

Sermon: Who Can Stand God's Coming
Scripture: Malachi and Matthew
Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans
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“And who can endure the day of his coming and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiners fire a purifier of silver!”

You know that scene in the Lord of the Rings' movie of a few years ago when the fellowship is trying to get through the caves of Moria and they are surrounded by swarms and swarms of orcs who descend upon them like so many thousands of insects and the 9 of the fellowship are standing there utterly vulnerable about to be devoured by the hordes of seething hissing angry ugly violent creatures when suddenly all the thousands of orcs become utterly still and silent and then they scatter away in all directions leaving our heroes standing alone in the great hall thinking “what new devilry?” And we hear this ominous earthshaking rumble of the Balrog from deep in middle earth and the fellowship stands there petrified at the sound until Gandolf, the powerful grey wizard, says “run!” And if Gandolf says to run, then you better run. And as they run the Belrog appears in earnest towering above their tiny little figures as this mighty cloud-engulfed horned creature breathing fire. It is a spectacular scene!

And when I read the prophet Malachi's words about the coming of the Messiah “who can endure the day of his coming, he's like a refiner's fire” and when I hear John the Baptists preaching in the wilderness about 500 years later to prepare a way for the Messiah and screaming out “you brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come... even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees and trees that do not bear fruit will be cast into the fire!” it's the image of the Balrog that comes into my mind. John, the prophets and Gandolph all yelling “run!”

Now of course the Belrog was a demonic figure in the Lord of the Rings and the Messiah for the prophets of Israel and John the Baptist was an agent of God but, according to them, fire-breathing, wrathful, and violent nonetheless. It sounds strange doesn't it, put that way? Why such an image of God's coming? Was it because the prophets and John were a little bit insane, just a tad bit unhinged? Yes, probably. At least that's what most people thought about them, cause it was easier to just write them

off as lunatics rather than really hear what they were saying. And what they were saying was this: God's wrath is coming upon us because God is a God of justice and mercy and we have not been just and merciful. God's wrath is coming as the logical consequence of our own over-indulgence of ourselves and neglect of the needy, because of our violence and greed and misuse of power. That's what the prophet's were screaming and trying to wake people up to - the fact that they had fallen away from the fundamental precepts of living rightly which they make clear was about loving neighbor and welcoming the stranger and caring for the widowed and orphaned, loving justice, kindness and walking humbly with God. It was a path of right living that the prophets were calling the people back to and threatening them with the wrath of God in hopes that if nothing else, fear might change their ways, just like the Balin got Gandolf and the fellowship running in the opposite direction, which is what the word "repent" means - to change directions.

But they were wrong ultimately, the prophet and John, at least from a Christian perspective they were wrong. Not in principle but in form, they were wrong about how the Messiah would come. Because in fact God's messenger was not a Balin-type figure inspiring great fear at all, but quite the opposite. God's messenger, and as he was later understood - God's very self! - came not as an enormous breather of fire but as a drinker of momma's milk! God came among us not as a threatening violent terrifying supernatural force but as a vulnerable nonviolent natural human baby! God came not with flaming eyes and a fire whip to drag us to hell in punishment for our waywardness but rather as a baby, a person full of love, to love even our waywardness.

But hold on a minute. Before we get too warm and fuzzy about it, I said the prophets were mistaken only in form. In principle though they got it right, that we really do need to change. Does anyone really believe that the things we are doing right now as individuals and as a nation are quite perfect and lovely and in no need of correction? Is there anyone here completely satisfied that who they are and the way they are is exactly as they should be. Or are you with me when I say that I know there are ways that I need to change and heal and adjust myself if I want to live my life rightly. And what is true of each of us individually is certainly true of us collectively. Could anyone claim unequivocally that our president's decision to send 30,000 more children to fight in Afghanistan is the right decision? Is it a just and fair decision for our country and theirs?

I'm just saying what the prophets and John were saying and that is that we must change; we, each of us, and we collectively. The only catch is that for the most part I don't think many of us like much to change. I know I don't. Change in life is painful as birth is painful. So when I say that God did not come as a violent furious Balrog figure but rather a loving human one, I'm not saying that God simply came to accept us as we are and give us permission to stay just like we are. The psychological term for that is enabling. God didn't come to simply enable us in all of our less than whole and loving ways of living. I'm saying that God hedged God's bets – to completely humanize God – on the fact that love would be a more powerful force for transformation than hate and violence would be... that love would be a more powerful force for transforming us into the loving and whole people we are created to be. So the transformation of lives was why the "coming" of a Messiah was necessary... and why it's still necessary.

For the light of love is as intense and purifying and can be as painful an agent of change in our lives as any threat of punishment or fear of violence. What parent who takes seriously his or her job of parenting has not felt the pain of realizing that our actions have hurt the very person or people that we say we love most in this world. Talk about sitting in the refiner's fire! Are we as parents, or really as anyone in a position of power over others, willing to face squarely our faults and mistakes that have caused other's pain instead of projecting them out onto the vulnerable other? Are we willing to work on the arduous task of changing those ways within ourselves?

That's what is disappointing to me about President Obama's decision about stepping up the war in Afghanistan is that it really seems just more of the same as the bailouts were as well. He is not enough of a visionary, I guess, to really take the heat of asking us as an American people to undertake the change we need, to repent. I can't say I blame him exactly, because he really would get crucified if he said that we as Americans are far too self-indulgent and consumptive and we need to become more humble in order to live rightly in this world. But where is the change that is necessary, that is always necessary?

As nice as it sounds to hear of God coming as a baby instead of a Balrog, Love really doesn't excuse our complacency, our unwillingness to change. Granted, love doesn't nail us for it either, but Love really does demand more of us than most any of us

can stomach. So the prophets and John were not incorrect in principle, God does come to purify with the profoundly intense heat of Love and I can even believe that the demands of Love in our lives might feel wrathful to us when we are clinging desperately to those things in our lives that we have grown attached to but that do not serve us and the purposes of love any longer. But where faith comes in is in trusting that the purifying work of Love is ultimately the hand of God healing us, turning us right again, freeing us up into some new and renewed wholeness that is so much greater and fuller than where we are right now.

The irony is that none of us really want to go there in our conscious selves... but it is there where our souls yearn to be more than anywhere else in all the world. You could say it this way - what an addict wants is his drug and he does not want to suffer the withdrawals of not having his drug but what his soul wants ultimately more than anything is freedom from that drug, right? Well, we are all addicts to something. We all go for those things and fill ourselves up with those things that ultimately do not satisfy our souls. And God is at work in a mysterious and miraculous behind-the-scenes sort of way responding not willy-nilly to all our wants and desires but specifically to the yearnings of our souls! And God is at work not as a Belrog rising from the depths of Hell to force us to listen (or else!) but much more subtly and mercifully, in the form of a baby being knit together in his mother's womb. Now what does that mean? Hwat in the world does that mean?! It's not something I can answer or that science can answer or anyone else. It's a question that only your soul can answer and Advent is a time for approaching the great mystery of the Messiah's coming and simply listening for what that coming means in your soul in this time and this place...