

Cleansed with Fire & Soap

Malachi 3:1-4; John 1:6-8; 19-28

Slide: Rubber Ducky Scene

There is nothing like a rubber ducky manger scene this time of year, especially at bath time for my nephew Benjamin. I once witnessed his bath time, when he was just barely one year of age. Bath time later on became one of his favorite things, but it wasn't always. At first, Benjamin wasn't sure about that whole water and soap thing, so much so that he would cry and cry and cry knowing that he would be put in a big bath tub. Looking back, my sister Carol recalls now that his son, being autistic, looked at the world in a different way and so she would have to find ways to relate to Ben differently than those who are typically cognitive.

My sister's way of dealing with it was pretty ingenious. She would entice Ben to try the tub by getting in the tub herself and splashing around laughing with glee and playing with toys. By the

look of it, bath time was not only the most awesome experience that he could see; he also could learn to mimic that desire to get in the tub. Suddenly, Benjamin thought that bath time wasn't such a bad idea. He could play with toys in the water too!

So, bath time became his favorite time; except that later on, I understand, there was water everywhere, and toys galore, and bubbly soap on the top of his head. Becoming clean can be fun! I continue to marvel at my sister's ability to be an awesome Mom to a very differently abled young boy, who although quite high on the autism spectrum, has developed so beautifully.

Slide: Three Candles

Today is the third Sunday of Advent, as we continue to prepare for the coming of Christ, once as a baby, and but also when he comes again promising to judge all things with righteousness and authority. You'd think that with all of the saccharin sentimentality of the season as we often see

around us this time of year, we would get some words of comfort and joy, but instead the Old Testament prophet Malachi says to us that before Christ can come...we really all need, just like my nephew Ben, a bath. Here's what the prophet says:

Slide: Refiner's Fire

"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 fuller's 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, until they present offering to the Lord in righteousness."

Slide: Flannery O'Connor

The Bible readings for today reminded me of a short story I read some years ago by Flannery O'Connor entitled "Revelation". The primary character in this story is named Mrs. Ruby Turpin, the wife of a farmer, and boy is she written as an overbearing, intolerant, mean person. She is also blatantly racist in this

story believing she is far more superior being white. On top of everything else, she is classist separating rich from poor, educated from non-educated and to make it even worse, she counts her classification and generalization of others as a virtue. Then, one day, while sitting in a doctor's office talking about how glad she is she is white, a teenage girl, who is also waiting for the doctor, takes the textbook she is reading and accosts Mrs. Ruby Turpin with it by smacking her right on the forehead with it while yelling "Mrs. Turpin, you are just warthog from hell".

Slide: Mrs. Turpin

The short story continues to unfold and the purpose of the author becomes apparent, as Mrs. Ruby Turpin, instead of doing, what we might all assume she would do, in chastising the girl or threatening a lawsuit - instead Mrs. Turpin has a wakeup call and sees this teenage girl as a messenger from God. She sees the girl as an angel who is

sending a message to her and is not pleased with the message. She looks into herself and suddenly sees her sinful blemishes, how her behavior or self-importance and bigotry are harmful to others. Mrs. Turpin turns back to God in what is really an amazing story, albeit maybe not as realistic as we wish it could be for ourselves and for others around us, but still a wakeup call – the sudden refining of fire, and a bath with soap, making us clean.

But, is Mrs. Turpin right? Does God whack us upside the head and call us nasty names when we need a wake-up call?

Slide: Fuller's Soap

“Who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?” asks the prophet Malachi about Jesus who is promised to come. “For, he is like a refiner's fire and like fuller's soap.” Now, if you think on it, these are two images that can seem frightening. A refiner's fire is the white-hot

blaze that melts metallic ores and brings the impurities to the surface. And, fuller's soap is lye based soap that in the ancient world was used to remove stains from clothing.

Refiner's fire...fuller's soap...not very Christmas-y. I don't think of the baby Jesus as having a screaming hot torch in one hand and detergent in the other, do you? Yet, the prophet would have us know that this is exactly what Jesus came to do: to remove impurities and clean stains. And, in fact, we see it again in our Gospel reading. John the Baptist is preparing us for that special bath, the cleansing bath of baptism, where Jesus, the light to which John points, will cleanse us all. Jesus is that kiln, the refiner's fire, the cleansing water for us.

Slide: Hand Sanitizer

When speaking of hygiene, we know that clean is good. Just look at the germ craze we are in, washing our hands ad nauseum because of our fear of the flu. When my other nephew Nate was born, I remember my sister-in-law

asking me if I had washed my hands before she would give Nate to me to hold. "It would be nice if you washed your hands before holding the baby," she would say. But, by the time she had her twin girls, she realized that she would get everything her kids got and vice versa, no matter how much she tried and by that time, had gotten over pouring hand sanitizer on people. But, sure, I get it. I keep hearing my mother here as she always says "cleanliness is next to godliness." So, to take this analogy further, it's not hard for us to see how we need a bath...that is, a bath to be cleaned enough to stand before God.

Slide: Advent Waiting

That's what the Old Testament reading from Malachi is speaking of: being cleansed from all impurities so that we are fit to stand in front of our Lord. So, do our souls need a shower before Christmas? As we travel to the manger this Advent, perhaps the prophet is reminding us, "We need to

wash our hands before holding the baby."

Back to the short story about Mrs. Ruby Turpin, she comes home after being assaulted by that teenage girl, stomps to her shed, and is angry with God. How dare God suggest that she, an upstanding citizen, is "a warthog from hell"! "How am I a hog and me both?" "How am I saved and from hell, too?" she asks.

How am I saved and from hell, too? That is also a question for us, as we enter this holiday season, although maybe said another way: "How can I be out shopping for jewelry for my wife and in my next sentence, belittle her or chide her?" "How can I sing Christmas Carols while driving and cut off the person in front of me at the same time?" "How can I love my child but get so impatient at him that I yell at him?" "How am I saved and from hell, too?"

Slide: Love Came Down

The classic theological problem: God both loves us and judges us. Or, accepted a

bit more this way: because God loves us, God judges us. God loves us so much that God wants us to clean up, but not just have us clean up, but to help us to do it. The prophet is saying in the Old Testament reading: "I'm going to clean you up so that you will be ready to stand before me."

Why does God judge us? Is it to see us squirm or be dangled over the flames? No...the opposite is true. God judges us **to** save us. It's the age old Lutheran idea, but also a Scriptural one, of the law of God convicting us while the Gospel saves us from the law. God seeks to clean us inside out so that we might have life and have it abundantly. So, the fire and the smelly, abrasive soap...or in some cases, a book that hits us on the forehead, is necessary for us. This is a God who wants us to be able to stand before the divine without blemish, and only God can accomplish this...even though sometimes it may not be comfortable for us.

How does God do this? Well, one clue might come from O'Connor's story yet again. For, it turns out that the teenage girl who throws her book at Mrs. Ruby Turpin ...is named Grace. It is God's grace that ultimately allows us to be righteous. Accept that grace today in the tangible signs that God is cleansing you, not with soap and fire, but with water, water from the font, Blessed Sacrament of baptism, where we are made worthy to stand before the Divine One, Christ himself.

Slide: Kiln

For these last three weeks, we have been watching this beautiful clay pot, thrown on the potter's wheel by our very own Eric Holey, to transform. Today, it looks quite drab. It has been glazed, yes, but the beauty and the sheen are quite drab. It has yet to go through its final stage, where it enters the refiner's fire. There, in the kiln for the last time, all remaining impurities will be removed and this drab, colorless glaze will transform into a shiny, clean, beautiful

baptismal bowl. We will
finally, next Sunday morning,
see the bowl in its
completeness, ready to stand,
to hold, and to renew with the
waters of baptism streaming
from it.

We, too, in our desire to
stand before God, need that
fire and soap. We need to be
fired up for the coming of
Christ in our lives over and
over again. That's what
repentance is. That's what
Advent does as we prepare for
the true promises of
Christmas: Christ with us.
Amen.