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Malachi 3:1-4
Luke 3:1-6

The Old Testament ends with the prophet Malachi saying, *Repent, for the Lord is coming. The Lord will come like a refiner's fire.* The New Testament begins with John the Baptist, who always strikes me as a very unsavory character. I think he's hairy, he's smelly. He has no business showing up in the month of December when we're all wearing our finery and we're having pleasant parties. But John the Baptist makes his appearance in all the Christmas stories and urges us to repent, to repent, to repent. And he does so in the context of history. We hear the list of names that Luke includes. Jesus doesn't come into the middle of nothing going on at all but into the thick of history. The names of great leaders are offered, Tiberius, Pontius Pilate, Herod, Phillip, Arsanius and the great places where history is turning, Rome, Judea, Ituraea, reminds us perhaps of what we see in the news in our day, Bush, Obama, Karzai and places like Afghanistan and Sudan and Pakistan and just so much else. History, history – God comes in the midst of history.

I love the funny assessment by Whitney Brown from a few years ago on Saturday Night Live. He was trying to explain why kids don't like to study history. Here's what he says: "There's a lot we should be able to learn from history, yet, history proves we never do. In fact, the main lesson of history is that we never learn the lessons of history. This makes us look so stupid that few people care to read it. They'd rather not be reminded. Any good history book is mainly just a long list of mistakes, complete with names and dates. It's all very embarrassing – history, a list of mistakes with names and dates." It appears that history could use some repenting, doesn't it? I mean, if you don't think that we are kind of suspicious about things that are going on out there in the world, just try to have a conversation – one of these days when you're with some people – just bring up the name of Sarah Palin and see what happens. There's this firestorm that will erupt, negative against Sarah Palin, positive for Sarah Palin, but that's negative against somebody else. We look at the world out there and something is profoundly wrong that really needs to be changed. This is curious because we don't often think of ourselves this way. We tend to have sort of a sunny disposition about ourselves. We're trained in positive thinking, so when we whine and when we gripe and when we find fault, it's not often with ourselves; it's with somebody out there, somebody out there ought to repent, somebody ought to change things, somebody out there ought to do differently. John the Baptist, the prophet Malachi says to us that we should repent because the Lord is coming. But then this isn't negative; it's a very positive thing. When Malachi said *Repent*, he used a Hebrew word which means to make a 180-degree turn. You're just going the wrong direction and need to turn around and go back home to God. And when Luke describes John the Baptist preaching repentance, he uses a word which means "a change of mind." We need to change our mind. We need to change our thinking.

The Lord comes into history with its long list of mistakes as embarrassing as it all is. Sometimes we're not good at assessing the relationship between God and history. Yesterday, I watched some of the Florida-Alabama game and before the game, Tim Tebow, who is the quarterback for the Florida Gators was interviewed, and Tebow is a pretty pious guy. You know,

he wears Bible verses on his cheeks during ballgames, and before the game he was talking about why bad things happen. And Tim Tebow said, "When something bad happens, God causes it. God makes everything to happen just the way it does. And if something bad happens, you know that God did it to teach you a lesson." I want to phone up Tim Tebow. Do you think he would take my call? "Tim, Tim, this is James Howell. I'm not a Gator or anything." I probably couldn't get to him. What I'd like to ask is, "What about the child who is being abused by the parent who's supposed to be taking care of that child?" Could you say to that child "God did this to teach you a few things?" What about the mother in Afghanistan whose entire family has been wiped out in war? Do we say to her, "God did these things to teach..." What would God be teaching a mother in Afghanistan? You see, things happen and God doesn't cause them. It doesn't mean that God doesn't have a relationship to history. In fact, the whole point of Christmas is that God enters into an amazing relationship with history. We have this long list of mistakes with names and dates down here, and it is in to this history that God comes. God comes in to history and takes all that has transpired, and God comes to redeem it. God comes to take all that has transpired and to hold it very close to God. And I'm not just talking about the history that you read about in the papers or on the Internet that is unfolding before our eyes. I'm thinking also of the history of our lives.

How do you look at the history of your life? You know, the Whitney Brown quote, that would work for the history of my life. You may have a different view of your life. You may say, "The story of my life, it's an undiluted chronicle of success, wise decisions and wonderful things happening to me." If you think this, see me after the service. This can't be. We look back on our lives. There are moments of wonder and great joy, and at the same time for every one of us, there's just some stuff that's so boneheaded. Such huge mistakes – we wish we could rewind the clock. We wish we could say something different. We wish we could do something different. We wish we could take another road. We wish we could undo what we have done. It's a long list of mistakes and embarrassments, but the whole point of Christmas is that God comes down and God takes our history in God's hand and God holds it very close so that there can be healing, so that there can be hope, so that perhaps a new chapter can be written in the story of our lives.

Barbara Brown Taylor said this: "His name is Emanuel, God with us, who was made out of the same stuff we are and who was made out of the same stuff, God is, and who will never let either of us go. The God stuff, our stuff, they are united in the person of Jesus and he will never let either of us go." You know, I heard a guy the other day say, "I was facing a tough crisis but my faith saw me through." I said, "I beg to differ." I said, "Your faith probably isn't what saw you through. I bet it was God." You see, our faith may falter. Our faith may be weak. But we don't depend upon our faith. We depend upon God, the God who comes down and grips us and will never let us go.

There's one other thing in this Malachi text that I never really noticed before in many years of thinking about it, and it is the following, and I'll close the sermon with this. Malachi says that *When the Lord comes that he will be a refiner's fire, that there is gold that will be refined.* And I've always liked that image. I thought, "That's what the Lord does. The Lord refines. The dross is burned away, that God is a refining fire, but what it says is refined is gold. It's gold that will be refined, and that raised a question in my mind; could it be that you and I are

gold? Are we gold?" When you look at yourself in the mirror, do you think, "I am gold in God's eyes?" I think we have a different view of ourselves, don't we? We think of ourselves as consumers. We think of ourselves as the people who try to get some gold, and we're the ones who spend some gold, and sometimes we give gold to the church – hint, hint. Gold, that's something outside us, and we're the consumers, we're the collectors, we're the achievers who earned gold. But maybe this text suggests that in God's eyes we are so precious, we are so valuable that we are actually gold in God's eyes.

I want to think about this. It's something I brought up a couple of years ago at this time of year. It's about a novel. It's one of those great novels that get assigned to you when you're in the ninth grade or the 11th grade. English teachers are so foolish to recommend these books to 15- and 17-year-olds because they're totally wasted on them. You know, when you're 16 and you're assigned a great book, you're just trying to check it off and get the facts down and just get it out of the way. What we should do is have the great assigned books – and you don't really read them when you're 15 or 17 – you put them away and when you're 34 or 47 or 59 and you've got some life on you and some heartbreak has happened and you really understand what love is about, then you go and read the great books, and they make a lot of sense to you and there's some resonance there. The book that I've been thinking about is one that I did not get when I had to read it in high school by George Eliot, *Silas Marner*, a wonderful, wonderful book. I used it a couple of years ago in a sermon to talk about what the coming of Christ as a child into our world is like. I want to think about that but I want to do something different with it. You know the story of Silas Marner. Silas Marner is a miser – you see, that's what you learn for the quiz in high school – right? There was a matching thing – it said Silas Marner and you looked up miser, B, check, you got that right. Do you remember anything else about the story? Silas Marner is a miser. He is a weaver. He goes to his loom day by day and he weaves his fabric and they pay him gold to do this. He takes the gold home and he hangs on to it. He does this day after day until he comes to have quite a stash of gold in his house, and he is very proud of the gold; he's worked very hard for the gold; he is very attached to the gold. And then one day he comes home from the loom; he comes home from work and opens the door to his hut, and the gold is not there. He is panicked and thinks, "Where could I have put it?" He looks in every corner of the house, under everything and cannot find the gold. He goes out into the streets and is looking everywhere, asking people, "Somehow my gold must have been misplaced. Someone must have it." It's to no avail; the gold just is gone, and he is devastated. He is forlorn. His whole point of living up to this time is gone, and he's so desperate, and he can't think of any reason to live any longer except he comes up with one idea and he thinks, "The only thing really left to do is to go back to the loom and to start again, to reaccumulate the gold. He begins to go to work, very sad, very distraught, but then one night he comes home. He opens the door to his hut. He's holding a lantern, and he is shocked by what he sees. He looks and in the glimmering light he sees on the floor that the gold has returned and he's almost tearful with excitement. He puts the lantern down and bends down on his knees and plunges his hand into those gold coins that he has missed so badly, and here's how George Eliot describes what happens. Instead of hard coin, he found soft curls. It wasn't the money at all. It was a sleeping child with blond hair, a lost little girl. He had a dreamy feeling that this child was somehow a message come to him from a far-off life. It stirred old quiverings of tenderness, old impressions of awe and to present them into some power presiding over his life. We older human beings feel a certain awe in the presence of a little child, such as we feel before some quiet majesty or beauty in earth or sky.

Marner took the little girl on his lap, trembling with an emotion mysterious to himself, that something unknown dawning on his life. He could only have said that the child has come instead of the gold, that the gold had turned into this child. This child, whom he named Eppie, loved sunshine, sounds and every other thing in God's good world. The gold had asked that he should sit weaving longer and longer, death unto all things except the monotony of the loom, but Eppie called him away from his weaving and made him think all its pauses a holiday, reawakening his senses with her fresh life, warming him into joy because she had joy.

When I talked about this a couple of years ago, I said Christ came as a child to give us this kind of joy, to awaken something in us, to be a message to us from afar off life, but I want to change that now. You see, that still says that everything is about us, that everything is about me and how I feel. Maybe it's a little bit different. Maybe you and I – this is mind-boggling – maybe you and I can be like the child, Eppie, and when God, like Silas Marner, takes us onto his lap, he is joyful. He is delighted. Imagine that. Imagine that that you exist to give God joy, and when you're near God, God is delighted. And when you notice the sunshine and any other good thing that God has made, God is delighted. When we laugh, when we love, God is so pleased. When we take the pause to be with God, it is not just for us, but it is also for God a holiday, a holy day, and God rejoices over us.

I don't know about you, I don't think of myself this way very often. What I imagine is this, I imagine God is up in heaven and God looks down at me and says, "Well, there's James Howell down there. He made a good thing the other day, but Tuesday night, boy, what a bone-head, what was that about?" And God is disappointed in me. At other times, I think that God looks down at me and God is probably like some mother off in a nursing home somewhere. She's lonely, she can't get out herself, and what she wants is for her son or her daughter to come and visit. She's probably always looking at the door and every time the door opens, she hopes it's not just somebody from the staff of the nursing home. She hopes it is her child that she thinks about and longs for all the time, but that's not who comes. She just wants her child to come. I think that God is like that – you're so busy, you're so busy. I just want you to come and be on my lap, have a pause, a holiday. Let us notice the sunshine and the sounds, the delights, God's beautiful creation, together. You see, the history of our life is not done. There's a new chapter that's about to be written. You see, Silas Marner's chapter was rewritten because of Eppie, and the next chapter of Eppie's life was rewritten because of Silas Marner. And God can rewrite the next chapter of our lives. Instead of it being the same run of mistakes, names, dates, and embarrassments, the next chapter of our life could be us together with God. Me crawling up into God's lap, and I am to God gold, the gold turned into a child, a great delight, giving immense pleasure to God.

Malachi says *Repent for the Lord is coming. He will be a refiner's fire.* Maybe that means that we're the gold and the refining is discovered, a treasure we truly are in God's eyes. John the Baptist says *Repent for the Lord is coming.* He invites us to a change of mind. We think of ourselves not as consumers, not as somebody with a long list of embarrassing mistakes, but somebody who is gold in God's eyes, somebody who gives pleasure and delight and joy to the heart of God. Let us repent; let us repent for the Lord is coming.