

Fire, Compassion, Power and Peace

Response: Luke 1:68-79

Epistle: Philemon 1:3-11

Gospel: Luke 3:1-6

Lesson: Malachi 3:1-4 (Courtesy of Vanderbilt Divinity Library)

3:1 See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and 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.

3:2 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;

3:3 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.

3:4 Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of old and as in former years.

I remember the first time in my life when this phrase, "Purified by Fire" gave me one of those awe struck spiritual moments. It was my first day as solo Chaplain at the University of Kentucky Hospital and I was called to perform a baptism on a dying baby. I had never before baptized anyone, or been with someone who was dying and I was sure I was unable to do this. So I called my Supervisor fully intending to ask him to come in and do this, but instead I found myself asking what I needed to do. He told me, I did it, and it was amazing what the small ceremony did for the parents of the child, and for me. Because in looking back I noticed that the fear and the anxiety, and then the acceptance of the task and the willingness to step beyond my comfort zone, felt like the burning of the refiner's fire.

I would have numerous moments of the refiner's fire after that, and will most likely continued to do so. But oddly enough, I believe the pain of the burn lessens, I believe one gets used to being challenged by God and one actually starts looking forward to the next revelation.

That is what I believe this second Sunday in Advent is all about - preparing the way for God to come into our lives and reveal God's self to us through shaking us up. "The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight is coming - but who can stand when he appears?" from our lesson, "Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain made low," from the Gospel. John tries to make sinners face the pain of their lives in order to prepare them for the revelation of God.

Which leads to the question, in this growing world of superficiality, painlessness, and instantaneous gratification, why would facing pain be necessary for the revelation of God?

I guess it would depend on what pain one is facing. Pain for pain's sake isn't really productive. Even St. Francis realized this a little late in his life that all the deprivation he put his body through wasn't necessary, and he apologized to his body at the end of his life. The *spiritual preparedness* which causes pain are those moments when we are faced with our inadequacies in comparing what we think would really be helpful for God's kingdom. I believe looking at ourselves and our weaknesses can be more painful than stubbing a toe on the corner of the table.

Human nature is such that we build our nests, get them comfortable, devise a scheme to keep us comfortable and attempt to live happily ever after in that cocoon. But lives rarely continue in such a way. Everyone's life seems to be full of inadequacies and foibles, and each human being has an effect on those around them. When we are faced with those moments of weakness we have a choice on how to react. We can continue to set ourselves as superior to others and do everything we can to land on top regardless of the cost to those around us, or we can realize that we are all related to each other and learn humbleness and compassion.

That is when we become gold and silver. When we burn off our selfishness and our trespassing upon other people's lives for our own benefit, and learn to love and serve the rest of humanity. Paul expresses his joy and encouragement from the people of Philemon because of their love and care for the saints. He praises their ability to care for others who sacrifice themselves in Christ's name.

Janice and Larry's daughter Laura shared a wonderful cartoon during Bible Study the other day. There was a man carrying his cross and he says, "Lord, this is so heavy, would you make it a little lighter?" So the next frame you see the cross a little shorter. A bit later he says, again, that it was too heavy and God makes the cross shorter. A third time this happens and then he comes to a great chasm where other people have taken their long crosses which they've carried this far and it bridges the gap and they cross over on their crosses. The man is left there facing his short cross and can go no farther.

Facing our challenges, be they external or internal is truly necessary for us to realize what God's will is for our lives and for the lives of those we care connected to - and that is just about everybody.

People who call themselves Christians are rare birds. We can't focus only on ourselves, because time and time again every aspect of Jesus' life points to caring for others and therefore achieving a disclosure of who God really is. The God that Jesus teaches us about is a God who wants all his creation to love each other. It is as simple as that. God wants the whole world to be reconciled to each other. God wants nature to be loved and cared for as well as human beings, to live in peace.

We have learned to accept less than that as an aim, because it seems like too much. I sometimes feel like a fool for not giving up on my hope to overcome all forms of violence. I want to see a time of life on this planet where there is no need for weapons; I don't want to give up hope for that goal. Because no matter how often I read about God's will - it always comes down to, "Peace On Earth Goodwill Toward All."

Why should that sentiment be considered to be anything more than an overly romantic Christmas-time-only wish? People all over the world say this, and yet, I suspect very few can hold on to the belief that it is more than just words for a Christmas card. But when you see how Christ lived and what he taught, it is hard to imagine that Peace on Earth was not his goal.

Christ lived his life teaching people who would listen, to let go of their selfish desires and be willing to do for others, to love each other, to serve each other, to overcome anger by turning the other cheek and struggling to love our enemies - in other words - to experience the burning fire of facing those things that separate us from feeling compassion to all others.

He suffered and died and returned from hell to humanity, empowered, to prove that going through the fire, suffering for compassion is a source of power. THAT source of power - the power of compassion - has been proven to all who claim themselves as Christians to be greater than the power of violence. It is the only power that can truly lead to peace.

When we see how far away we still are from God's goal after 2,010 years it could be easy to lose heart. It becomes easier and easier to look around these peaceful facts of Christianity due to lack of use. But we are called this day to prepare the way of the Lord, to allow ourselves to be refined, and for our feet to be guided in the way of peace.

Our hopes for God's will of peace are not in the nations, or in the powers that be. Our source of Hope is in the same source where Jesus had his hopes - and that would be in each of us who claim we love him. To love the son of God, who was born humbly amongst the animals, the poor and the rich, is to take to heart the calling for peace. We can only do that in ourselves. We can't force anyone into compassion - it must come from within - and often people can't feel compassion themselves if no one has ever been compassionate with them.

For the world to learn Peace there needs to be a movement of compassion - compassion born of the fire of humility - and that can only be done individually.

Preparing the way of the Lord for peace, means preparing our hearts for compassion and not to let violence overcome our hopes.

We may fail at times in our faith that peace is possible, but let us not ever give up the belief that THAT is sincerely God's wish. We keep going through that fire, but then we let the impurities of our doubts burn away and try all over again.