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Title: The Inn: Housing the Holy – A Place at the Table

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Text: [Malachi 3:1-4](#)

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Last week we embarked on the journey of Advent that leads us to Christmas. We started a series called: "The Inn: Housing the Holy," to prepare us to house the holy in our homes and our lives. We lit the first candle of hope and read from Jeremiah that new life can come when we make room for Jesus and make room for hope even when

that means moving some things around like we do when we put up our decorations.

Today, the second Sunday of Advent is Peace Sunday. The candle and banner help us remember. Today, we are pulled into the distant past to hear the words of another ancient prophet, Malachi. Malachi, as the Old Testament is coming to a close, tells of a figure who is coming "to prepare the way for the Lord." He tells of one who will refine and purify people's hearts. Amid our pre-Christmas hustle and bustle, the scripture for today has this primitive prophet who promises us an Advent clean and polish. You would think that we could come up with more encouraging words at this time – something that would assure us that we will make it through another Christmas and remind us of the idyllic Christmas pageants of our childhood. Instead, it suggests that we'd better get busy getting cleaned up before God arrives.

In Flannery O'Connor's short story "Revelation" the main character, Mrs. Ruby Turpin, is the domineering spouse of a pig farmer. She is also an appalling racist. She categorizes everybody - black and white, rich and poor - according to an elaborate scale of bigotry that she is constantly adjusting. Worst of all, Ruby Turpin views her fondness for making distinctions based on race or class to be a great talent that she possesses. ¹

One day, while she is sitting in the waiting room of her doctor's office, expressing gratitude that she is neither black nor poor, Mrs. Turpin is assaulted by a young girl who hits her smack in the middle of her forehead with a book titled *Human Development*, and who calls her "a warthog." This

accusation overturns Mrs. Turpin's world. Ruby understands this attack not simply to be the deranged act of an over-stressed teenager but rather, she understands the assault to be a message sent by God.

When Ruby Turpin arrives home from the doctor's office with a bruise on her forehead, she stomps out to her shed, picks up a hose, and begins washing down her pigs with a forceful stream of cold water. She is angry at God. What right does God have to suggest that she, an upstanding citizen, is "a warthog"? As soon as her husband is out of earshot, Ruby looks to the heavens and growls, "What did you send me a message like that for?" "How am I a warthog?" "How am I saved?" she asks.

"How am I saved?" It is one of the most profound theological questions ever posed in American literature. It is also a question that we know quite well at this time of year. We may not ask it like that but there are instances that this season can show a disconnect between who our words say we are and who our actions say we are. We can spend hours trying to make a good Christmas for our children or others in our family and then lose patience with them in an instant? I can hum Christmas carols and, at the same time, wish people would get out of my way in line at Costco? "How am I saved?"

This question testifies to a classic theological formula: God both loves us and judges us. Or perhaps more accurately, because God loves us, God judges us. That is the deep truth that lies at the heart of Malachi's prophecy. Our gracious God so loves us that God's great desire is to see us freed from the grime that covers our souls. God is not saying: "I refuse to let you come in for a visit until you clean up a bit." God is used to having our messy selves around. Instead, God is saying: "I am going to help you clean up. I will help you to throw off the tarnish that prohibits you from truly experiencing the joy that awaits you this season."

"Who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?" asks the prophet Malachi, "For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap." (Malachi 3:2) Both of these images are a little frightening. A refiner's fire is the forced-air, white-hot blaze that melts metallic ores and brings their impurities to the surface. Fullers' soap is the strong, lye-based soap used to bleach the impurities from cloth and wool just sheared off of sheep. Fire and soap are what we need to get ourselves ready for the one that is coming, says Malachi.

We are told that the messenger who comes to prepare us for the Lord arrives with flames in one hand and a caustic detergent in the other. He comes to boil off the impurities in our souls and to apply a coarse scrub brush to our spirits. MERRY CHRISTMAS! A little-known fact is that Malachi

was fired from his job of writing Christmas cards for Hallmark. I'm kidding of course, but it does beg the question of why this concern for purification as we head toward Christmas?

If you are familiar with Handel's Messiah, you know that George Fredric Handel wrestled with the words as he wrote - "But who may abide the day of his coming? and who shall stand when he appeareth? for he is like a refiner's fire" and later Handel writes, "And he shall purify the sons of Levi, that they may offer unto the Lord an offering in righteousness." ²

Who exactly this passage is referring to has been interpreted differently over the years but if the words "my messenger" in Malachi 3:1 is identified with John the Baptist in its early Christian interpretation, then phrases "the Lord whom you seek" and "the messenger of the covenant" become identified with Jesus himself. It is the Lord who is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap. It is he who will purify the people of the covenant. And, despite our feelings or fears about the matter, this is good news! Sin separates us from God and we need a good cleansing. And we are helpless to do it ourselves. Enter the refiner of gold and the washer of clothes, to do the cleaning for us.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes of this theme of judgment in an Advent sermon he preached in 1928: "It is very remarkable that we face the thought that God is coming, so calmly, whereas previously peoples trembled at the day of God We have become so accustomed to the idea of divine love and of God's coming at Christmas that we no longer feel the shiver of fear that God's coming should arouse in us. We are indifferent to the message, taking only the pleasant and agreeable out of it and forgetting the serious aspect, that the God of the world draws near to the people of our little earth and lays claim to us. The coming of God is truly not only glad tidings, but first of all frightening news for everyone who has a conscience. Only when we have felt the terror of the matter, can we recognize the incomparable kindness. God comes into the very midst of evil and death and judges the evil in us and the world. And by judging us, God cleanses and sanctifies us, comes to us with grace and love."³

At the close of Flannery O'Connor's story, Mrs. Turpin has a vision - a "revelation" from where the title comes - as she stands outside by her pigs. She sees a ladder on which people are ascending to heaven, walking together in the groups that she had placed them. She and those like her are bringing up the rear of the procession; they are the "last," following all of those whom they have despised for so long. And O'Connor writes, "They alone were on key. Yet she could see by their shocked and altered faces that even their virtues were being burned away."

Sometimes the things that we need to be purged from our spirits are precisely those aspects of our personality that we are most proud of; even those pieces of us that we consider to be our strengths and our virtues are at risk when the purifier of souls comes to town. This is the promise of the season. The gift of Malachi is to picture for us a God who lays out fire and soap this Advent, a God who wants to cleanse us from everything that would prevent us from standing in awe at the manger. Why does God do this? Well, one clue might come from O'Connor's story. The name of the girl who throws her book at Ruby Turpin in the doctor's office is "Grace."

Ruby Turpin wanted to be the one who controlled who was in and who was out. Like the childhood game of "musical chairs", we, like Ruby, are always convinced there are not enough places at the table. So, we shrink the guest list just in case there is not enough room, and we make sure to occupy the chairs first. Yet, we are reminded that we are invited to imagine and make real a world where there is room for everyone.

I've always been fascinated by the preparation that goes on behind the scenes to prepare for something – an upcoming event or the arrival of a person. While a student at TCU, I worked in a 500-room hotel in downtown Fort Worth. My title was Assistant Manager but that sounds better than it was. I and two other assistant managers took care of problems that might arise when the real manager was not there. The assistant managers worked evenings, overnights, and weekends. Even though we didn't have much authority, we did get to witness the preparation that went into every event – and, the bigger the event, the more preparation.

There was one occasion, likely in 1982 or so, when the owner of the hotel, Sid Bass, announced that the Vice President of the United States, George H.W. Bush would be a guest at the hotel. The Americana Hotel was a very nice hotel and was kept in tip-top shape but when that announcement was made, all departments of the hotel kicked into overdrive. The owners and managers worked with Secret Service to make arrangements. An entire floor of the hotel was blocked off for his visit. The hotel was cleaned like it had not been cleaned before – curtains were steamed, tile grout was cleaned, the carpet was shampooed. Everybody got new uniforms. Anybody that was going to be in the vicinity of the Vice President had to fill out a questionnaire. A memo from management suggested that we look our best if we were working on the day the Vice President would be in the building. I assumed that meant that I should shower and use deodorant and comb my hair that day. Yes, I had hair in 1982.

Here's the deal. Someone much greater than the Vice President is coming. There are things that we carry into this season that are less than holy that

need to be cleaned up. We approach our family gatherings and company parties burdened with old grudges, hurt feelings, and misunderstandings that we simply cannot let go of. In fact, instead of coming clean, we have secretly nurtured these wounds, allowing them to coat our souls with gunk. God comes to save us, and a part of that process is to purge our souls of the gunk and grime that prevents us from fully welcoming the Christ child in our lives. God came to us in Christ so that we might have life and have it abundantly. For that to happen, we have to rid ourselves of the baggage that weighs us down, the mindset that excludes others from the table, the grievance that we hold against another.

The job of the fuller was to make the cloth “fuller” - clean and more suitable for weaving or sewing. In our faith journey, from the day of our baptism forward, there should be a constant cleansing to keep our spiritual fibers in the best possible condition. In this season, I hope you will seek to prepare yourself to welcome Jesus. As for me, I’ll take a pass on the refiner’s fire and the fuller’s soap, but I will work to ready myself for the one who is coming in this season. Amen.

¹ Information on Flannery O’Connor’s *Revelation* found at www.cliffnotes.com

² Handel’s Messiah Bible references found at:

https://www.wordproject.org/bibles/resources/handels_messiah/index.htm

³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *A Testament to Freedom: The Essential Writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*. Ed. Geoffrey B. Kelly and F. Burton Nelson (New York: Harper San Francisco, 1995) pp. 185-186.