

## Like Ore in the Fire

By Linda Rex

**December 8, 2024, 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Advent / Peace**—On our second Sunday in the season of Advent, the Gospel passage points us to the ministry of John the Baptist, who was sent by God to prepare the way for our Lord's entry into our human sphere in the incarnation. Let's continue to look at the Old Testament readings for this season, which brings us to the book of Malachi. Malachi, in the Hebrew, means *messenger*—a word used not only for angelic messengers, but also for a human messenger, in the sense of a diplomat, ambassador, or emissary.

In the first chapter of Malachi, the prophet describes a messenger sent from God. But in our passage for this Sunday, Malachi 3:1–4, we see that two parties are involved—one to prepare the way before the Lord, and the other, the messenger of the covenant, who is the Lord. Though the Jews of Jesus' day wrestled over the meaning of this passage and felt it was unclear, in retrospect, because of Jesus' instruction, we see that Malachi predicted the coming of John the Baptist, who prepared the way for our Lord Jesus Christ, who was the Messiah.

Many of the Jews of Jesus' day were expecting a messiah who would deliver their people from oppression and punish their oppressors. For many of those who sat in the halls of the Sanhedrin, the governing body, the fact that they were God's covenant people meant that God was going to cleanse the world of all that was evil and give them their rightful place as the leader of the nations.

But the book of Malachi, written hundreds of years before Jesus came, was quite clear about where the issue lay—within the spiritual leadership of the nation, the worship of the temple, and the lives of the people. What Malachi predicted was a messenger of ancient Israel's covenant with God who would “sit as a smelter and purifier of silver” and “refine them like gold and silver, so that they may present to the Lord offerings in righteousness.” He was indicating that this messenger, their Messiah, would bring the covenant people into judgment, so that they might be purified and refined, cleansed of all those things which were hindering their right relationship with God. This was an intervention which would look quite a bit different than what these leaders expected and planned for.

What does it mean to “sit as a smelter”? Today, when we consider smelting, it probably is not something you would encounter as you walked down the streets where you live. According to Wikipedia, when smelting, intense heat and a chemical reducing agent are applied to an ore in order to extract a particular base metal product. Today, this is done in large factories where blast furnaces are used to produce base metals, such as pig iron from which steel is made.

To refine silver and gold, great heat is applied, and as the impurities rise to the top, they are scraped off and removed. It is said that when the person refining the metal sees a clear reflection of themselves in the liquid metal, then it is pure. This provides a great metaphor for what Malachi was saying the coming messenger of the covenant would do for his people. It was greatly needed, for within their hearts and lives existed the twisted elements of evil, sin, and death, and this was preventing them from living in right relationship with God and one another. The only way they could be righteous was for God to make them right with himself. So, through Malachi, God promised to send a messenger of the covenant, who would apply the intense heat and chemical reducing agent, so to speak, which would remove these impurities and bring God's people back into right relationship with God.

The apostle Paul, in his letter to the Philippians, written many centuries after Malachi, writes about what Jesus Christ accomplished as the Anointed One sent by God to his people and to the world. In Philippians 1:9–11, Paul expresses his concern for the brethren there, praying “*that*

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*your love may abound still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve the things that are excellent, in order to be sincere and blameless until the day of Christ; having been filled with the fruit of righteousness which comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.*" Notice the source of the believers' righteousness, or right relationship with God—it comes through Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit. Jesus took on the judgment of all of us, bringing our humanity to intense heat through his purifying life here on earth, which led to the crucible of the crucifixion, where, in dying, he scraped off the impurities of evil, sin, and death. And Jesus rose again from the grave, having purified us as silver and gold are purified, giving us peace with God, as he brought us home to his Father and sent us his Spirit.

Because of what Jesus has done, and is doing in and through us by his Spirit, we are able to participate in Jesus' own right relationship with his Father in the Spirit. In other words, because of Jesus, we can be at peace with God and at peace with one another. As we live and walk in Christ by his Spirit, we live and walk in his right relationship with God and one another, participating in his righteousness. And as the apostle John says, "*We know that when [Jesus] appears, we will be like him, because we will see him just as He is. And everyone who has this hope fixed on Him purifies himself, just as He is pure*" (1 John 3:2b–3 NASB). The Holy Spirit continues to work in our hearts and minds, to conform us to Christ, to transform our hearts by faith as we trust in Jesus and respond to him in faithful obedience. This refining and smelting will continue throughout our lives, as we respond to the Spirit's work, and God will not quit until he has finished what he has begun. But one day we will see him face to face and live with him forever in the new heaven and earth as his beloved children. And that's the good, good news!

*Thank you, Father, for transforming our hearts by faith, for cleansing and renewing us in Jesus. Heavenly Spirit, please fill us anew with Jesus' righteousness, that we may live at peace with God and man, through Jesus our Lord. Amen.*

<sup>1</sup>"Behold, I am going to send My messenger, and he will clear the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple; and the messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight, behold, He is coming," says the Lord of hosts. <sup>2</sup>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. <sup>3</sup>He will sit as a smelter and purifier of silver, and He will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, so that they may present to the Lord offerings in righteousness. <sup>4</sup>Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord as in the days of old and as in former years." Malachi 3:1–4 NASB

<sup>3</sup>"I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, <sup>4</sup>always offering prayer with joy in my every prayer for you all, <sup>5</sup>in view of your participation in the gospel from the first day until now. <sup>6</sup>For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus. <sup>7</sup>For it is only right for me to feel this way about you all, because I have you in my heart, since both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel, you all are partakers of grace with me. <sup>8</sup>For God is my witness, how I long for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus. <sup>9</sup>And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment, <sup>10</sup>so that you may approve the things that are excellent, in order to be sincere and blameless until the day of Christ; <sup>11</sup>having been filled with the fruit of righteousness which comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God." Philippians 1:3–11 NASB