

Camille Cook Murray  
Polished for Christmas  
Georgetown Presbyterian Church

December 9<sup>th</sup>, 2018  
Malachi 3:1-4  
Special Music Sunday

After the first presentation of the Messiah in London in 1741, Handel wrote to a friend, “I should be sorry if I only entertained them. I wished to make them better.” Today’s music by Vivaldi is presented not just for the sweet glorious sounds for our ears but in order to inspire us as we tiptoe closer to the high and holy day of Christmas. For generations poets, preachers, musicians, and prophets have tried to make us better with all sorts of tactics from lofty musical arrangements to flowery rhymes to stirring sermons.

The prophet Malachi had his own style for trying to encourage a ‘performance improvement plan’ for his people. 450 years before Jesus, the prophet Malachi cries the familiar Advent chorus, “Prepare the way, the Lord is coming.” The exact same message we hear from Isaiah and then quoted by John the Baptist. It is sort of weird that for centuries the message hasn’t changed much – the world is broken, people are sinful, and we all need to get our acts together. Prepare the way, cleanse your hearts, and polish yourselves up.

At the time when Malachi preached the nation was at a spiritually low ebb. It was a time when a cloud of dull depression settled over the people and cynicism and impiety had gained ground. People had generally stopped listening for God and maybe had even stopped believing that God was coming at all. Malachi had his work cut out for him. I found this modern translation of what I think Malachi might have sounded like when preaching about the state of the souls of his people.

*“You’re a monster...your heart’s an empty hole...your brain is full of spiders...you’ve got garlic in your soul. You’re a foul one...you’re a nasty-wasty skunk...your heart is full of unwashed socks...your soul is full of gunk. Your soul is an appalling dump heap overflowing with the most disgraceful assortment of deplorable rubbish imaginable mangled up in tangled up knots.”*

I believe that is taken from a missing sermon from Malachi, it is non-canonical, non-verifiable and plagiarized, I am sure, by Dr. Seuss. In his call to cleanse the souls of the people Malachi said that God would come like a refiner’s fire and like fullers soap and given the state of things this was good news. The purpose of the refiners fire is to remove impurities and strengthen the substance. John Calvin wrote, “The power of the fire, we know, is twofold: for it burns and it purifies; it burns what is corrupt; but it purifies gold and silver from their dross.” The ‘cleanse and repent’ drumbeat is supposed to be good news – the fire is not to destroy but to purify and make room for God. “I wished to make them better.”

The pastoral message from the prophet is that when our hearts are open, our minds are clear, our souls cleansed then there is space for God, there is space for new life, there is space for growth. Malachi was trying to get them to make this kind of space so they might receive God. John the Baptist was trying to get them to make their hearts open to receive Jesus. Advent every year tries to get us to prepare the way for God to come again into the hearts and minds of God's people, to those who have fallen asleep or stopped listening or stopped striving or stopped believing. The symbolic judgment of the nativity story was that there was no room for Jesus. God will come again if there is room, if there is openness, if there are ears and eyes to see.

If we are ready – God will come. If we are open - God will invade. If we are accepting - God will reform. This should be music to our ears that our souls filled with the build up of a year's worth of 'gunk' might be cleansed, repaired, and renewed. For God is good and God's entry is always good news. May we be inspired this day to be open, to be better, and to make room for the Lord to come again.

Amen.