



Watch

Malachi 3:1-4

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Second Sunday in Advent

Advent is intended to be a time of anticipation – intensified anticipation – of the coming of Christ once again, and the final age of peace. The church over the years has given themes to each Sunday in Advent to help us, several sets of themes, in fact. The one we're following this year is Wait, Watch, Prepare, and Praise – which means that today is Watch.

Malachi's words fit right in here. "See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple." See? The Lord whom we seek will suddenly come. That's Advent, isn't it?

But how do we see? And what is it we're watching?

Think of the world as an impressionist watercolor painting. We, like most people, are like tourists going through a museum, heads in our guidebooks, glancing at the pretty picture as we walk past. Prophets are like art students. Prophets look at the world, the painting, and see God's hand; they can tell right away that he's the artist, that it's his work. They've been granted an insight, an inspiration, that allows them to see the feather-light brush strokes of God across the canvas of history, to see the whole picture instead of just bright patches of color. They are given the gift of seeing what they're looking at, a glimpse into the artist's mind: what current events have in common with the ultimate purpose of God, how they fit into it, how they display God's artistry. They see the beauty of the Kingdom of God where we just see random lines and shadings.

Malachi knows how hard it is for us to see what he sees. That's a major frustration of being a prophet: not being able to get people to see what they do. And they tell us why we can't see: Because we are mixed up. Not just mixed up, confused, but literally mixed up: impure, distracted, soiled. To be able to see what he sees, to clearly make out the details of the Kingdom, to be able, as Malachi puts it, to stand at the appearance of the Lord, we need to be purified. Refined. The good news is that's already in process

I don't know about you, but I can recall a time when I poured my life into dozens of different things -- photography, pets, cars, books, snowmobiles, rock music, classical

music, guitar, singing, sports, friends, skiing -- all at the same time, it seems, and still had time to be bored. No more! As the years have marched onward, I have far fewer interests than formerly – and even though there aren't as many, I don't have time to do half of them.

Life itself is a refining process. As we mature, the side trips and interruptions of sparkly things begin to lose their appeal; we focus our attention on what really matters. We know what must be done, as opposed to what we could do. There comes a time when you realize you'll never get to the top of Everest, or hang ten off Maui; and even more amazing, you're okay with that.

Other circumstances draw out this focus even more – when you're sick, you have a greater appreciation for health, when you're really hungry, any food will do; when you're truly, desperately thirsty, you don't hold out for that half-soy skinny decaf latte with an extra shot.

Refining is taking something precious in its natural state, like silver, and taking away everything that isn't silver until all you have left is pure silver.

Malachi talks about the refiner's fire. The purpose of that fire is to melt precious metal so that it can be separated from the ordinary rock and other impurities that usually accompany it in nature. That fire has to be exceptionally hot – hotter than just an open wood flame. You need some way to contain the heat, enclose the fire. One of the great inventions of the ancient world, a tube like a reed or something similar to blow extra air into the fire to make it hotter (like blowing on a campfire, only better). When everything else has burned away, or sunk to the bottom, or floated to the top of the molten metal, then you have the pure stuff.

Life purifies us, to some extent, naturally. We become more focused; our thoughts more precise and efficient. Those times of sickness remind us how precious health is; all the time we've wasted or lost makes us more careful about how we use today. The searing heat of experience has refined us.

Refining, in human terms, is taking some quality, some skill, some attribute, and separating away everything that takes away from what you're trying to accomplish. The practice of a skill, a craft, leads to a simple, clean, pure method...no wasted moves...and in the process of refining, we come to see what we're doing differently as well.

An artist perfects technique; and the application of the technique, using it to create the work, makes the artist learn to see the subject differently. A writer or speaker learns to order thoughts and construct a line of reasoning. A storyteller knows what pieces to bring out when and how.

A doctor, practicing medicine for ten or twenty years, looks at patients much differently. A teacher learns the difference between a kid who's just defiant or lazy, and one who just can't grasp the work.

A parent, raising a second or a third child, sees and understands things they didn't know before – like a child playing quietly is NOT something to relax about!

Every time you read your Bible, you'll find something different, some new layer of meaning.

We start out life like a puppy I once saw who was so excited to have food put in front of it that it can't eat it: we should end up like my old dog that would leave food in the bowl it didn't need.

God is behind our life's refining by experience, but that only part goes so far. It is God who is the true refiner. It is God who applies the flame; it is God who skims off the impurities, who pours off the pure silver from the dross of daily existence.

It is God who makes that fire hot enough to do its job – by introducing the wind of the Spirit to intensify the flames, like the tube in the furnace. Like the open fire that needs to be intensified with more oxygen to properly separate, purify, so God blows the Spirit into us, purifying us so that we can finally see what we've been watching all along, see through the same stuff we've been looking at for years, see God's hand in ordinary events we've never paid attention to: see what's happening around us, what's been happening, and what will continue to happen until we shall stand when the Lord appears: and we are pure and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

There are amazing things happening in Southern Arizona and in Valley Presbyterian Church right now, things I've never see the like of before. I hope you can see some of them, too, and others I haven't. What wonderful things will we be able to see? Let's watch!