

FULLER'S SOAP

December 6, 2009

Texts – Malachi 3: 1-4

Luke 3: 1-6

“I send my messenger to prepare the way for me,” the voice of Malachi says. *“He is like a refiner’s fire and like a fuller’s soap . . . he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them . . . until they present right offerings to the Lord”* [Malachi 3: 1, 2b]

The words are not a part of most of our family Christmas albums, are they? Oh, we may recognize them from Handel’s “Messiah,” but only if we’re exceedingly familiar with the unabridged version. Why is that? Is it because the notes are too difficult for any but the most accomplished chorus to sing? Or is it because the words are too challenging for any but the most committed to live?

Christmas is about shepherds and wise men from the east. It is about angels “*heard on high*” and the baby Jesus “*wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.*” Why is it not also about “*a refiner’s fire and . . . fullers’ soap*”? Is there room in your Christmas for Malachi?

Consider his promise of “*fuller’s soap.*” Do you have any of that in your cupboard at home? I confess I wasn’t sure earlier this week, so I looked it up in a Bible dictionary. Turns out we do – it’s called Tide® in our house. We use the liquid “deep clean” formula. Comes with its own “easy pour” spigot built right in. There’s even a measuring cup to tell you exactly how much to use.

“I send my messenger He is like . . . fuller’s soap . . . ,” like deep cleaning Tide®. Sort of loses its mystique when you put it that way, doesn’t it? I confess we usually buy ours in the handy family-size 150 gallon drum they sell at Costco. It’s cheaper, as long as you have a semi-trailer truck with which to carry it home. Talk about creative marketing! From now on I’m

gonna sing “I Want To Be Ready” while I do the laundry.

“I send my messenger to prepare the way . . . He is like . . . fuller’s soap.” This is the Word we hear each Advent. Clean up your life. Wash it, scrub it, prepare it for the coming of the Promised One. Is that something you are doing this year?

There was a time, wasn’t there? . . . not so very long ago, really . . . when doing the laundry was not just about going into the laundry room or down into the basement and throwing a load of dirty clothes into the washing machine. You first had to heat up the water in a very large kettle. Sometimes that was outside over an open fire. Sometimes it was inside in the kitchen, using the stove to heat smaller pots of water which you then used to fill that big laundry kettle. It took time.

When you had the water just right, you removed it from the fire and put your soiled clothing into it. After they had soaked a bit, you rolled up your sleeves, picked up a cake of soap in one hand and an article of clothing in the other, and you started scrubbing. A washboard came in handy. You scrubbed and rubbed it, then you rinsed it and examined it to see how it was coming . . . then you started all over again, and did it again and again until it was clean. Then you put it all into a big wash basket, a laundry basket (we’ve still got my grandmother’s out in the garage at home), and then you picked up the next article of clothing and started over. It could take all day, couldn’t it?, if you had a big family.

“I send my messenger,” this old text says, *“to prepare the way He is like . . . fuller’s soap.”*

Then as now, of course, the soap was important. You aren’t going to get the dirt out just using clean water. But neither is the soap going to do any good if all you do is throw a bar of it into the kettle and let it float around for a while amongst all your dirty t-shirts. You’ve got to roll up your sleeves, pick it up in your hand, and scrub with it. And obviously, before you do that,

you've got to get the water and heat it. And then after you've washed it, you've still got to rinse it and hang it out to dry, to say nothing of folding it or ironing it.

My point? It's a lot of work. It takes time. It takes energy, whether that comes from your muscles or from your machines. The soap is a critical ingredient, but it's not the only thing. You have to participate. You have to do some work.

"I send my messenger," this old text says; it dates from approximately 450 B.C.. We might read it, therefore, as "I have sent my messenger" . . . *"to prepare the way."* And yes, the text goes on – *"He is like a refiner's fire and like fuller's soap."* But the point is . . . The message is . . . You have what you need. All is in readiness. The rest is now up to you. To me. To us. To do what? To prepare . . . To make ourselves clean. To roll up our sleeves and to go to work.

Advent, we often say, is a season of preparation – a time of waiting for the coming of the Christ. And that's right, but it is not therefore passive. We are invited to prepare the way not just by cleaning our houses or our world but our selves.

Henry David Thoreau caught the essence of it one hundred and fifty years ago. "Beware of all enterprises that require new clothes," he warned,

"and not rather a new wearer of clothes. If there is not a new person, how can the new clothes be made to fit? If you have any new enterprise before you, try it first in your old clothes."

The *"fuller's soap"* which we have received is not for our laundry but ourselves. Let us use it in the sacred solitude of silence, that we might truly prepare ourselves to receive the gift of new life. Amen.