

If you were going to design a Christmas card what would you put on the front cover? Would you draw a picture of the Christ-child lying in a manger as Mary and Joseph stand guard and a wide-eyed shepherd boy peers in on the little babe? Maybe you would sketch an angel next to the words “Peace on earth and good will to all”? Or perhaps you would illustrate Jesus with his sleeves rolled up carrying a box of bleach, or Jesus working at a metal factory pouring raw ore into a boiling vat attempting to get some pure gold or silver out of the raw ore? What? Send that type of Christmas card? Jesus carrying a box of bleach, or Jesus wearing goggles and working with hot metal? But that is how Malachi would have drawn up his Christmas card. God told Malachi that the Messiah would come as one who purifies and cleans with a launderer’s soap or a refiners fire. While Malachi’s portrayal of the Messiah might seem bizarre it does provide a precise picture of what Jesus came to do. Our sermon text teaches us this morning that the Lord comes to launder lives by purifying us from sin, and restoring our usefulness.

The prophet Malachi lived about 400 years before Christ was born and was the last of the Old Testament prophets. 100 years had also passed since the Jews returned from exile in Babylon and in a sense God was starting over with his chosen people. He had purged from the ranks those who refused to worship him and was now going to use this new group to usher in the era of the Messiah. Things started out well as the returnees quickly dedicated themselves to rebuilding the city of Jerusalem and the Lord’s temple. Unfortunately this enthusiasm didn’t last as they decided that it was more important to build beautiful homes for themselves than to finish their house of worship. They also ignored God’s warnings not to intermarry with the heathen. They broke the Sabbath and their marriages. They cheated, lied, and embezzled funds. To top it all off the priests were guilty of many of these things.

With all that going on you would expect God to say, “Enough! I just can’t win with these people!” It’s true isn’t it? The Israelites had often displayed an unfaithful, ungrateful attitude towards the LORD. Think back to how they treated God after he rescued them from the Egyptians. Even though they had just witnessed God’s ability to part the sea so two million people and their possessions could cross over on dry land in a single evening they didn’t seem to think that this same God could, or would provide an adequate supply of food and water on their journey to the Promised Land. So they complained bitterly to Moses and were even so bold as to say that it would have been better for them to remain slaves in Egypt.

The story of the Israelites is often our story isn’t it? We too know that our God is all-powerful and is concerned about our well being, yet when we run into the first signs of difficulty we panic and accuse God of abandoning us! We think that if only we could be in charge of our life things would go much more smoothly. Of course we forget about those times when we did go out on our own only to mess things up. We also seem to conveniently forget that it was God who bailed us out of the mess we had gotten ourselves into.

How do you think God should deal with people who continue to second-guess him and try to

go their own way all the time? After hearing about all the sins the Israelites were committing you would expect God to tell Malachi that he was going to send someone to punish the unfaithful Israelites. Instead God says that he is going to send the “messenger of the covenant” who would not punish but purify the hearts of his people.

Before that messenger of the covenant arrived, a messenger would come, who would announce his arrival to the world. We know who that messenger was. It was John the Baptist, the voice calling in the desert, “Prepare the way for the Lord.” John the Baptist introduced Jesus to the world with these important words, “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” All the lambs and animals that were offered in God’s temple, pointed forward to Jesus the Lamb of God who would take away the sin of the world.

Look at the priests offering lambs in the temple of the Lord. Think of all the lambs that were sacrificed. How often the priests sprinkled the blood of the lambs on the altar. Now the Lamb of God comes into the temple. What was pictured becomes a reality. In Psalm 40 we hear Jesus the Messiah tell us 1000 years before he is born, how he feels about coming into this world to be the sacrifice for our sin. He says to his heavenly Father with great joy and anticipation, “Here I am, I have come- it is written in the scroll. I desire to do your will, O my God, your law is within my heart.”

God’s people needed to hear that the Lord was ready to enter into the temple and purge the world of sin. And how did Jesus purify us from our sins? He didn’t use soap or a vat of molten gold, but his own blood which he shed on the cross. Jesus’ blood cleanses us from our sins because it is pure blood – blood that doesn’t contain any of its own sin and therefore absorbs all of our sinfulness like a big sponge. Therefore we can be confident that because of Jesus our sins are covered and hidden from God and we can trust that he won’t punish us for them.

But in spite of the wonderful work Jesus has done many people are not planning on standing behind Christ’s blood when they appear before God’s judgment throne. They either think that their life has been good enough or they simply don’t know about Christ’s work and therefore plan on standing before God on the basis of what they have and have not done. But that’s foolish. It’s just like the little boy who doesn’t think he needs to wear a winter coat, hat and mittens while he’s playing outside in the -20 zero weather. Without that winter protection, it won’t take very long for the boys’ ears to become frostbitten will it? In the same way if we try to stand before God on our own merits we won’t last very long before God throws us out of his loving presence for being frostbitten with sin. Praise God for purifying our hearts through Jesus. Honor him by putting your trust in him for the forgiveness of sins.

While Jesus’ work of purifying our hearts from sin is completed he continues to purify our faith. He does this by sending trials into our lives. He allows tough times because he wants to teach us through experience that we can count on him for everything. Therefore don’t be surprised if God allows you to get sick, or gives you a spouse or other relative to take care of for a time. When that

happens look forward to seeing how God will continue to care for you just as he has in the past.

In purifying our hearts from sin Jesus restored our usefulness as God's servants. Think of it this way. You wouldn't spend money to get your favorite shirt dry-cleaned if you didn't plan on wearing it. In the same Jesus doesn't just purify us so that heaven can be ours; he's purified us so that we can serve God. Paul put that thought this way. "And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again" (2 Cor. 5:15).

How exactly does God want us to serve him? Well, in our text God didn't ask anything extraordinary from his people. He simply wanted them to serve faithfully in the work that he had already given to them. For the priests this meant that they should take their duties seriously and look at it as a privilege, not a burden. For you it may mean to worship the Lord at Open Bible as often as possible, to have daily devotional time in the Word, to take advantage of Bible studies offered at church, and to look for a way to serve in the ministry of your church.

Of course there are other ways in which we can serve our God. In the book of Malachi God says that we can serve him by bringing him the best of our income. Unfortunately the Israelites during Malachi's time were bringing anything but their best. They were sacrificing animals that were sick and diseased and not worth selling on the market any way. That hardly showed devotion and respect to the King of Kings! In fact God dared them to bring that same gift to their governor in Jerusalem.

How are we doing in our giving? Are we giving the King of Kings the best of our income, or whatever we can afford to part with? Giving God our best is a way for us to show that he truly has captured our heart and remains number one in our life. When you sit down to figure out how much you want to give to the Lord keep in mind that he purified you for that very purpose; so that you could serve him with your whole life, including your treasures.

In the Old Testament the sons of Levi and the priests had the special privilege of serving the Lord in his temple. Now because of Jesus, God's Son, born in Bethlehem, we are the Lord's temple. We are living stones built on Christ. We have the privilege of offering sacrifices to Lord in the form of the changed lives that we live. "But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who has called you out of darkness into his marvelous light."

The Christmas cards are coming in. We see Jesus in a manger, shepherds, wise men, Mary and Joseph. I don't think we will see the picture on a card of a refiner's fire, or of Jesus carrying launderers soap. But What a wonderful gift we have in Jesus who purifies us and make us shine more brightly for him than the purest gold or silver. Amen.