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Malachi 3:1-4

I confess that I am not really a “baby” person. (Please don't tell my son.) I've always thought that toddlers were so much more fun than the teeny ones. Even as someone who isn't a baby person, it's hard to be anti-baby. As a culture, we are seen as precious. They're so small and sweet and vulnerable. Sure, the reality of life with a baby is much more mixed, especially when they cry and scream. In theory, who doesn't like to see a smiling, cooing infant, or a baby who looks like an angel as she sleeps.

Because of babies' sweetness and predictability, of course we would be thrilled to welcome God as a baby at Christmas. It may seem odd, as we consider a great and powerful God in such a little package. But infants are a known commodity. They might be intimidating only because of the amount of care that they require. But they won't be demanding or scary in the same way that adults can be demanding. For God to come as a baby means that God will be relatively predictable and manageable for a while.

When the Old Testament prophets speak of God's coming, they imagine a far scarier scene than a sleeping baby. The Day of the Lord is a theological idea that appears many times in scripture. It is some day in the future, when God will come. The world and all its people will be judged. The prophet Amos points straight to our hearts: for God "judges evil in us and in the world." (*Amos 5:18-19*) People have long known that we are not perfect. Our lives are marked as God's own creations. Yet we struggle with good and evil.

Even if we are aware of our temptations and brokenness, it's still hard to think about being the subject of God's judgment. There's no safe ground to stand on. No possibilities for us to feel better or holier than others. All of us will be seen truly. Both saint and sinner. Beautiful creations, with broken ways. Every one of us.

With this in mind, the Day of the Lord inspires fear and awe. God will come in all God's fullness and power. Bearing a divine sense of right and wrong. Seeing us as we are – people whose priorities aren't right, who make mistakes, who hate to apologize or admit wrong, whose pride or greed get in the way.

Our passage from Malachi describes the Day of the Lord. Yet he uses language that describes God's judgment and redemption, tied together. It reveals the

way that God's love and mercy will be active on the Day of the Lord, how they will be joined in our transformation. Malachi writes:

“[W]ho 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;
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...” *(Mal 3:2-3)*

This language of fullers and refiners are relatively foreign to our ears. The practices still happen, but our lives tend to be further from them.

Malachi compares God to people who are cleaning objects in the world around them. God is like “fullers' soap, in verse 3. A fuller is someone who helps make cloth (like wool) into clothing. The fuller's step in the process involves cleaning the cloth so that is rid of the oil and dirt that was in the sheep's wool. The process involved stamping on the clothing with one's feet or a bat-like club, while the clothes were resting in an alkaline solution. It was basically bleaching clothes, which is rather caustic. The end product is a clean cloth garment, fluffed and ready for wear. The fullers' soap makes it all possible.

Malachi also describes God as a refiners' fire. Metal like silver or gold would be put in a fire with caustic materials. Gross-looking slag floats to the top, and the denser metal sinks to the bottom. A refiner can scoop up the slag, leaving a clear

view to the metal beneath. After the slag is gone, the refiner can look down and see his or her reflection. The refiners' fire burns violently. Yet it removes the impurities from the metal. The fire allows the metal's true beauty to be revealed and seen by all.

In Advent, we worship between these two extremes. We look forward to celebrating the birth of an impotent baby, who inspires our love. We wait for the arrival of a powerful judge, who inspires our fear. The true nature of our God lies somewhere in between.

Our powerful, loving God loves us for the beautiful creations that we are, as a craftsman cares for the cloth or metal he creates. God sees us truly, for our blemishes and faults. More importantly, God sees in us the beauty that remains hidden, that only God can draw out of us. Yes, the process of God's loving judgment may be rough. The fire is hot; the soap is painful. We will not be allowed to remain as we have been.

But Christ's true judgment of us leads to Christ's completion of our redemption. We will be remade into marvelous reflections of God. Shining clearer and brighter than we do now. The Spirit of Christ has begun the process for us already: in the waters of baptism; through our confession and our reconciliation;

when we hear the word and our worship; through growing in our relationships in Christ; as we receive him at the altar. We are already being prepared for our full redemption in Christ. Waiting for God's arrival at the end of time.

Sisters and brothers, you are marked as Christ's own, marked for judgment and redemption, marked to shine with God's loving touch. We prepare for that day to come. Amen.