

Luke 2:22-40 and Malachi 3:1-4

I don't think we have celebrated the festival of Candlemas here at Immanuel in the past, it doesn't often fall on a Sunday. I was introduced to this festival at seminary when one of the students on the worship team, of which I was a member, asked if we could have a Candlemas service, which we did. When it was mentioned in our pastor's Bible study group a few weeks ago I agreed that it would be good to celebrate the festival as well. The Presentation of our Lord, Candlemas, is the day we remember Jesus' presentation in the temple and Anna and Simeon rejoiced because they were in the presence of the Messiah. It is a day that celebrates seniors and children alike. It is a day when candles are blessed for the coming year.

Since Candlemas is on February 2, which is midway between the winter solstice and the spring equinox, we see that the days are growing longer. The deeper meaning of Candlemas is not simply the reality of increasing light, but also of death. Candlemas is the point in time of the liturgical year that we move from Christmas to Easter, from the manger to the cross. The gold, frankincense, and myrrh brought by the wise men, become gold for a king, frankincense for a priest and myrrh for burial. We can look deeply into the mystery of the incarnation in order to give depth to Christmas and a greater sense of the profound to Holy Week and Easter. Jesus took on human flesh in a humble manger to build community between God and people. He gave his life so that community can extend into eternity. We build community between people and share our love of God.

The most memorable scripture verses in the Candlemas readings is what we have come to know as the Nunc Dimittis, Simeon's song, where in Luke 2:29-31, Simeon took Jesus in his arms and praised God, saying, "Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and fore glory to your people Israel." Martin Luther composed a hymn based on it #440 in our hymnal. It turns us, humanity in which God nurtured Jesus, toward the cross, on which the salvation of the whole world hangs. It puts birth and death side by side. It points to the fullness of life and our mortality. These are some of the most poetic words ever written, and we can sing Simeon's song as our own. I invite you to join in, let me explain how... you will begin by saying "Now, Lord" to which I will complete the sentences, so we will start with you saying "Now Lord"

Now, Lord,

You let Your servant go in peace.

Now, Lord,

Your word has been fulfilled.

Now, Lord,

My own eyes have seen Your salvation.

Now, Lord,

You are in the sight of every people.

Now, Lord,

A light to reveal You to the nations.

Now Lord,

The glory of Your people, Israel.

Now Lord.

In this we hear a recurring word, "now", the promise that surprised Simeon and Anna, "now". The word brings the promise of a Messiah to life. "now" As our candles shine in our homes throughout the year, we see that light of Jesus shine.

As we turn from the celebration of Christmas towards the end of Jesus' life on earth, we remember that Jesus came for all humanity, each one of us. Yet as we heard in the reading from Malachi when the Lord suddenly comes to his temple it will not be an easy day for all people. The descendants of Levi, the tribe from which priests descended, would be purified with fullers' soap and refiner's fire. I spoke about fullers' soap in one of my Advent sermons... it isn't a pleasant experience to have fullers' soap wash you. It is an acidic soap that nearly washes the skin off your body. In the second chapter of the book of Malachi, we hear these words about priests, "For the lips of a priest should guard knowledge, and people should seek instruction from his mouth, for he is the messenger of the LORD of hosts" (2:7). Given this high view of the priesthood of his day, we can understand Malachi's concern for their integrity.

Yet, everybody will be judged, but, says the prophet Malachi, some will be redeemed. Malachi doesn't speak about repentance, only God's initiative, but the implication is that those whom God will redeem are those who turn to the Lord. They will be saved, but it will be a rough redemption, a caustic washing.

We can apply this word from Malachi to ourselves. And whether we will be among those who perish or those who will be redeemed, there's reason for terror. In one of his sermons, Bonhoeffer said, "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 of death, and judges the evil in us and in the world. And by judging us, God cleanses and sanctifies us, comes to us with grace ..."

A women's Bible-study group was once discussing Malachi 3:3, about how God "will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver." Deciding she wanted to find out more about the passage, the leader went to visit a silversmith and asked about the refining process. "Why don't you watch me at work?" he offered. She observed how the silversmith held a piece of silver over the fire and let it heat up. He explained that, in refining silver, it's essential to hold the silver in the middle of the fire where the flames are hottest, to burn away all impurities.

She asked the silversmith if it were true that he had to sit there in front of the fire the whole time the silver was being refined. The man answered yes. Not only did he have to sit there holding the silver, he also had to keep his eye on it the entire time. If the silver was left in the flames just a moment too long, it could be damaged beyond repair. She realized, then, the attention needed to be a refiner and purifier of silver, and what good news that is for those going through various trials in life. Thanking the silversmith for his time, the woman was about to leave, but he called her back. "There's one thing you didn't ask," he said. "You didn't ask how I know the process of purifying is complete. I know it is finished when I can see my own image reflected in the silver." When Christ the Messiah sees his own image reflected in his people, he knows the work of purifying has been accomplished.

Malachi's good news is that God takes the initiative and does the needed purifying, so we need not live constantly in terror. It doesn't hurt, however, to be reminded that God's grace is not cheap, and that redemption is a strong cure, worth going through because of the outcome, but not something to be thought of lightly. As we light our candles in our homes this year, let's remember that:

We are immersed in the waters of baptism and marked with the sign of the cross.

God is for us and promises life everlasting.

We turn from the manger to Christ's passion and death on a cross.

God is for us at the empty tomb and in the mysteries of Easter.

We bend down to serve and love one another as Christ first loved us, lifted high on a cross.

God is for us, and we are God's people now and forever.

All glory be to God.