

TITLE: "Refiner's Fire"

SCRIPTURE: Malachi 3:1-4 & Luke 3:1-6

IT'S BEGINNING TO LOOK A LOT LIKE CHRISTMAS!
THIS WEEK MY HUSBAND AND I SET UP OUR CHRISTMAS TREE ON THE
BALCONY.
WE LIVE IN A SMALL CONDO, SO THE ONLY PLACE A TREE WILL FIT IS ON
THE BALCONY!
DON'T WORRY, WE GET A WONDERFUL VIEW OF THE TWINKLING
CHRISTMAS LIGHTS AND THE GOLD AND LACE ANGEL ON TOP
BECAUSE IT SITS RIGHT IN FRONT OF THE SLIDING GLASS DOORS.

I'M THE BUILDING CAPTAIN OF OUR CONDO ASSOCIATION.
ON FRIDAY MY CO-CAPTAIN AND I SET UP THE CHRISTMAS TREE IN THE
LOBBY.
THE SCHOOL DOWN THE ROAD FROM US HAD THEIR HOLIDAY FAIR
YESTERDAY.
THE BLOW-UP SANTAS AND REINDEER ARE POPPING UP ALL OVER THE
PLACE.
THE PACKAGES FROM CHRISTMAS SHOPPING ONLINE ARE SHOWING UP IN
THE MAIL ROOM ON A DAILY BASIS.
YES, IT'S BEGINNING TO LOOK A LOT LIKE CHRISTMAS.

I COULD GO ON NAMING ALL THE TASKS INVOLVED WITH CHRISTMAS
PREPARATION, AND I'M SURE YOU CAN FILL SOME OF YOUR OWN
ACTIVITIES INTO THE BLANKS I'M LEAVING.
THERE'S NO DOUBT ABOUT IT, PREPARING FOR CHRISTMAS IN THE 21ST
CENTURY MEANS ACTIVITY – LOTS AND LOTS AND LOTS OF
ACTIVITY!

AND THIS IS WHY IT IS SO VERY GOOD TO STOP FOR A MOMENT AND READ
THE WORDS OF THE PROPHET MALACHI AND THE GOSPEL WRITER
LUKE.
EACH OF THESE MEN TELLS US THERE IS A SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCE
BETWEEN PREPARING FOR CHRISTMAS AND PREPARING FOR THE
CHRIST.

PREPARING FOR CHRISTMAS IS FUN AND BOISTEROUS AND DISTRACTING
IN MANY WAYS.

IT IS A VERY IMPORTANT PART OF OUR JOURNEY THROUGH DECEMBER,
AND I WOULD NEVER WANT TO TAKE THIS AWAY FROM ANYONE.
BUT IT IS ALSO GOOD TO REMEMBER THAT THE OTHER PART OF THE
JOURNEY THROUGH DECEMBER HAS TO DO WITH PREPARING FOR
THE CHRIST, WHICH IS SOMETHING QUITE DIFFERENT THAN
PREPARING FOR CHRISTMAS CELEBRATIONS.
PREPARING FOR THE CHRIST IS PARTLY INTERNAL JOURNEY – A JOURNEY
OF THE HEART AND SOUL THAT COMES WITH SILENCE AND PRAYER
AND QUIET MOMENTS.
BUT PREPARING FOR THE CHRIST IS ALSO A COMMUNAL EXERCISE OF
GRACE AND MERCY THAT ONLY COMES WHEN PEOPLE OF FAITH
WORK TOGETHER TO GLORIFY GOD.

YOU SEE, BOTH MALACHI AND LUKE ARE TALKING ABOUT IMMENSE
TRANSFORMATIONS OF BOTH THE INDIVIDUAL HEART AND THE
SOCIAL STRUCTURES THAT PREPARE THE WORLD TO RECEIVE THE
CHRIST.

I THINK MALACHI IS TALKING MOSTLY ABOUT AN INTERNAL
TRANSFORMATION.
MALACHI SEEMS TO BE PREPARING THE WAY FOR THE ONE WHO
PREPARES THE WAY!
HE SAYS, “SEE, I AM SENDING MY MESSENGER TO PREPARE THE WAY
BEFORE ME, AND THE LORD WHOM YOU SEEK WILL SUDDENLY
COME TO HIS TEMPLE.”

MALACHI IS SPEAKING ABOUT JOHN THE BAPTIST HERE; THE ONE WHO
PREPARES THE WAY FOR JESUS THE LORD.
REMEMBER HOW JESUS COMES TO JOHN IN THE WILDERNESS?
THIS IS JESUS COMING TO JOHN’S TEMPLE – HIS PLACE OF WORSHIP – THE
JORDAN RIVER.
SO MALACHI PREPARES US FOR THE ONE WHO PREPARES US.
AND JOHN’S PREPARATION IS LIKE A REFINER’S FIRE.

MALACHI SAYS, “BUT WHO CAN WITHSTAND THE DAY OF HIS COMING,
AND WHO CAN STAND WHEN HE APPEARS.”
HE IS TALKING ABOUT THE RITUAL OF REPENTANCE TO WHICH JOHN
CALLS ALL OF HUMANITY.
IT IS A RITUAL THAT MELTS OUR SOULS INTO A BOILING MASS OF
MOLTEN METAL.

AND THEN THE GOOD NEWS OF LOVING AND COMPASSIONATE TRANSFORMATION COOLS THE HEAT OF REPENTANCE AS THE SOOTHING WATERS OF BAPTISM ARE POURED OVER A PERSON'S WOUNDED SOUL.

THE CALMING WATERS OF JOHN'S BAPTISM ARE MEANT TO TURN A DIFFICULT EXPERIENCE OF REPENTANCE INTO A PRECIOUS MOMENT OF GRACE AND MERCY AND RENEWAL THAT SHINE LIKE A PIECE OF SILVER OR GOLD.

NOW I WOULD BE HARD-PRESSED TO NAME A TIME WHEN I HAVE EXPERIENCED A MOMENT OF TRANSFORMING FORGIVENESS MORE POWERFULLY THAN WHEN VIEWING A SCENE FROM THE MOVIE CALLED *THE MISSION*.

THIS IS AN OLD MOVIE (1986) WITH SUCH AGELESS WISDOM THAT I CONTINUE TO COME BACK TO IT IN MY MIND OVER AND OVER AGAIN.

IT TAKES PLACE IN THE 18TH CENTURY IN SOUTH AMERICA.

THIS IS WHERE SPANISH JESUIT MISSIONARIES ARE SEEKING TO TEACH CHRISTIANITY TO THE NATIVES.

FATHER GABRIEL (PLAYED BY JEREMY IRONS) IS AN ENDEARING CHARACTER WHO USES MUSIC AND CULTURE AS AN ENTRY POINT TO BRING THE LOVE OF CHRIST INTO THE LIVES OF THE NATIVES.

BUT THE PERSON OF GREATEST INTEREST TO ME IS A MAN NAMED RODRIGO MENDOZA (PLAYED BY ROBERT DE NIRO.)

RODRIGO IS A MERCENARY AND SLAVER WHO KIDNAPS THE NATIVES AND SELLS THEM INTO SLAVERY AT NEARBY PLANTATIONS.

HE IS HATED BY THE INDIAN PEOPLE – AND FOR GOOD REASON.

THE ONE SOFT SPOT IN RODRIGO'S HEART IS GIVEN TO HIS BROTHER AND HIS FIANCÉE.

UNFORTUNATELY RODRIGO FINDS HIS FIANCÉE IN BED WITH HIS BROTHER AND IN A FIT OF JEALOUS RAGE STABS HIS BROTHER TO DEATH.

UNABLE TO FORGIVE HIMSELF FOR HIS BROTHER'S DEATH AND THE MULTITUDES OF NATIVES HE HAS SOLD INTO SLAVERY MENDOZA SINKS INTO A DEEP DEPRESSION.

EVENTUALLY HE TURNS TO THE GOOD FATHER GABRIEL, BEGGING FOR A TASK DIFFICULT ENOUGH TO BRING HIM TO A PLACE OF TRUE REPENTANCE.

RODRIGO MENDOZA IS BEGGING FOR A REFINER'S FIRE TO PURIFY HIM IN SUCH A WAY THAT HE WILL ULTIMATELY BE PREPARED TO RECEIVE THE CHRIST INTO HIS LIFE.

HE WANTS HIS VERY BEING TO BE MOLDED INTO SOMETHING NEW AND SHINY BRIGHT.

SO FATHER GABRIEL TAKES MENDOZA'S ARMOR AND WEAPONS, TIES THEM IN A SACHEL, AND ATTACHES THE SACHEL TO MENDOZA'S WAIST.

IN ONE OF THE MOST MEMORABLE SCENES, HE THEN ASSIGNS MENDOZA TO SCALE THE IGUAZU FALLS AGAIN AND AGAIN.

MENDOZA, STILL PROUD AND BITTER DESPITE HIS GUILT, REFUSES HELP AND PROCEEDS TO SCALE THE FALLS UNTIL HE COLLAPSES AND CRIES OUT TO GOD.

DESPITE ONE OF THE JESUIT PRIESTS CUTTING THE SACHEL AND RELEASING HIM OF HIS PENANCE, HE RE-TIES IT TO HIS WAIST.

IN THE MOMENT I LOVE THE MOST OF THIS MOVIE, MENDOZA ULTIMATELY STRUGGLES OVER THE CREST OF THE CLIFF AND CRAWLS ACROSS THE GROUND, OBVIOUSLY EXHAUSTED FROM THE BURDEN OF HIS LOAD.

A NATIVE RUNS UP TO MENDOZA, KNIFE IN HAND, LOOKING FOR ALL THE WORLD AS IF HE WILL CUT MENDOZA'S THROAT.

BUT INSTEAD THE NATIVE CUTS THE SACHEL OFF RODRIGO'S BACK. AND THE JOY OF THAT MOMENT IS AS SPARKLING AND BRIGHT AS NEWLY SMELTED GOLD.

IT IS A SPECTACULAR MOMENT OF REPENTANCE AND FORGIVENESS AND TRANSFORMATIVE GRACE.

IN HIS GUILT RODRIGO WAS SO FAR FROM GOD'S LOVE HE COULDN'T BEGIN TO FEEL IT.

AND THEN GOD APPEARS TO THIS STRUGGLING HUMAN BEING IN THE FORM OF A FORGIVING NATIVE AND RODRIGO ALLOWS HIMSELF TO BE GATHERED INTO THE ARMS OF GOD'S LOVE.

IN THIS MULTI-LAYERED ACT OF LOVE A WHOLE NEW LIFE IS BEGUN!

AND THIS IS EXACTLY WHAT MALACHI SAYS JOHN EXPECTS OF US AS WE PREPARE FOR THE COMING OF THE CHRIST.

THIS IS AN INTERNAL STRUGGLE THAT WILL NOT BE DIVERTED FROM THE TRUTH OF WHO WE ARE.

THIS IS THE PROCESS BY WHICH OUR WILLS COME INTO ALIGNMENT WITH THE WILL OF GOD.

AND THEN WE HAVE THE PREPARATION OF THE GOSPEL OF LUKE.

THIS, TOO, IS ABOUT JOHN THE BAPTIST.

BUT THIS IS ABOUT THE OUTWARD, POLITICAL, SOCIETAL PREPARATION WE ALL PARTAKE IN.

LUKE'S IMAGE FROM THE PROPHET ISAIAH HAS EVERYTHING TO DO WITH THE TREMENDOUS EFFORT IT TAKES TO MAKE ALL THINGS EQUAL FOR ALL PEOPLE.

THE IMAGE MAKES REFERENCE TO THE ENTRANCE OF A CONQUERING EMPEROR INTO HIS NEW TERRITORY.

MASSIVE ARMIES OF SLAVES WERE SENT AHEAD OF THE EMPEROR IN ORDER TO LEVEL OFF THE LAND SO THAT HIS JOURNEY IS MORE COMFORTABLE.

THEY LITERALLY MOVE EARTH TO MAKE THIS HAPPEN.

THEY DIG OUT MOUNTAINS AND EMPTY THE DIRT INTO VALLEYS TO MAKE A SMOOTH TERRAIN FOR THE JOURNEY OF THE NEW MONARCH.

AND THIS IS AN IMAGE AND A METAPHOR FOR THE JUSTICE JESUS HAS COME TO PREACH AND TEACH ABOUT.

WHEN THE REALM OF GOD IS USHERED INTO THE WORLD, WITH JESUS AS THE DIVINE RULER, THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE "HAVES" AND THE "HAVE-NOTS" WILL BE LEVELED OFF.

JOHN IS SAYING THAT PART OF OUR PREPARATION FOR THE COMING OF THE CHRIST IS TO FEED THE HUNGRY AND HOUSE THE HOMELESS.

SOME OF THE BEST ACTIVITY WE ENGAGE IN DURING THIS ADVENT SEASON IS REACHING OUT TO PEOPLE WHO ARE IN NEED OF ALL SORTS OF JUSTICE AND EQUALITY.

THERE ALWAYS SEEMS TO BE AN ACHINGLY FAMILIAR PULL ON OUR HEART-STRINGS TO GIVE EXTRA FOOD TO THE FOOD PANTRY;

TO FILL SHOE BOXES WITH GIFTS FOR CHILDREN;

TO HELP WITH THE HOMELESS OF THE HOSPITALITY NETWORK;

TO INVITE THE LONELY WIDOW OR WIDOWER FOR CHRISTMAS DINNER;

TO WRITE CHRISTMAS CARDS FOR INMATES OR SOLDIERS SERVING OVER SEAS;

TO SING CAROLS AT THE LOCAL NURSING HOMES AND HOSPITALS;

TO GIVE CHRISTMAS COOKIES TO THOSE NEIGHBORS WE HAVE YET TO MEET.

TO LOOK AT PEOPLE IN GENERAL AND DO WHAT WE CAN TO INSURE THEY HAVE A QUALITY OF LIFE THAT IS ON PAR WITH – THAT IS EQUAL TO OUR OWN.

FEW THINGS PREPARE US BETTER FOR THE COMING OF THE CHRIST THAN THE EXPANSION OF OUR SOUL, WHICH HAPPENS WHEN WE WORK TO SATISFY THE INEQUALITIES OF THE WORLD.

SO AS WE CONTINUE IN A MODE OF PREPARATION DURING THIS MONTH OF DECEMBER, MAY WE ENJOY THE ACTIVITIES OF PREPARING FOR CHRISTMAS.

AND AT THE SAME TIME, MAY WE PREPARE OURSELVES AND OUR WORLD FOR THE COMING OF THE CHRIST.

MAY WE ALLOW THE REFINER'S FIRE TO CLEANSE OUR SOULS.

AND MAY WE ALLOW THE REALM OF GOD TO BE MADE KNOWN THROUGH OUR ACTIONS OF SOCIAL JUSTICE.

MAY WE, METAPHORICALLY SPEAKING, FILL EVERY VALLEY – BRING EVERY MOUNTAIN AND HILL LOW – MAKE EVERY PATH STRAIGHT – MAKE EVERY ROUGH PLACE PLANE AND SMOOTH.

AND IN THE END, MAY ALL FLESH SEE THE SALVATION OF GOD BY RECEIVING THE CHRIST INTO OUR LIVES.

AMEN!