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Jessica: Welcome to Lectionary Kickstart, where
we're sparking your thoughts for Sunday
as you plan
your sermon or teaching lesson.
I'm your host and producer, Jessica
Bordeleau, here with Dr. David Schmitt and
Dr. Peter Nafzger
They're both professors of homiletics
here at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis.
You can hear all about us in our
introductory episode, but trust me, they
are pretty good
preachers.
All right, guys, let's get started.

Peter: Peter, where are we in the church here?
We are talking about the second Sunday in
Advent as we look forward to the coming of
Jesus that we celebrate at Christmas and
his coming on the last day.

Jessica: And David, what are the texts this week?

David: Malachi 3, Philippians 1, Luke 3, and Psalm 66.

Jessica: As always, I ask each of you to tell me
which text you would preach on.
In our readings this week, there's a lot
about getting ready, leveling paths,
refining fire,
cleaning up your act, and treating people
better, right?
So when you are getting ready for company
to come to your house, which room in the
house
do you spend the most time cleaning?

David: The dirtiest.
It depends on how life's been going.
It's like sometimes the kitchen table has
just got everything on it.
And so it all goes somewhere.

Jessica: So you vote kitchen?

Peter: Mine's the entryway.
We have shoes that multiply daily in the
entryway.
There's everywhere.
And so we just open the closet door in

the entryway and shove shoes until the
entryway
is empty.

David: And if the closet closes, it's okay.

Peter: Sometimes you have to lean up against it.

Jessica: No, I think Peter wins because our
entryway is a mess.

I have a curtain instead of a door
because I just couldn't close the door
anymore.

Too many pairs of little shoes.

So Peter, you win.

You get to go first.

Peter: All right.

As I talked about last week, I am
suggesting spending Advent with the
prophets.

Last week there was that passage from
Jeremiah where through the prophet
Jeremiah God speaks
about fulfilling his promises.

And so I thought it would be maybe
helpful to spend Advent learning a little
bit about

some of these prophets and emphasizing
and highlighting and proclaiming the
promises

that each prophet prophesied about and
then speaking that promise to your people
today

in an appropriate way.

Jessica: I love it.

Such a good theme idea.

Peter: Well, part of my thinking, I especially
thought about this this week is Malachi
is not really
known by a lot of people.

Neither is Zephaniah or Micah for that
matter.

Jeremiah is a little bit more well known.

But this is a chance to take people, I'd
say maybe a chance to expand their
biblical knowledge,

their biblical literacy by thinking about
these prophets of old.

And so part of this, of course, is
spending some time with the prophet in
his context.

And so Malachi, Jessica off the top of your head, what do you know about Malachi?

Jessica: When I had to memorize the books of the Bible in grade school, that was one of them.

And it was at the end.

Peter: That's right.

He's at the end.

Jessica: And that's about it.

Peter: Which is about what most people know about him.

He's actually the last prophet.

He lived, I mean, we don't know exactly, but probably around 400 BC, he was prophesying.

His context is he was, it was maybe up to 100 years after the people came back from Babylonian exile.

So the people of God had been taken off in exile, and they returned to the land.

But unfortunately, they did not return to the Lord in the land.

And so a lot of Malachi's prophecy is kind of calling the people of God out for a variety of problems.

You had unfaithful priests.

You had marrying people outside the people of God in divorce.

You had failure to give tithes, that kind of thing.

And so Malachi's got a lot of criticism to say to the people of God after they returned home.

Now, of course, when you're thinking about this, you got to recognize that your people

are not living 400 years before Christ, and it's not just a one for one connection that

makes preaching on the prophets always a little bit of a challenge.

But I thought it might be helpful just to note a few of these basic things about Malachi

so that when you do apply what God says

through him to your people, it's done intentionally.

It's also noteworthy, I just noticed this right before I came in, that Malachi only shows up in the three year lectionary in two places, and they're both this year. The very beginning of the church year, second Sunday in Advent, and the last two Sundays of year C are both from Malachi.

And so I'm not sure what to make of that, but it's just an example of we don't read much from Malachi, and so I would spend some time helping people get into his shoes.

David: And this is a year for it.

Peter: So each of these prophets I'm going to suggest during Advent is you highlight a promise that God makes through them.

So I will raise up a righteous branch, that was Jeremiah.

With Malachi, I'm going to suggest you go with I will refine.

Okay.

Would you start by reading verses two and three, Jessica?

Jessica: But who can endure the day of His coming, and who can stand when He appears? For He is like a refiner's fire and like fuller soap.

Fuller soap, isn't that a brand?

What is fuller soap, Peter?

I'm just going to pause for a second.

Peter: I don't know.

It's soap that Fuller uses.

It's supposed to get things really clean.

Jessica: All right.

He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, and they will bring offerings and righteousness to the Lord.

Peter: Okay.

So I will refine the people, says the Lord.

And you can hear that a couple of

different ways.

One is that's not good news, because to be refined means you've got all sorts of impurities and pollutants and all sorts of problems that need to be cleansed.

Jessica: Oh, no.

The problem is you have to go through fire.

That's the scary part.

Peter: And to get that pollutant out, you need to be refined.

Some of that happens with a refiner's fire.

That's something I think should be on the table for this sermon.

But I also want to frame it in a way that emphasizes that you only bother refining something that you value.

Okay.

David: That's nice.

I like that.

Peter: So think about, Jessica, what are the kinds of things that just kind of in your life that

you think about, what are some things that are valuable enough to go to the trouble of

refining or cleansing or purifying?

What's something that is valuable to you that you would bother to do that with?

Jessica: I tell my kids that all the time when I have to give them a discipline and they don't like it.

They're like, this isn't a big deal.

Why are you doing this to me?

I'm like, because I love you so much.

I don't like grounding you.

It's actually more work for me, but I love you so much that I have to do it.

So I think about my kids.

And I try to explain it to them.

I don't think they care about the explanation, but I feel better if I say it.

Peter: See, I was thinking you went much more

serious and more helpfully than I was thinking.

I was just thinking you got to refine, like to our question at the beginning, the house is people come over to your house and you kind of want to have a nice home and you've got to value these people so you kind of refine your house.

You straighten it up.

So you think about the various things that you care enough about to make perfect or make clean or make whole.

I think that's what when Malachi is talking about, he's like a refiner's fire.

He will sit as a refiner and purify of silver.

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

The message there is the sons of Levi are like gold and silver to Him.

That He values these people and because He values them, He will refine them.

And so the kind of the two basic truths that I'd want to proclaim in this sermon are one,

God's people, namely the people to whom you're preaching, are valuable enough to God to refine.

And so that would be maybe your example of the kids.

You really love your children.

That's why you want to help them shape up.

But then the other truth is that God's people need to be refined.

And this is where kind of the call to repentance, a call to see what's wrong in our lives would be would potentially be part of that.

But I do want to give a caution about that in a minute.

So you think about Malachi's day.

These are the people of God.

He has brought them back from exile, back

from Babylon.

He values them.

He cares for them.

And they return to land, but they don't return to Him in their hearts and in their actions.

And so it's pretty easy to see where things were going south in Malachi's day.

When you think about bringing that to your hearers today, I think there's kind of two ways to go about it.

And I want to be kind of careful here.

One way to go about it would be to identify something that needs to be refined in the lives of your hearers, in your congregation, maybe something, some aspect of our life together in this culture that is seeped into the church, that is polluting the church, the people of God.

David: Divisiveness.

Peter: Divisiveness, maybe.

And what causes the divisiveness.

You know, you can't sometimes to get at something like a division in a church, you got to get beneath the issue.

I think a big piece of the church's life today that needs to be refined and purified is the fear in which we live.

I think we live, I think we're scared as the church a lot.

Jessica: So much fear.

Peter: So that might be something that is appropriate for your congregation.

But I also, I want to exercise a little bit of a caution here, because I think there are probably

any time you deal with a metaphor of kind of being polluted and being cleansed, is you probably

have some people in the congregation who feel very polluted already, and maybe who feel

shamed or ashamed or are very well aware of the ways they don't live as the people

of God.

David: Yeah, but doesn't that, I mean, but the whole point of the metaphor is the point you made at the very beginning is that you only refined things that you value.

Peter: Right.

David: So, you know.

Peter: Well, that's where I want to go. I just want to, how you help people recognize the need to be refined or valued because God is refining them. You just want to be careful with people who maybe already feel, are already there.

Jessica: I appreciate your sensitivity to that, because I think that some people are sitting there just kind of melting in the pew, crumbling under guilt, and maybe I don't belong here. And everybody knows what if everybody knows this about me. But I'm glad that you're thinking about both sides, right?

Peter: And maybe it's partially I'm just thinking about it because it's, you know, we're thinking about December and Christmas time and things are, everyone, no matter how hard we try, it never, the holidays are never what they should be. We never deliver like we should. And, but however it is, this idea that the overall big picture here is that the promise to purify is actually good news. I will purify you means I care for you. I love you. I value God is saying to his people. And so it also means not only that God values us, but it means the ways in which we are polluted or need refining. That's not the end of the story because the promise here from Malachi is that I will refine. I will refine you.

And if you need help with that, I recommend looking in chapter four. That's a chapter four of Malachi is really short, but there's just a couple of verses, verses two and three, especially verse two says, but for you who fear my name, the Son of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall.

This promise that there's healing coming, the refining will result in the way things should be when the Lord returns.

And so part of this here is I'm picking up a little bit.

I don't know what you're going to preach on, Dave, but the Philippians, one passage where Paul prays that he who began a good work will bring it to completion.

David: I love that passage.

Peter: I love that passage too.

And I think the reason I love it is because it, it it helps me be okay with the fact that I'm not complete yet, that it's not, we aren't the way we should be yet, but He will bring it to completion.

And so I would maybe tie together the, the, I will refine with, He will bring it to completion and have that be a way to expose both the trouble and the promise of God to make all things good.

Jessica: I think that is so comforting because sometimes when you're going through fire, you just think it's going to fire to kill you.

Is that fire that's going to burn you up? Or like you said, fire that isn't the end of the story.

He will be at the other end of it and maybe you will be refined gold instead of just ashes.

David, what about you?

David: What would you preach on?

Well, I'm going to go with the gospel reading from Luke three, simply because John the baptizer always appears in the middle of Advent.

You, to get to Jesus at Christmas, you got to go through John the baptizer and he's rough.

He's not easy to go through.

I mean, so Jessica, just to get a taste of his roughness, if you could read verses seven through nine.

Jessica: He said, therefore, to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, you brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come.

Bear fruits in keeping with repentance and do not begin to say to yourselves, we have Abraham as our father.

For I tell you, God is able from the stones to raise up children for Abraham. Even now the ax is laid to the root of the tree.

Every tree, therefore, that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

David: Okay, so.

Jessica: He's a friendly guy.

David: Yeah, he is a friendly, you know, I have this neighbor who has this great house, big yard, swimming pool, and there's always people out there and they're very friendly people. I mean, you know, you can kind of walk up and chat with them.

It's great.

The problem is Ella.

They have this dog named Ella, and Ella is the meanest dog I know.

That dog, you know, they have this electric fence and you hear this bark and this dog comes charging and comes right to the edge of that electric fence, growling, barking.

And you're like, to get to the pool party, I have to go through Ella.

And the only way, the only way you would

ever step foot on that property is if
Brian was there to walk
you back, right?
Because he can control Ella, right?
And I kind of feel, this is how I feel
about Advent and Christmas.
To get to Christmas, it's wonderful.
It's a beautiful party.
You know, Jesus has come, He's in the
flesh, He's forming a community and
you're invited.
But to get to the community, you have to
go through John the Baptizer.
And it kind of, it, for me, it reminds me
that the only way, the only way I'm going
to be with Jesus is if Jesus brings me
there.
I mean, you know, that, you know, Brian
has to come, stop Ella, bring me in.
Jesus is the one who comes, takes care
of, kind of the judgment of God that's
coming upon us all as John calls us to
repent.
And invites us in because He wants us, He
wants us at the party.
He wants us as part of the community.
So I always like John the baptizer in
Advent.
And John the baptizer occurs in the
second Sunday of Advent and the third
Sunday of Advent.
And so I'm going to go with that one.
And I think, you know, I've just, as I
was thinking, as you were talking, it'd
be kind of fun.
I'm not, you know, I don't want them to
not use your stuff, but you could also
use John as a prophet.

Peter: Oh, yeah.

Right.

David: Because he is another prophet.

Peter: That's true.

David: And so, and if you were going to go with
that, you would say, well, what would be
the promise that John is bringing as a
prophet?

Right.

And here the promise would be.

Peter: Well, even before you get there, one of the promises of Malachi is that I will send my messenger before me.

David: Right.

Peter: And then John is the fulfillment of that. And that in both chapter three and four, John is clearly in view in Malachi's prophecy.

David: Right.

Right.

And so, Jessica, if you could read verse 16, this would be the promise that John brings.

Jessica: John answered them all, saying, I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandal I'm not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

And so more fire.

More fire.

David: And it's interesting, right?

Because the fire so far has been not the refiner's fire.

That's a beautiful image, but it's been an image of judgment.

That the trees which do not bear fruit, you're going to set the axe to them and then they're going to be thrown into the fire.

So there's kind of this fiery judgment and that this baptism of Jesus is going to be not with just water, but with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

And it's in Luke where Jesus comes across a town in Samaria and the disciples want to go in there and the people resist them and the disciples come to Jesus and say,

Peter: Bring down fire.

David: Yeah.

Can we bring down fire from heaven on that town?

Right.

And so you've got kind of this imagery of a Jesus full of judgment.

And in this text, particularly, He's going to come, He's going to lay the axe to the root of the tree.

He's going to, you know, bring about judgment.

And yet when you watch the ministry of Jesus, when he does send the Holy Spirit and fire, it's an axe, right?

It's the baptism of the Holy Spirit and fire that lead to everyone speaking the good news of salvation in a multiple of languages.

And He's kind of throwing that big party that I'm imagining at my neighbor's house, right?

That you've got all peoples there in all languages, singing the celebration of the good news of Jesus.

And so there's kind of this interesting reversal with the promise from John that it's somewhat frightening that the one who's coming is going to be stronger than John because John's pretty strong.

He's calling out the Pharisees as a brood of vipers.

He's telling people what they need to do. You know, he's

Jessica: I mean, the man eats grasshoppers.

David: Right.

And he eats grasshoppers and wears a leather girdle.

Peter: Crazy John.

David: So you've got this strong prophet and then the prophet saying, yeah, the one who comes after me, you think I'm bad? Just wait till he gets here.

And this prophet is going to be worse than me.

He's going to baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

And then we see the disciples saying, hey, Jesus, do you want to call down fire on that temple?

I mean, on that that town.

And then Jesus is the one who himself is baptized with the fire of God's judgment.

Right.

I mean, that's the baptism he undergoes. Remember, I think it's James and John are asking, can we be on your right and left side?

And He says something about, you know, are you ready to be baptized with a baptism?

I'm baptized with.

So He he takes that baptism of judgment upon himself for us.

And then He baptizes with the Holy Spirit and fire, bringing us into a kingdom of a God who values us and loves us.

So that's kind of how I would go with.

Peter: I like that move to Jesus being the one who is kind of takes on the fire, the burning, the refining, even. You know, Jesus is He who He who knew no sin became sin.

David: Right.

Peter: For us.

So we might become the righteousness of God.

I think that's a that's a better move to go to Jesus and his suffering and then also his refining than to go too quickly to Pentecost.

David: Right.

Peter: Because sometimes we have to get through Jesus, you have to get through Jesus on the cross.

And even before he baptizes them, even before Pentecost and the fire, the flames of fire on the head, he's purifying his disciples and is kind of teaching them, you think of Peter, you know, after the resurrection where he's kind of forgiving him and calling him to kind of refine. You can even read that passage about feed my sheep, feed my lambs as kind of a refining.

And so, yeah, I think that's a really helpful way to have Christ be central here.

David: They're coming out to the Jordan meeting this fiery prophet who's actually introducing them to a fiery savior.

Peter: Yeah.

Jessica: Thanks, David.

That's all for today.

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I'm your host and producer, Jessica Bordeleau.

Join us next week here at Lectionary Kickstart when Dr. David Schmitt and Dr. Peter Nafzger will spark your thoughts for next Sunday.

Jessica: More fire, more fire.

David: More fire.

Peter: Bring down fire.

David: Yeah.

Can we bring down fire from heaven?