

“Refining”

Luke 1:68-79 & 3:2b-6, Baruch 5:1-9, Malachi 3:1-4, Philippians 1:3-11

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We spend a great deal of time refining. The Northern Bells have been refining their ringing for weeks to glorify God through their delightful anthems. Athletes practice to refine their skills. Students refine their papers, projects, reading, notes, and thoughts to grow in knowledge. Workers refine their skills to produce quality products and excellent service. We refine our cooking to delight our taste buds. We refine our homes to be more comfortable and inviting. We refine our hobbies to bring joy. Advent is a time of spiritual refining.

Zechariah sings of refining: God refining us—His thanksgiving refining himself—His son, John, refining people to prepare them to receive Jesus—Peaceful light refining the chaos of darkness. **Luke 1:68-79 NLT** “Praise the Lord, the God of Israel, because God has visited and redeemed God’s people. God has sent us a mighty Savior from the royal line of God’s servant David, just as God promised through God’s holy prophets long ago. Now we will be saved from our enemies and from all who hate us. God has been merciful to our ancestors by remembering God’s sacred covenant—the covenant God swore with an oath to our ancestor Abraham. We have been rescued from our enemies so we can serve God without fear, in holiness and righteousness for as long as we live. “And you, my little son, will be called the prophet of the Most High, because you will prepare the way for the Lord. You will tell God’s people how to find salvation through forgiveness of their sins. Because of God’s tender mercy, the morning light from heaven is about to break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, and to guide us to the path of peace.”

Thomas Rosica wrote, “The God who was a highway engineer making new ways through the wilderness, a gardener turning deserts into flower gardens, is now the artist painting a new perspective of the age old messianic promise of hope.”

Luke proclaims, **Luke 3:2b-6 NRSV** “The word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. John went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, ‘The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’”

Scripture references wilderness to imply a journey of refining. God guided Moses to lead the Israelites for forty years in the wilderness. It was a time of refining: To refine hate for the Egyptians into love—To refine excessive work into a rhythm of renewing rest and productive labor—To refine uncertainty into trust in God—To refine a perception of scarcity into abundance—To refine wanting into thanksgiving—To refine selfishness into service—To refine disbelief into passionate worship—To refine despair into hope—To refine jealousy into sharing—To refine sorrow into joy—To refine grief into celebration of eternal resurrection life—To refine lies into truth telling—To refine shame into honor—To refine discord into harmony—To refine fear into love—To refine worry into a confident expectancy in the fulfillment of God’s promises—To refine self into the spectacular image of God. It was a refining journey from a life of misery and slavery to joy and freedom in the Promised Land.

Anne Lamott wrote, “During Advent, Christians prepare for the birth of Jesus, which means the true light. All our better religions have a holy season as the days grow shorter, when we ask ourselves, Where is the spring? Will it actually come again this year, break through the quagmire, the terror, the cluelessness? Probably not, is my response, when I’m left to my own devices. All I can do is stay close to God, and my friends. I notice the darkness, light a few candles, scatter some seeds. And in Nature, and in my spiritual community, I can usually remember that we have to dread things only one day at a time. Insight doesn’t help here. Hope is not logical. It always comes as a surprise, just when you think all hope is lost. Hope is the cousin to grief, and both take time: you can’t short-circuit grief, or emptiness, and you can’t patch it up with your bicycle tire tube kit. You have to take the next right action. Jesus would pray on the mountain, or hang out with the poor or the imprisoned ... or start doodling in the sand. ... Another problem involves what I think the light looks like. ...

Moses led his people in circles for forty years so they could get ready for the Promised Land, because they had too many ideas and preconceptions about what a Promised Land should look like. During Advent, we have to sit in our own anxiety and funkiness long enough to know what a Promised Land would be like, or, to put it another way, what it means to be saved—which, if we are to believe Jesus or Gandhi, specifically means to see everyone on earth as family.”

Isaiah proclaimed how even nature will be refined. The crooked is becoming straight. The rough ways are becoming smooth. John the Baptist proclaimed the refinement of a personal exodus, a personal wilderness journey from sin and death to love and abundant life. John demanded that each person repent, take an inventory of their thoughts and actions, discarding the negative and nurturing the positive.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, “A prison cell, in which one waits, hopes, does various unessential things and is completely dependent on the fact that the door of freedom has to be opened from the outside, is not a bad picture of Advent.”

The prophet Jeremiah’s scribe Baruch wrote, **Baruch 5:1-9 NRSV** “**Take off the garment of your sorrow and affliction, O Jerusalem, and put on forever the beauty of the glory from God. Put on the robe of the righteousness that comes from God; put on your head the diadem of the glory of the Everlasting; for God will show your splendor everywhere under heaven. For God will give you evermore the name, “Righteous Peace, Godly Glory.” Arise, O Jerusalem, stand upon the height; look toward the east, and see your children gathered from west and east at the word of the Holy One, rejoicing that God has remembered them. For they went out from you on foot, led away by their enemies; but God will bring them back to you, carried in glory, as on a royal throne. For God has ordered that every high mountain and the everlasting hills be made low and the valleys filled up, to make level ground, so that Israel may walk safely in the glory of God. The woods and every fragrant tree have shaded Israel at God's command. For God will lead Israel with joy, in the light of God’s glory, with the mercy and righteousness that come from God.**

The prophet Malachi proclaimed, **Malachi 3:1-4 NRSV** “**See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to God’s temple. The messenger of the covenant 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? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the LORD in righteousness. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of old and as in former years.”**

A women's Bible-study group was once discussing Malachi, about how God “will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver.” Resolving to find out more about the passage, the leader decided to go visit a silversmith and ask 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, so as 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 made 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 God sees God’s own image reflected in us, God knows the work of purifying has been accomplished.

How will you refine yourself during advent?

Antoine Leiris is refining hate, fear, and discord into love, trust and harmony. “You will not have my hatred.” That's the defiant message the husband of one of the Paris attacks victims is sending to ISIS. Antoine Leiris lost his wife in the violence that shook the French capital, taking the lives of at least 129 and injuring hundreds more. Three days later, he penned a tribute to his wife promising to not let his 17-month-old son grow up in fear of ISIS. Antoine wrote, “You want me to be frightened. Friday night you took away the life of an exceptional human being, the love of my life, the mother of my son, but you will not have my hatred. I do not know who you are, and I do not wish to. You are dead souls. If this God for whom you kill so blindly has made

us in God's image, every bullet in the body of my wife will have been a wound in God's heart." The attacks are fueling fear, hate, and violent retaliations. Some are taking out their frustration on refugees and Muslim population. That is like being angry at a person who has been abused and beaten. That is like blaming us for the actions of Westboro Baptist Church, because we both identify ourselves as Christians. Antoine is refining, refusing to give in to ISIS' goal of sowing divisions and hate in society. Antoine wrote, "There are only two of us, my son and I, but we are stronger than all the armies of the world. Moreover, I have no more time to grant you, I must go to Melvil who is waking up from his nap. He is just 17-months-old. He will eat his snack like he does every day, then we will play like we do every day and every day of his life this little boy will affront you by being happy and free. Because you will not have his hatred either."

Do you believe love is stronger than hate? Do you believe God's promise that love endures forever? Then we must refine our fearful hate into love. Pastor Daniel Smoak wrote, "Christian friends: If your church were to work together to sponsor a family of Syrian refugees and one of them turned out to be a terrorist, would he/she be emboldened in their convictions after living with you for a year, or is it possible that Jesus' love in your church is stronger than hate? Don't underestimate ISIS? Ha. Don't underestimate Jesus."

Do you believe that Jesus is the Prince of Peace? Then we must refine our discrimination into community. In response to haters our president said, "That's shameful. That's not American. That's not who we are. The values we are fighting against ISIS for are precisely that we don't discriminate against people because of their faith. We don't kill people because they're different than us. That's what separates us from them."

Do you believe God is redeeming the world? Then we must refine our anxious worry into confidence in the transforming grace of God. Mary Anderson wrote, "You will hear of the comings and goings of institutions and cultures, but it doesn't mean the end is near. It may be...powerful times pregnant with purpose for those with ears to hear and eyes to see the advent of our God."

The Apostle Paul wrote. **Philippians 1:3-11 NLT** "Every time I think of you, I give thanks to my God. Whenever I pray, I make my requests for all of you with joy, for you have been my partners in spreading the Good News about Christ from the time you first heard it until now. And I am certain that God, who began the good work within you, will continue God's work until it is finally finished on the day when Christ Jesus returns. So it is right that I should feel as I do about all of you, for you have a special place in my heart. You share with me the special favor of God, both in my imprisonment and in defending and confirming the truth of the Good News. God knows how much I love you and long for you with the tender compassion of Christ Jesus. I pray that your love will overflow more and more, and that you will keep on growing in knowledge and understanding. For I want you to understand what really matters, so that you may live pure and blameless lives until the day of Christ's return. May you always be filled with the fruit of your salvation—the righteous character produced in your life by Jesus Christ—for this will bring much glory and praise to God.

How will you refine yourself during advent? How will you refine negative thoughts into positive thoughts? How will you refine frustration over traffic into a prayer for the person who cut you off? How will you refine a frown into a smile? How will you refine exhaustion into renewal? How will you refine wanting into thanksgiving? How will you refine negative comments about someone into positive comments? How will you refine fear into peace, despair into hope, sorrow into joy and hate into love? In this silence identify three aspects of yourself that you will refine by Christmas. Amen.