

Get Ready to Get Uncomfortable
Malachi 3:1-4

Sermon for December 5, 2021 by Rev. Alex Creager

¹See, 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. ²But 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; ³he 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. ⁴Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of old and as in former years.

This is the Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

When have you gone through something uncomfortable, but come out better on the other side?

For myself, pretty much every moment of growth I've ever had – as a person, as a pastor, as a follower of Jesus, as a partner, as a parent – they've all come out of times of being uncomfortable.

One moment comes to mind especially this week. Because it happened this time of year, almost exactly a decade ago. I was a Young Adult Volunteer serving in Belfast, Northern Ireland.

Halfway through the year, I was finally starting to feel a little bit at home – with the church I was working with, with the school I was serving with once a week, with neighbors and friends, and fellow YAVs. But at the beginning of December, a friend of mine named Johnny invited me to do something that took me completely out of that comfort zone.

There was a group every Tuesday night that would go to downtown Belfast, offering blankets, coats, hot coffee, sandwiches, and soup, to anyway they met out on the streets that needed it. They called themselves Beautiful Feet from the words of the prophet Isaiah:

*“How beautiful on the mountains
are the feet of those who bring good news,
who proclaim peace,
who bring glad tidings.” – Isaiah 52:7 (NIV)*

Now I'd served before with shelters, soup kitchens, and food banks, in high school and in college. But this was different. First, it was cold. And damp. It's always damp in winter in Belfast. That first night going downtown, wind was rushing everywhere, and steady mist was falling, and no with 30 minutes no part of me was warm or dry.

But much more than the weather, was the work. I was used to making something, serving it, cleaning up, and that being it. But that was not the ministry of Beautiful Feet.

The food and coffee, blankets and coats were already prepared and made by church members and people in the community. We didn't have to do that. Our job was less to do, and more to be present. A lot of our job was to pry for the city as we walked. And then when we met someone who could use a blanket or coffee or soup, sit down with them and simply listen.

That to me was so different, and strange, and very uncomfortable. How do I just sit and listen? I wanted to make something. I wanted to fix something, I wanted to offer and change people's lives forever.

The first few times, I kept trying to give advice and solve things. And others in the group would tell me that's not our job. Just sitting there though was strange for me that first night. And the week after. And the week after that.

But a few weeks in, I started to get it. The people we met – many of whom were immigrants who just moved to Northern Ireland themselves – they had plenty of people telling them advice. There were other organizations with sleeping bags and blankets, and other places to grab meals.

But what most of the people we met never had enough of, was someone to listen to them. To sit with them. To show that their words, their lives, their presence mattered.

It was uncomfortable and strange, wet and cold, and it took me way out of my comfort zone. But from it, I began learning why Jesus spent so much time around tables, and telling stories and breaking bread, and welcoming children, women, and men. Because our simple presence matters. Our listening matters. Our time and giving of it matters. And if we can offer it, with a loving, non-anxious presence, then that may be a bigger gift than all the advice and soup we could offer.

We just need to be okay with getting uncomfortable first.

In both of our readings for today, God works through people by making them uncomfortable. Our first one from Luke 1 includes the song of Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist. When he is told that he will have a son at old age, who will help shape the world, he does not believe it. He thinks it's too big for God. He challenges God. Says that's not the way things work. And so God silences Zechariah. For months. Maybe 9 months. Until John is born, all Zechariah can do is watch and listen as God forever changes what Zechariah thinks is possible. For myself, 9 months of not speaking would

be excruciating. But that is how Zechariah begins to grow and see a much bigger God. And when he finally speaks, Zechariah is able to offer one of the most beautiful psalms in all of scripture of hope, love, and peace.

Our second reading from Malachi comes at a time of return. The people of Israel have been in exile for a generation. They've known grief and loss, pain, and separation. Now they have finally returned back home.

But in getting back to normal, they start doing the same things they've always done, some good, like rebuilding the city and temple. But also lot of things that are not healthy. Those in power, especially the religious leaders, are abusing their position. They are stealing more than their share. They are judging decisions out of selfish motives. They have forgotten justice, broken promises, turned into rival camps, and now even supported violence. They've stopped worshiping, loving, and listening to God, and instead listened to their own voices.

I've often heard that a pastor's job is to comfort the disturbed, and to disturb the comfortable. Malachi's job is definitely the latter. He has come to share God's message that the people of God need to get less comfortable. They need to be disturbed. They need to change their ways. They need to not just go back to doing things the way they've always done things.

This work, Malachi says, will be like "a refiner's fire and fullers' soap." Both purify, clean, and make better. But neither is a comfortable process. One is being burned. The other is going through the ringer. They are not always the things we would choose ourselves. But God needs us to become uncomfortable, to get out of our comfort zones, to do things that may feel like walking through fire or going through the ringer. Because it is those uncomfortable moments where God can often shape us and mold us and help us grow the most.

Here at Bon Air Presbyterian, I know already there are ways you all are going to be challenging me to get uncomfortable. Through RISC, this is the first church I've served that is at work with direct advocacy in the community. I'm used to serving and helping on the symptom side. I'm less used to directly addressing the root causes of issues in the community, and speaking directly for them. That's a big change, and one where you all are going to push me and stretch me in new way, but wonderful ways.

But I wonder what other ways we can get uncomfortable together? I wonder what ways God may be inviting us to go through the refiner's fire and fullers' soap? Through welcoming children, youth, and families in new and creative ways. Through connecting deeper with our ecumenical and interfaith partners, maybe even learning from them about worship and justice and community. Through having sermons where we actually break into conversation and trust that God is speaking not just through the preacher, but through all of us. Through facing less comfortable, but necessary topics, like mental health, racism, housing, and our justice system. Through dreaming how we welcome and connect with neighbors who never come into our building, but we can go out to them.

After almost two years of living with Covid, I know our first desire is to get back to normal. Get back to what is comfortable. Get back to what we know. But today, I think we are invited to do more. We are invited to be stretched. We are invited to dream. We are invited to try new and dangerous things. We are invited to go new places hear new voices, face new challenges, and trust that God is going to make us all uncomfortable. And that discomfort will be a very good thing. Amen.