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Grace Episcopal Church, Alexandria, VA

2nd Sunday of Advent , Year C

Malachi 3:1-4

Luke 1:68-79

Phillipians 1:3-11

Luke 3:1-6

Let us pray:

May the words of my mouth, and the meditation of all our hearts, be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength, and my redeemer. Amen.

Are you excited? I am asking you today are... you... excited?

I must admit, I love the confused looks upon your faces just now. You're surely thinking, what an odd way to start a sermon. You may also say, have you not been listening to all that what we've just heard? '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 fuller's soap', says the prophet Malachi. This grim eschatological image, in which our inherent sinfulness and fallenness is just so hard to avoid, literally glares into our faces. The baptism of repentance that John, the son of Zechariah, proclaims in the wilderness demands a very sombre and painful coming to terms with our own wretchedness too.

Can we be forgiven when millions of our brothers and sister lack food on a daily basis and will spent the holidays lonely and forgotten, when 85,000 children have died of hunger in effect of the ongoing war in Yemen since 2015, or when 3,248 American children died this year of gun violence? Can we really stand when our Lord appears at the day of his coming?

So what is there to be excited about?

Well, on the one hand, I think there's much to be excited about. Christmas is coming! Our houses are now beautifully adorned with our trees and advent wreaths. Today, we've now lit our second advent candle. A whole year filled with so many of God's blessings is now nearly past. Some of you will soon either welcome your children and grandchildren into your homes for a festive Christmas together, or perhaps like me, you will travel to spend your holidays with your parents. I, for once, must share with you, I really can't wait to be able to travel to Europe and be reunited with my family after 2 really wonderful years here in the United States.

But I stand before you today to share with you an even more exciting good news. That of our Lord Jesus Christ and his saving embrace! That of God living among us. Here, today!

Prophet Malachi is indeed right. No one of us can stand before God at the Last Day and survive his judgement without the ever-gracious saving help of our Lord Jesus Christ. And therefore, rejoice my brothers and sisters for 'blessed is the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favourably on his people and redeemed them. He has raised up a might saviour for us in the house of his servant David'. For God so loved the world that he has given up his only son for our redemption.

Both our Old Testament reading and the Gospel, as well as the 'unusual' psalm, in the form of the *Benedictus*, set for our reading today speak of prophecy. That is obviously a very typical theme for both the season of Advent but also for the new Gospel of Luke that we just launched into last week. Not surprising is it then that the first three chapters of Luke

are replete with prophets: Isaiah, Zechariah, his son John, Mary, Simeon and Anna. Even Jesus is often portrayed in Luke's Gospel as the prophetic messiah, as the one that has come to reveal to us a new way of living, the More Excellent Way of love as we hear in Paul's 1st epistle to the Corinthians. Finally, when we look at the Acts, Luke is very consistent there too in offering to us an image of a prophetic church through whom the Holy Spirit continues to work in the world.

We often think of the prophets as the divinely inspired messengers of God, akin those of Isaiah, Jeremiah, or Malachi. But the church over the centuries has also come to understand the prophets as the women and men throughout the entire history of salvation that point our attention to the presence of God among us, to the presence of God in our lives. Prophets continue to refocus our attention of the Divine. And finally, God continues to call each one of us to prepare God's ways in the world.

So, I ask you again, are you excited for we do, indeed, live in a prophetic time too!

God lives among us today! And where better to see it than here at Grace today. This Sunday should truly fill us with happiness, thanksgiving and hope as we welcome into our community of saints among us eight new followers of Christ. That number is absolutely stunning! God continues to truly work in this Church and calls on all these sisters and brothers of ours to share in our baptismal priesthood. In fact, I propose to you today that each one of them is also 'the messenger of the covenant in whom God delights' from prophet Malachi. God chooses to speak to us through them. God chooses to reveal himself to us through their lives.

But how does he do that?

The motif of the refiner's fire and the fuller's soap can be quite scary. At the end of the day, each one of us has at least once burnt their fingers and knows that pain. The imagery of the hell fire and gnashing of teeth is not new to any of us and has found countless artistic expressions over the centuries. But there is a very interesting twist to this story as well that I would like to point your attention to. John Calvin in his commentary on this chapter wrote: 'The power of the fire, we know, is twofold: for it burns and it purifies; it burns what is corrupt; but it purifies gold and silver from their dross'. In fact, I found out recently that when silver is refined and treated with carbon to prevent absorption of oxygen, it becomes sheen and pure. One writer has suggested that a silversmith knows when the process is complete, when she can see her own image reflected in the metal.

So, does Malachi suggest here that God will at the Last Day restore the fullness of his own image reflected in our human hearts?

'God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them', we read in first chapter of Genesis. That indispensable *imago Dei* within us is indeed, outside of birth and death, the only constant in our lives. So now, if you're comfortable with it, I ask you to take a moment and look at the person next to you. Look at their face, look into their eyes. Do you see God there? Can you see Christ's love shining through their smile?

There is indeed an awful lot wrong about our world. Truth, human dignity, equality, they all seem to be rather scarce today. But I believe that this situation is borne of our inability... No, our unwillingness to see God in the person in front of us. In Christ Jesus, there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one', says Paul in his letter to Galatians. There is no black or white, Liberian, Mexican, Polish or American, Christian or Muslim, straight or homosexual. No rich or

poor, Republican or Democrat. In God, each one of us is as precious and beautiful, as Christ himself. And that recognition of the *imago Dei* within us forces us to express our active love to the people around us, particularly those we hate and despise.

This is then precisely what Paul tells us in the letter to Philippians we've heard today: 'And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best, so that on the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God'.

Christ-like *agapē*, Christ-like love, is the one constant purifying force. The more we love, the more we realise what is important in life and good. 'When was it Lord that we saw hungry and fed you, or thirsty and gave your drink, or a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and clothed you?'

The late George H W Bush, a lifelong Episcopalian, whose life we've celebrated this week, once wrote to his granddaughter: 'I believe I was right when I said, as a President, there can be no definition of a successful life that does not include service to others... and [in that] I have found happiness'. I believe that his conviction to serve was borne out of his realisation of our common sharing in the image of God. Look around yourselves and I promise you that you will find those 'thousand points of light' that he spoke of. Let us look around ourselves and let us shine through even the smallest acts of kindness. Let our lights flicker in the darkness of the world around us, just like those beautiful advent candles before us today.

Love is infectious! When practiced in community, it sets off a chain reaction that will make our world a better place that will purify our hearts. To see Christ's face in one another is to never run the risk of being unprepared for God's second coming that we all await today.

So, I ask you, rejoice, rejoice for our Lord Christ is coming. Indeed, he is already among us in the light that shines through all of us and his Spirit lives dwells within our hearts. *Amen.*