah.”*

And they did return home. They set about rebuilding Jerusalem and the temple, renewed in their commitment to uphold their part of the covenant. They were going to do it right this time ... until they didn't. Not much more than a generation later, the Israelites are not even in the zip code of faithfulness, living in disobedience as if God is absent from their lives. Old Testament scholar, Elizabeth Achtemeier wrote that “their sin is total indifference toward the will of the Lord; rising out of their loss of intimate fellowship with the covenant bond.”

That's not hard to understand. If you haven't learned it yet, or aren't paying the price for it now, you are entirely self-absorbed, terribly naive, or just enjoy flirting with trouble, an adrenaline junkie wanting to see how close you can get to the edge without falling off. If you do not pay attention to a relationship; if you do not honor it; if you take it for granted; or abuse its privilege; or act with impunity toward it ... you may be one of about 2/3 of the guys from my high school. Seriously, though, inattention or indifference to a relationship seldom leads to bliss, but most often leads to conflict, hurt feelings, breakups, consequences.

God is irked, irritated. The people, just a generation after God's gift of a merciful homecoming, are not only apathetic, but insubordinate, too. The prophet observes — "You have wearied the Lord with your words. Yet you say, 'How have we wearied him?' By saying, 'All who do evil are good in the sight of the Lord, and he delights in them.' Or by asking, 'Where is the God of justice?'"

We are given many different images of God in the Bible, and in Malachi we see God echoing a bit more Tony Soprano than Daniel Day Lewis' *Lincoln*. My vote for the best billboard of all time has to be the one

with the single brief quote on a black background — *“Don’t make me come down there.” — God.*

It seems the grandchildren of the exile don’t quite understand who it is they are by turns, poking or ignoring. The Lord said to Moses, *“You cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live.”* The author of Hebrews refers to God as a *“consuming fire”*. Deuteronomy speaks of God as a *“devouring fire.”* The prophet Micah declared, *“For lo, the Lord is coming out of his place, and will come down and tread upon the high places of the earth. Then the mountains will melt under him and the valleys will burst open, like wax near the fire, like waters poured down a steep place.”*

Are you sure that is someone you want to poke? Back at the mountain of the Lord, we read, *“Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke because the Lord had descended on it in fire. The smoke of it went up like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled greatly.”* Perhaps you’ve read Annie Dillard’s priceless indictment of the way we trivialize the power and glory of God. *“On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a*

word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return.” (Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk*)

For decades, youth groups have been swaying back and forth singing, *Our God is an Awesome God*, as if God is *awesome* like the milkshakes at Cookout or the snowboarder on TikTok, but *awesome* in regard to God is something totally different, something that transcends even the power of a black hole to swallow a star. As I've said before, perhaps we should steal a sign from the Duke substation across the road and place it on the sanctuary door — *Caution! High Voltage*. The Psalmist proclaims, “The Lord is king; let the peoples tremble!” Do we know the power we beseech when we call on the name of God? The Psalmist reminds us, “Our God comes and does not keep silence, before him is a devouring fire, and a mighty tempest all around him. He calls to the heavens above and to the earth, that he may judge his people.”

A consuming fire, this is the God to whom the people in Malachi complain, the very people who have failed to acknowledge, trust, or serve God. They are not satisfied with their situation in life, but have given no attention to the Giver and Sustainer of life. Having fumbled their portion of the covenant, they have the temerity to grumble about the way God, the consuming fire, manages the covenant. Not a smart move!

And yet — Though the grandchildren of the exile are playing with fire, the fire that comes to them will not consume them. Malachi reports — *“The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. 2But 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; 3he 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.*

Note that we are no longer talking about a consuming fire, but are highlighting a refiner's fire. God has the power and the evidence to consume, yet chooses to refine. But let me be clear, I do not believe this text to be evidence or justification for the oft heard, yet horribly mistaken words

meant to offer comfort, but that very often only deepen the wound — *Everything happens for a reason*. No. It. Does. Not. We live in an often unreasonable world. We daily encounter unreasonable situations, unreasonable people, unreasonable demands, unreasonable tragedies, unreasonable conflicts and wars, unreasonable suffering. Everything happens for a reason? No. It. Does. Not. And blaming God for the unreasonable is misguided and often destructive.

And guess what, many times the unreasonable happens because we are the unreasonable ones causing it. God must have the imprint of a palm on God's head due to the number of times God has slapped God's forehead with the lower palm of a hand. Makes you wonder if the thunder we hear is God asking, *What were you thinking?*

Your good friend's death is never because God was running short on angels, or wanted you to learn how to get beyond loss. There is not a reason for everything. Don't reduce God to your spreadsheet. We are flawed people living in a broken world. Instead of *Everything-happens-for-a-reason*, we would be better off quoting the profane bumper sticker - How shall I say it? *Stuff Happens*.

Life happens. So, where is God in all of it? God is giving a voice to the brave who call out injustice. God is weeping with those who weep and rejoicing with those who rejoice. God is giving the surgeon clarity of mind and steadiness of hands to do her best. God is giving courage to the abused to escape the cycle. God is embracing the dying to soften the fall. God is giving strength to the suffering so that they may take one more step.

When I think of the refining fire of this text, I do not think of God sitting up there at a computer coding in the jots and tittles of my day, instead of punching ones and zeros, punching buttons like: a new job; the downpour will arrive halfway between my office and my car; compliment; insult; cure; (heh, heh!)smite. It's not that God can't program a computer, but God chooses not to abuse the ability.

No, when I think of the refining fire I think of life's inevitable encounter with trauma, trial, sorrow, loss, punishment, pain, uncertainty, fear, cruelty, hate, prejudice, illness, opposition, conflict, etc. Those are not fun words. Yet, those words **are** the flames we must navigate in life. God is not hidden in a darkened control room, sitting behind a bank of computer screens, a finger hovering over the zap button. T-minus - 5, 4, 3... Rather,

God is there with us in the kiln carrying a bag of safety gear, saying, *Let's not obsess on what got you here. We'll save that discussion for later. Let's focus on what we're going to do now. Take my hand. There will be pain for both of us. After all, you're not wearing that cross around your neck for nothing, but I am here and will not let you go.*" Last week, we sang — "When through fiery trials thy pathway shall lie, my grace, all sufficient, shall be thy supply; the flame shall not hurt thee; I only design thy dross to consume, and thy gold to refine."

When a damaged piece of silver is brought to a kiln, it is misshapen, tarnished, broken. Yet, the smith doesn't need to have a justification for how this happened, rather, the smith needs to have the patience, care, and skill to work with the silver, in spite of the heat, bringing wholeness from brokenness, beauty from heartache, a future instead of the trash heap.

Paul says, *Suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.*

This room is filled with stories and experiences that end with the punchline — I wouldn't wish what I experienced upon anyone, but I am grateful for the person I became. I am a better person, stronger person, more compassionate person than I was before. God wasn't punching buttons, insulated in the computer room, coding calamity. If God was there on the cross; if God walked out into the garden, leaving an empty tomb behind; God knows you and will not abandon you when the kiln flames. Amen.