

Seriously
First Reading: Luke 3:1-6
Second Reading: Malachi 2:17-3:4

Perhaps you've seen the GEICO commercial highlighting the young homeowners with the *aunt* problem — *We love our new home, it even has a guest room ... but we have aunts.* And with that, instead of the Orkin man, a matronly woman walks into the room eating a bowl of cereal — *Your slouching again, Ted.* Then the scene shifts to the kitchen where another aunt is rummaging through the refrigerator, pulling out condiments and dressings — *Expired! Expired! Expired!* And with each comment, you can see Ted and his wife shrink, wilting from the persistent harangue. Some visits are like that, the announcement of the visitor's impending arrival sparking dread and trepidation instead of hopeful anticipation.

We look forward to your visit! We're so excited! Can the person on the other end of the call sense your panic, catch the tremulous dread in your voice, hear your pulse racing from zero to terror? You may even like them, and would love to visit with them, but at your house? In your house? With the caller's "*See you soon!*" still hanging in the air, you are wildly gesturing to everyone lazily lounging in their pjs around the family room to get up off of their tuchises and start straightening up this federal disaster area. Junior

is jumping over the couch, Dad's launching out of the Barcalounger, and Eleanor is throwing off her blanket. In an instant the family photo is transformed from the look of a Sunday morning frat lounge into a NASCAR pit crew. Get out the vacuum. Stuff the closet with old magazines, dirty clothes, Xboxes, and basically everything but the dog. The dog! Stink-stank-stunk! Break out the Fabreeze, open the windows, letting the winter in but hopefully letting the odor out. They are coming to your house. They **can't** be coming to your house. They will see how you live. They will judge who you are. You thought you had hidden yourself pretty well. You didn't even think the boss knew your name. They can't see you like this. Where is *The quicker picker-upper* when you need it?

Have you ever been frightened by the thought that someone might actually discover who you are ... underneath the facade ... behind the mask ... the false front ... the armor you don to hide your imperfections? I was a kid in the Sixties, living in a small river town, and even in those unassuming environs, if we were just going to the IGA, it was common to hear my mom say, *Take the cat to the basement while I put my face on, and then we'll go to the grocery store.* Put my face on — I was only 7 years old but I knew exactly what was happening. I'd hear the click-clacking of makeup and perfume

bottles on the bathroom counter and catch the scent of Estee Lauder products as I tried to navigate the cat to the basement door without getting my arm mutilated.

We want to control the way others see us. We strain to keep several illusions going at once. Raise your hand if you have ever heard a parent or yourself say these words — *“I can’t let anyone see me like this!”*

So, today Malachi is the receptionist buzzing your intercom — *You have a guest here to see you ... It’s God. Cue the soundtrack from Psycho!*

“The Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?” That’s a disturbing word, particularly as you realize that the prophet Malachi has a penchant for sarcasm. *The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming ... But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?*

It is almost as if Malachi is itching for them to freak out, wanting to hear them say, *I can’t let God see me like this!* We say we seek the Lord, but

truth be told, we are not so sure we like the idea of God showing up at our doorstep.

Malachi is preaching in the first half of the 5th Century BCE. A little over a hundred years earlier, after a series of heretical and iniquitous kings, along with a general spiritual malaise among the people, Judah collapsed under the siege of Nebuchadnezzar's army, Jerusalem and the great Temple were destroyed, and Judah's leaders, skilled workers, and the educated class were forced into exile in Babylon. After nearly fifty years, Persia overtook Babylon as the alpha dog in the neighborhood, and Persia's leader, Cyrus, allowed the exiles to return to Jerusalem in 539, giving them permission to reestablish their Temple atop Mt. Zion.

Now, those early exiles realized what they had lost and how their spiritual negligence fueled Judah's demise. The Psalmist expresses their remorse — *“By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept as we remembered Zion.”* Yet, by 539, most of those early exiles had died. It was their children and grandchildren who would be returning to Jerusalem, even though many of them had only known Babylon as home. Their ties to Zion were not as strong, but there was renewed fervor and hope when

granted the permission to repopulate Jerusalem and Judah. You could look at it as a spirit of *Let's get it right this time. From this point on, let our faith outshine the failures of the past.*

However, the result was what you could call *the Peloton Syndrome*. In December, you are setting the cycle up in the corner of the bedroom, all fired up, ready to crush it on that bike in the new year, but by July, especially after breaking your toe on its base when you went to the bathroom in the middle of the night, the Peloton has been demoted to the garage, where it will be picked up in 5 years by the guy you sold it to on *eBay*. Time, like wind and sand, can wear down best intentions.

So some twenty years after their return, and despite the initial renewal of their faith, the people's commitment evolved from fierce to lukewarm, to tepid, to occasional, to God's not that big a deal, to spiritual but not religious, to there's no need to pay attention to that, to — I was going to become an atheist, but they have no holidays.

Yet, it's not that the people are atheistic or agnostic, it is that they have lost the sense that faith bears any relevance in their day to day existence. They are too busy and sophisticated to pay attention to the

ancient rituals and spiritual practices or to ponder deeper questions of meaning and theology. Malachi is confronting a people for whom religion is okay until it disrupts social schedules and to-do lists. God is basically out of sight and out of mind. Questions of justice are irrelevant, so if evil is prosperous, hey, what's the harm in fudging a few rules and rationalizing your insensitivity to your neighbors? And if you don't pay attention to a relationship with God or anyone else, if you don't work on the relationship, nurture the relationship, the connection frays, the communication breaks up, as with the dead spot between cell towers.

For example, like many folks we intuitively grabbed the remote on Thanksgiving morning and tuned into the Macy's Thanksgiving Parade, and I have to confess, as the procession of pop stars, country stars, streaming celebrities, and social media icons lip synced their way down Broadway, I did not recognize a single one of them. Now, old people like me say things like that all the time. It's in our job description, right there beside — *Get off my lawn!* and *Speak up, I can't hear you!*

However, I have no gripes about who the popular artists are. My clueless response to the parade of celebrities just highlighted how

disconnected I've become from popular culture. I used to have that knowledge mastered. You wanted me on your team for Trivial Pursuit — I could tell you who won the golf tournament and how much he earned; I could tell you what brand of shoes Michael J. Fox wore in *Back to the Future*; I could reenact Eddie Murphy's *Mr. Robinson* from *SNL*; I knew who was the backup singer for *Steely Dan*; who made the *Hail Mary* catch for the Dallas Cowboys against the Minnesota Vikings; who barely missed the bronze medal in the 5000 meters at the '72 Olympics; and what kind of car McGarrett drove in Hawaii Five-0 during the Jack Lord era. That's the stuff we read about, talked about, watched, and followed. I had the cultural vocabulary locked in. That I don't have that same proficiency today doesn't say anything about contemporary culture so much as it says something about me — what I'm paying attention to; what I am keeping up with; what language I'm using; what is important and relevant for me.

What do you talk about? What fills the space in your contemplations? These are the things you know. These are the things that form your worldview, construct your vocabulary, color your relationships, and order your lives. So, be honest, what place does faith hold in your answers to

these questions? Where would we see God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit in your answers? What narratives inform the way you respond to life events?

Malachi was speaking to a people whose faith vocabulary had long ago been mothballed and put in storage. His is a message timely in every age. As we set aside deeper theological conversations about meaning, purpose, mercy, grace, and redemption, what are the resources left to guide us through the twists and turns of life? *Call of Duty*? *The Bachelorette*? Are those the best resources to rely upon in the formation of a moral worldview?

Consider Kenda Creasy Dean's word to parents, "If Jesus [i.e.-sin, redemption, grace, mercy] does not get talked about, he soon fades from teenagers' awareness, and therefore vanishes from their structures of meaning." (Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian*) So, what resources are left? *Mario Cart*? *Mr. Beast*? *Alex Cooper*? Hey, nothing against them. They've figured out the culture and are using it to their advantage, but their purpose is not to provide a sustainable framework for moral reasoning. What resources have our attention? *Love Island*? *Real Housewives*? *Joe Rogan*? Without an acquired faith vocabulary that allows us to frame our moral worldview,

where does that leave us? A people led by reality stars, governed by conflict, and immune to the common good.

Malachi is still offering a wake up call telling us God is coming and asking if this how we want God to find us? *“The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?”*

In Advent, we are singing and praying, *We look forward to your visit! We’re so excited!* But do you think the Holy One on the other end of the call can sense your panic, catch the tremulous dread in your voice, hear your pulse racing from zero to terror? *Coming here? I can’t let God see me like this?*

Well, truth is, God already sees us along with everything we’ve hidden under makeup or swept under the carpet. Malachi is telling us to wake up, but is also telling us that God is actually not out to nuke us. In and through Christ, God is here redeeming us and as we pay attention and dive into the language of God’s revelation, a language that provides us with a way to see more clearly what God is up to, we’ll find that God is shaping us, refining us, and polishing us so that we can reflect God’s light for others.

That is what Malachi means when he says, *“For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap; 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.”* That’s what John the Baptist is affirming in his baptism of repentance. That’s what Paul is saying in his letter to the Romans — *“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.”*

Noted scholar, Kenda Creasy Dean, relates that as far back as Tertullian (late 2nd Century, early 3rd Century), *“The early church enacted such a curiously countercultural way of life that when nonbelievers saw the way Christians lived as a community, they were compelled to see Christianity’s brand as the practice of a special love.”* Tertullian was struck by nonbelievers’ reaction to the early Christian community. He heard them say — *“See, how they love one another.’ ... We who have become mingled in mind and soul have no hesitation about sharing what we have.”* May it be so as we recapture the vocabulary of faith. In the end, we are judged by whether or not people say of us — *“See, how they love one another.”* With that in mind, let us prepare the way of the Lord. Amen.