

The Refiner's Fire
2nd Sunday in Advent
December 6, 2009

We're looking today at our Gospel reading from Luke chapter 3, so I invite you to open your Bibles there with me. Luke records in this section one of the most abrasive conversations in the entire Bible, and it comes from a man who Jesus said was the greatest of all prophets!

Before we get to John the Baptist though, I want to tell about the abrasive awakening I had last Thursday morning. It turns out my alarm clock stopped working, and even though it was set correctly and turned on and all that good stuff, it didn't go off. Stacey had woken up, and was vigorously shaking me and saying, "Michael, we've blown it!" We had both overslept, which in turn meant Alannah had overslept, and we were waking up at the time Alannah and I would normally be leaving the house for me to drive her to school.

There's a major difference between being woken up on time by an alarm clock that plays music to gently lift you out of a sound sleep, and being vigorously shaken and finding out you've running behind. I'd take the alarm clock any day, and I'm willing to bet I'm not the only one, right?

When John the Baptist came on to the scene, he came like a vigorous shake to wake the people up from their spiritual sleep. There was nothing gentle about John – take a look at the things he said:

“You brood of vipers!” (You bunch of snakes!)

“Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?” (You're gonna get it, and I certainly didn't warn you about it so you'd get out of getting in trouble with God. Who warned you?)

“Produce fruit in keeping with repentance!” (You do a good job paying lip service to being a 'good' person, but you sure don't live like it –there's no evidence you even recognize your sins, let alone really repent of them).

“Every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire!” (Your time is coming, and you're going to burn, burn, burn!)

No, if anything, John was far from being a politically correct, feel-good preacher. He was an abrasive, straight-shooter who refused to water down his message for the people. They needed to know the truth, and he hit them with the truth squarely between the eyes.

And the people loved him for it. They flocked to hear him. Why? Because for the first time in a long time, they were hearing the truth, and it was like a veil had been lifted from their eyes, and they couldn't get enough.

Why did they need to know the truth? Because the Messiah was coming. No, more than that – the Messiah was there in their midst. There was no time left to “sleep”, the alarm was blaring and they needed to wake up, get up, and get moving.

Notice who didn't like John's message – the ones who had grown complacent in their lives. The ones who liked things the way they were; the ones who liked the positions and the power they had. They were the ones who wished they could hit a snooze button on the alarm clock known as John the Baptist. Or maybe even turn him off all-together.

Now what does this have to do with us today?

Some people need a loud, jarring wakeup call – they've been spiritually asleep far too long and far too deeply. When we've been in this state, we need to be jarred from our slumber so we don't miss what God has for us both in this present life, and more importantly, in the life to come. Some people are lightly sleeping, but sleeping none-the-less, and have wandered off the path of where they should be. A quiet, gentle awakening is all they need to see where they are and to get them where they need to be. Either way, though, they need to be woken up.

So here's the question none of us really want to think about: what kind of wakeup call do we as individuals need? Because here's the thing: we're all sinners, so we all need a wakeup call, an alarm, to bring us out of where we are and put us on the path we should have been all along.

Back to last Thursday. If I had known my alarm clock wasn't working, I would have done something about it, so I could have had a gentle wakeup last Thursday morning. You know whose fault it was that I didn't know that my alarm clock wasn't working? It wasn't Stacey's or Alannah's. As much as I would like to put the blame on someone else for me over-sleeping, it was my fault and my fault alone. I had grown too complacent just assuming everything was fine. I usually wake up before the alarm goes off in the mornings, so most of the time I simply shut the alarm off before it rings. Here's the point: I didn't know the alarm wasn't working because I had decided I didn't need it. I could rely on myself and my own power to wake up, get up, and get going.

How many of us do the same relating to the things of God?

“I know (or don't know!) what the Bible says, but that doesn't matter, 'cause here's what *I* say...”

“I don't want to hear about sin and the need for confession and repentance and the forgiveness that's available through Jesus, because I might feel convicted. I just want to hear what I define as the 'good' stuff! Give me the warm fuzzies!”

“I'll take care of myself. God can do His thing, I'll do my thing, and in the end everything will be fine.”

Good luck with that, because let's remember what the person Jesus called the greatest prophet ever said – *I baptize you with water. But one more powerful than I will come, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in His hand to clear His threshing floor and to gather the wheat into His barn, but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.*

He baptizes with the Holy Spirit and with fire. In the margins of your Bibles, write down the Old Testament reading from today, Malachi 3:1-7. This reading from Malachi is a prophetic statement about John the Baptist as well as Jesus. Let's take another look at the first half of verse 3: *He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver.* Do you know how you refine and purify silver? You refine and purify silver by putting it through a fire, breaking it down, burning off the impurities, and making it new.

And that's the good news for you and me.

We were created, lost, found, bought back, redeemed, marked and set aside, and promised Heaven. We didn't do any of this on our own, and we won't get into Heaven on our own, either. But the refiner of silver, or, the silversmith, if you will, is going to take us there.

How?

By doing what is necessary to take care of our impurities – our sins. He did what was necessary when He suffered and died for us, and then walked out of that tomb three days later. Now comes the process of refining and purifying over fire for us.

When a silversmith is working with silver to purify and refine it, do you know how he knows when the silver is done, when it has reached the place of refinement and purity? He knows it's done when he can see his reflection in it.

Our Silversmith, our Jesus, is going to constantly work on us so it's Him that's being reflected in our lives. For some, that may take a rude awakening so He *can* work in us – we've been spiritually sleeping too long. We've relied on ourselves and our own word, rather than Him and His Word for too long.

For some that means the fire of refining may be painful. For others, maybe not so much, but here's the thing: it's not about the fire, it never has been. It's about the hands that hold us through the refining process.

Back to last Thursday again. I jumped out of bed Thursday morning, flew through house getting dressed, making Alannah's lunch, being sure her back-pack was full of what she needed, and (I confess), probably broke a speeding limit or two getting her to school that morning on time. My wakeup call was a jarring one that moved me to action, not only for myself, but for my daughter's sake as well. You see, the time in the refining fire isn't always about only us. When

we are refined, we are able to be the person we are supposed to be for others. We're able to reflect Jesus.

Again, it's about the hands that hold us through the refining process. Whether by a loud, glaring thing that was needed to get our attention like John the Baptist, or a quieter, yet still effective alarm like Jesus saying, "Repent, the Kingdom of God is near", the hands that hold us when we wake up, get up and get moving don't let go.

And as we are refined, we reflect Jesus more and more. We grow closer to Him through reading His Word and prayer. We come to know what He wants us to know, love what He loves and reject what He rejects through the process of being molded and shaped, refined and purified.

Is it always easy? No. Just ask the people who came face-to-face with the greatest prophet ever and walked away shell-shocked.

Just ask the silver after it's been broken down and reformed.

Just ask the One who holds us in His still nail scarred hand.

The advent candle we lit earlier is the Candle of the Way. Jesus said it Himself: He is the Way, the Truth and the Life. No one can get to Heaven except through Him. No one can be refined and purified except through Him. Until that time we remain spiritually asleep as He constantly seeks to wake up us.

One last trip to last Thursday. Alannah and I got to her school in the nick of time before they closed and locked the doors. If we had been a minute later, I would have had to take her into the office and sign her in (and I hadn't taken a shower yet, or for that matter double checked to make sure the clothes I threw on were clean enough to be seen in!). After Alannah walked through the doors, I saw a teacher shut them and thought, "I have *got* to get a new alarm clock today! I don't want to experience another morning like this one!"

I didn't want anymore jarring wakeup calls. I didn't want to experience that kind of panic and rushing because of my own doing. I don't want to have to learn the hard way ever again to check the status of my alarm.

How about you? And you know I'm not talking about alarm clocks...

Will you pray with me please?

Lord Jesus, thank You for sending John the Baptist to wake people from their spiritual sleep. Thank You that He would not compromise on the truth, but instead did what You wanted Him to do, even though there were some who didn't like it.

Jesus, we don't want to be so spiritually asleep that we need a jarring wakeup call from You like the one John brought to the people. The truth is, though, as we look at our lives,

there are places where we have gone to sleep, and need to be woken up. We need to be refined and purified. We need to be changed into the people You want us to be.

Wake us, Holy Spirit, to Your truth. Wake us by Your refining and purifying power. Wake us, change us, and then turn us loose upon the fallen world to bring the message You spoke through all of the prophets: “The Messiah is coming! Wake up! Get up! Get moving!”

It's in Your name we pray it Jesus,

Amen