

FIRST READING: Malachi 3:1-4, 23-24

A reading from the Book of the Prophet Malachi:

Thus says the Lord GOD: Lo, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me; And suddenly there will come to the temple the LORD whom you seek, And the messenger of the covenant whom you desire. Yes, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts. But who will endure the day of his coming? And who can stand when he appears? For he is like the refiner's fire, or like the fuller's lye. He will sit refining and purifying silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi, Refining them like gold or like silver that they may offer due sacrifice to the LORD. Then the sacrifice of Judah and Jerusalem will please the LORD, as in the days of old, as in years gone by. Lo, I will send you Elijah, the prophet, Before the day of the LORD comes, the great and terrible day, To turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers, Lest I come and strike the land with doom.

The word of the Lord.

RESPONSORIAL: Psalm 25:4-5ab, 8-9, 10 and 14

Lift up your heads and see; your redemption is near at hand.

Your ways, O LORD, make known to me; teach me your paths, Guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my savior.

Lift up your heads and see; your redemption is near at hand.

Good and upright is the LORD; thus he shows sinners the way. He guides the humble to justice, he teaches the humble his way.

Lift up your heads and see; your redemption is near at hand.

All the paths of the LORD are kindness and constancy toward those who keep his covenant and his decrees. The friendship of the LORD is with those who fear him, and his covenant, for their instruction.

Lift up your heads and see; your redemption is near at hand.

GOSPEL: Luke 1:57-66

+ A reading from the holy Gospel according to Luke:

When the time arrived for Elizabeth to have her child she gave birth to a son. Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy toward her, and they rejoiced with her. When they came on the eighth day to circumcise the child, they were going to call him Zechariah after his father, but his mother said in reply, "No. He will be called John." But they answered her, "There is no one among your relatives who has this name." So they made signs, asking his father what he wished him to be called. He asked for a tablet and wrote, "John is his name," and all were amazed. Immediately his mouth was opened, his tongue freed, and he spoke blessing God. Then fear came upon all their neighbors, and all these matters were discussed throughout the hill country of Judea. All who heard these things took them to heart, saying, "What, then, will this child be? For surely the hand of the Lord was with him."

The Gospel of the Lord.

Reflection for the 4th Thursday of Advent December 23

How did the Ethiopians develop coffee? Coffee beans aren't beans. They are the hearts of seeds that come from fruit called coffee cherries. The fruit, I understand, is sweet and tasty. To collect the pits, dry them out, crack them open, collect the hearts, roast them, grind them and infuse them with hot water to extract a bitter, caffeinated beverage is a bit of a stretch. Yet it happened. I have one cup, which is actually a four cup pot's worth in a half liter beer mug, each morning. Human ingenuity always intrigues me. The same is true of linen, a fine cloth. How did people put together that the coarse fibers of reeds could be transformed into such soft fine thread? What of extracting metal from rock. How did people deduce, discover the process and begin to work metal?

The processes of extracting a cup of coffee from beans, turning flax reeds into fine cloth and refining metals are discoveries that changed the world. The original item, its matrix and form must be destroyed in order for the morning's lift, fine clothes and metal adornments. The structural steel that reinforces our church building's concrete structure was first smelted from rock to be criss-crossed in artificial stone. It is a wonder.

I digress. Each time I have read this passage from the prophet Malachi, I am filled with that same wonderment and awe; God's creation and human creativity. The prophet used this wonder to describe the process of human transformation. Sometimes, upon reflection, we may discover new ways of thinking, feeling, perception and behaving; a natural discernment within our lives by the grace of God. Yet, sometimes change is hard won; difficult and painful.

We can encounter our limits. At sixty eight I can no longer move as easily as I did, say, five or ten years ago. I have to adapt and accept the physical fact of aging and to be at peace with the fact that I have more years behind me than before me. I will die. This too, is a process not unlike the refiner's fire or the fuller's lye. I will only live forever in the life to come in God's Kingdom. Malachi wrote of the transformation of the human soul, psyche and person.

It's easy to get absorbed by his imagery. The refiner sits over his crucible watching the rock matrix melt. He removes the slag until he can see himself reflected in pure molten metal. I made lead soldiers as a kid and did it myself. I've never made linen from flax, but each morning I grind coffee beans for my morning's cup of java. As I write this I reflect how the many decisions and choices that I've made over a life time have shaped me, molded me into the person I am; all by the grace of God and movement of the Holy Spirit.

Malachi gave an important clue as to what he expected to be the sign on human refinement; people's hearts turning toward one another. He used the relationships of children and parents as his example. That may be too comfortable. Jesus preached, "Love your enemies; pray for those who hurt you. This is how you show yourselves to be children of your heavenly father." The sun, by God's grace, shines on us all. We are all sinners who need God's love to forgive us. The key element in our process of transformation into the people that God wants us to become is not our good will but God's saving and amazing grace. Who's the fuller? Who sits watching rock melt to reveal the purest metal? The same God who forgives us to begin anew. Forgiveness is our process of refinement and takes a life time to achieve.

As I read the story of the annunciation of John the Baptist, the angel spoke to Zechariah not Elizabeth. When he asked in astonishment and partial disbelief, how this could happen, he was

struck dumb, unable to speak. Why, then, did these well meaning but intrusive neighbors not speak to him but communicate with sign language? He wasn't struck deaf. This passage always strikes me with the absurdity of a Monty Python skit. If the bible came with a laugh-track, this passage would have one.

When we read the scripture, we read it as the events happen in real time just like we do when we read a novel or watch a movie. This is not exactly what it seems, though. Luke wrote this narrative decades after the events. John was beheaded and his parts were in a grave. Jesus had been executed, buried, rose from death, ascended to the father and sent the Spirit perhaps forty years before. The story was told from that perspective of his faith. People remembered the events from an experiential filter. The question they asked, "What, then, will this child be?" is from the perspective of knowing who the man really was.

I can be filled with wonder like the neighbors of Zechariah and Elizabeth this each time I hold an infant, see young people or see someone beginning something new. Their lives, relationships and choices will unfold in ways just as astonishing. God does not work in just the lives of those in the bible or who we now call saints; God works in us all. God has transformed us all into the persons we are today. God's life is a wonder to behold.

May the Spirit lead us always.

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