

## **Vigorous Speech**

Malachi 2:17-3:5

December 6, 2015

Advent 2

<sup>17</sup>You have wearied the Lord with your words. Yet you say, "How have we wearied him?" By saying, "All who do evil are good in the sight of the Lord, and he delights in them." Or by asking, "Where is the God of justice?"

See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. <sup>2</sup>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; <sup>3</sup>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. <sup>4</sup>Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord as in the days of old and as in former years.

<sup>5</sup>Then I will draw near to you for judgment; I will be swift to bear witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired workers in their wages, the widow and the orphan, against those who thrust aside the alien, and do not fear me, says the Lord of hosts.

### I

Have you ever found yourself wanting to argue with God? I have. Often. Not only did I *want* to argue with God, I *have* argued with God.

For example, on several occasions I've had it out with God over violence. Why, I ask, won't you do more to stop the civil war in Nigeria, the fighting in Iran, or the grinding conflict in Israel-Palestine? Given the outsized power and passion which scripture claims you so manifestly possess, what valid reason could you possibly have for withholding your saving self from us? Look at racial violence; look at sexual violence; look at family violence. You appear to be a do-nothing God. Aren't you worried about your own divine honor and reputation? No wonder people in our time are abandoning you in droves!

Another example. During one era of my life I thought God had discarded me. Tossed me aside on a junk heap beside the road, and then disappeared to some distant and mysterious place I knew nothing about. At first I was disoriented by this, without a clue why it had happened. Eventually I became sullen and resentful. "What sort of God are you to do this?" I asked. "What purpose could you possibly have? Do you have a mean

streak I didn't know about before?" Finally after a long time I erupted in anger. I went outside and screamed at God. I made no effort whatsoever to hold my tongue or tame my speech. I heaped on God the full fury of a soul in distress.

When have you argued with God? And what was the argument about?

## II

The person or persons who wrote Malachi argued with God big time. In fact, the entire book is a series of arguments between various people and God. People argue with God and God argues right back. The conversation is vigorous and intense. They argue about love, respect, profaning the covenant of the ancestors, God's justice, scarcity and abundance, and last but not least, about the value of serving God.<sup>1</sup> Six arguments in all, one right after the other with no break between them. Clearly the relationship between God and the people of God is not going well. The partners in this relationship are so disgruntled and vexed that they get in each other's faces. While reading Malachi you can sense the heat rising in the room, with faces contorted by emotion and hands jabbing the air for emphasis.

Take the argument we just heard from 2:17-3:5. It's about justice. The people accuse God of not caring about justice anymore. By making this argument they are criticizing God where it hurts because Yahweh, as distinct from all other gods, had acquired a reputation in Israel's history as someone who passionately and vigorously defended justice. Therefore to accuse Yahweh of abandoning justice was, metaphorically speaking, a bit like stabbing a stiletto between God's ribs. It's an argument calculated to make God feel some pain.

As evidence for their argument they point to the state of Judean society: Look at what's going on, God! It's not just that evil people are getting away with their nastiness, without any repercussions or punishment. It's worse than that. It looks like you, God, are actually approving of what the bad guys do. The whole system of right and wrong is turned inside outside out, so what used to be wrong is now right, and what used to be

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<sup>1</sup> Julia M. O'Brien, "Malachi," in the *New Interpreter's Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2003), 1351.

right is now wrong. From what we can tell, you don't even take justice seriously anymore (2:17)! If you don't care about justice in this world, then what good are you to anyone?

These are stiff words, infused with deep emotion. The people feel forsaken and betrayed. But I hope we notice something about this blunt speech flung into God's face: at least the people of Malachi are deeply and passionately engaged with God. Instead of walking away from God, they are walking toward God. Instead of giving up on God, they are trying to engage God with one of the most important tools we have in our relationship with God, namely the gift of vigorous speech. They are making their relationship with God more intense, more real, more honest, more authentic. In a round-about way, they are actually honoring God by this energetic engagement. They are communicating that God is still important to them. They're implying they still want to be in relationship with God.

If they really didn't care about God, you know what they'd do, don't you? They'd walk away and live the rest of their lives as if God didn't matter, as if God didn't even exist. People who reject God will soon stop talking to God; but people who value God will keep up the conversation, even if it's emotional, even if it's raw, and even if it seems as though God isn't saying anything back. Sometimes we demonstrate our loyalty *to* God by arguing *with* God.

What tight spots have you been in when you wanted to do this with God?

### III

In Malachi 3, God chooses to talk back. Sometimes God responds to us with silence, acceptance, and patience. But in this instance God decides to push back. God is by no means a wimp. God is quite capable of responding to us with equally vigorous, equally strong speech. God can speak to us just as vigorously as we can speak to God. Perhaps the most significant part of God's speech in 3:1-5 is the word "will," which is used six times.

- God *will* suddenly come to the temple (v. 1).
- God *will* sit as a refiner and purifier (v. 3a).

- God *will* purify the descendants of Levi (v. 3b).
- Then the offerings to God *will* be pure (v. 4).
- God *will* draw near in judgment (v. 5a).
- God *will* be swift to bear witness against evil (v. 5b).

In other words, God pushes back with concrete, tangible speech about the future. It may look to you like God has forsaken the temple and associated religious institutions, but God *will* appear on the scene in a flash and demonstrate it ain't so. It may look to you like evil has taken over the world, but God the silversmith *will* refine lumpy old rocks that don't look like much of anything and turn them into pure silver. It may appear that the people of the church, especially the leaders of the church, are misguided fools, but God *will* straighten them out. It may seem that the church's worship is perverted by nationalism and greed and self-interest, but God *will* burn off its ulterior motives so that it worships God and only God. You might think God no longer cares about justice, but in fact that is not the case. God *will* come near to judge and to make things right. To use the metaphor of a courtroom, God *will* become like a prosecuting attorney. God *will* go after sorcerers who worship other gods; after adulterers who break their covenant; after liars who tell fibs; and after oppressors who don't pay their workers well, cut off benefits for widows and orphans, and try to get rid of foreigners.

Notice there is no mention of heaven anywhere in this speech. These things that God will do are not intended for some heaven, light years away. Instead they are intended for here in this place, on this earth. Like someone doing the laundry, God will wash away evil. Like someone who smelts gold and silver ore, God will burn off all the impurities until only pure metal remains.

You probably know that one way of purifying precious metals is to put them over a very hot fire. To be refined by fire is a fearsome thing. Fire hurts. We suffer great pain in the fire. Our perfectly normal and perfectly understandable reaction is to avoid such painful refinement at all cost. And so I invite your attention to one more word in this text, a word in verse 3. It says that God will "sit" as a refiner and purifier. God will sit! In that word "sit" lays a nugget of gold. While we're being refined in the fire, God will sit with us.

God will not take a vacation far away in some other galaxy of the universe. No, God will sit right there beside us while the flames are searing our souls. God will hold us by the hand and comfort us even while the divine fire does its work. Like a faithful companion, God will sit with us. Like a best friend, God will sit beside us. God will clasp us with compassion. God will supply us with courage. God will sustain us with communion. Thanks be to God!