

What Do You Want For Christmas?

Malachi 3:1-4

If it's been a while since someone asked you what you really want for Christmas, I'm asking you now. What do you want for Christmas? I mean, what do you really want? Forget the routine ice skates, snow boards. Go deeper - not the jewelry, or the bathrobe or the latest hi tech gadget. Not even the real world e-commerce shopping offers of free shipping without all the crowded stores. Think outside the boxes. Something more satisfying.

Time to bake? A clean house? Gathering with children, grandchildren and friends?

Go deeper. It needs to be significant. What can you not live without?

For a short time this morning, before heading out to the stores, before getting online to beat the free shipping deadlines, I want you to let go of the lesser wants and concerns of the hour. Ask yourself what you most want for Christmas.

Peace? Peace in your family? Peace in the world? Quiet? Time to think? Healing for a loved one. Comfort during grief?

Now go even deeper into your soul. Ask yourself the significant questions: Who am I, really? How do I face the loneliness around me? Am I a good husband or wife, father or mother, son or daughter or friend? Questions like: Is there a God? And if so, in all my frailty and fault, can I honestly come and stand before His holy presence?

In the deepest, most secret subterranean depth of your soul, what do you want for Christmas? With 12 shopping days remaining, it's time to sort through the routine clutter of the season and of your life, find that box and open it.

Today it seems that so much gets in the way of discovering our deepest needs. Happens to all of us. You go on autopilot, years pass, children grow up, and life's deepest concerns remain on hold - indefinitely. We move into repetitive, predictable, carefully planned routines.

The problem isn't new. Twenty-six centuries ago in Jerusalem, the deepest convictions and concerns of the people of Jerusalem were buried under monotonous repetition. Their focus blurred.

Exiles who had returned 100 years before had rebuilt the Temple with excitement, rebuilt the walls with vision and strength. They believed Second Isaiah's promise that 'nations shall come to your light and kings to the brightness of your rising.' But in time, generations passed and the closest thing to royalty in Jerusalem was the dumpy figure of a Persian governor who leered at the women and squandered the taxes.

By the time this last book of the prophets was written, the glory of the rebuilding of the Temple had faded into a distant memory. Sacrifices still took place, not of course with the first-born unblemished males of the flock - the governor liked those - but the weaklings and the runts, the diseased. People stopped bringing their best to God and started bringing the leftovers.

The tithe was neglected.

Can you smell the rot of moral decay? Along with slovenly worship dishonoring God, the people dishonored each other. The people of Jerusalem lost sight of what was important. They lost track of the covenant obligations to God and to each other. A message was clearly needed, a message that would be heard, a message from God.

The name Malachi means 'my messenger.' The message of 'my messenger' comes at the very end of the Old Testament, leaning into the expectations of the New.

Malachi has harsh words for those who let the ritual covenant duties dissolve into meaninglessness.

My messenger strips away the clutter, strips away the complacency, strips away cultural mores and norms, strips away the blinders that keep us from seeing good and evil, strips away the earplugs that muffle the lonely cries from the street.

'I am sending a messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the Lord in whom you delight - indeed he is coming, says the Lord of Hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming? And who can stand when he appears?'

'My messenger' is telling God's people to get ready. They've been complacent too long. They've forgotten their ancestral, covenantal obligations. They've grown comfortable. They've grown satisfied. They have sacrificed their mission on the altar of convenience.

As ritual has become routine, they have inadvertently and unintentionally sacrificed their relationship with God. You can have comfort without God, but the cost is high. You give up your soul.

Comfort without God is complacency, and God has little patience for the complacent, for the complacent nation and the lukewarm individual. The messenger says they should get ready, individually and as a whole. 'For he is like a refiner's fire.' God will burn away all complacency, all Godless comfort, all self-satisfied, lukewarm laziness.

'He will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver.'

The heart of the refinery is the furnace where coals blaze and the air is seared with noxious fumes. The heat can kill at 100 paces. At night, the sky glows bright with the pillar of flame spewing from the top of the furnace. The refinery strips away everything that is not elemental, everything that is not carbon, stripping away sulfur, stripping away naphthenes, stripping away inorganic salts and trace metals. 'My messenger' comes like a refiners fire, stripping away everything from the soul that is not faithful. What is left is the purity of the soul. This is the essence of being human, of mortality. Purified of all the clutter,

there is one response and one alone - and it is the response that makes offerings acceptable to God. That singular and pure response is grateful joy.

God will no longer accept half-hearted joyless offerings, made impure by the dross of routine complacency. God will no longer accept treating others as means and not as end. God will no longer accept any sacrifice that is not in its purest form - a thankful sacrifice of purest joy.

What remains for us is a dangerous purification, to stand in holy fire, while God strips away all pretensions, washing away all that is not pure. Is it any wonder that the one person who 'prepares the way', baptizes with water the one who himself will 'baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire?'

When all else is stripped away, we are left quivering and shaking and naked, the soul singing songs of joyful gratitude to God! When everything else is stripped away, when you have been through the refiner's fire - will your soul sing golden songs of grateful joy?

That's what I want for Christmas. I want Jesus to have a happy birthday. I want to come to the party and eat his bread and drink his wine. I want to give him a hug and I want to ask him what it was like to ride on that donkey into Jerusalem with chanting crowds and the pulsing exuberance of the stones themselves singing out praise and Hosanna.

I want everything else to be stripped away in the refiner's fire and the rush of baptismal water. I want my very soul to join the throng and sing loud and melodic and clear:

Joy to the world, the savior reigns!

Let all their songs employ!

While fields and floods,

rocks, hills and plains

Repeat the sounding joy,

repeat the sounding joy,

repeat, repeat the sounding joy!