

Sermon 2009 Advent 2
Text: Malachi 3:1-7b
Theme: "Returns Welcome"
12-6-09

It all starts for us with that word "Behold." It is an important word for us because it means that God is telling us something that is important for us to hear. Like all kids, we have a tendency to tune out our parent and even when God is saying great stuff we find ourselves thinking about our next meal, smiling at the little kid looking over the pew at us or just zoning out as we doodle on something.

BEHOLD! Pay attention! This is important. You change. I do not change. You wander. I do not wander. You lose focus. I do not lose focus. You fail to believe. BEHOLD! Like the father in the story of the prodigal son, God stands waiting patiently. Our lack of faith will not deter him. He will reach into our lives and draw us to him. He will return us to his way.

In this season of buying, we all pay careful attention to the "return policy" right? I mean, I think Dänya will love the blender that I have selected for her with loving care, but just in case it is the wrong color, I want to know that I can return it. God has a

return policy too. Returns are always welcome and even encouraged. The ever patient father stands by and waits for us to return to him from wherever we have wandered.

And here's the thing. We like to know all the dirt of *how* someone wandered; *what* they did while they were wandering, *why* they wandered away in the first place. I think we like to know because we *like* to roll around in another person's dirt. My fourth rule of life is that you can't wrestle with a pig because you just get dirty and the pig likes it. I'll make the exception for a few of you, but most of us are pigs. It's sort of a cheap thrill rolling around in other people's dirt. Or maybe, what we are doing is secretly trying to figure out how to return ourselves.

And if it is that last reason; that we are all trying to find our way back from our own wandering, well, now there's a problem. While returns are welcome – they are also quite impossible. See, our human nature does not want to return to God. Our human nature seeks sin not holiness, so no amount of dirt will ever cause us to desire to be clean. Our human nature likes the dirt. We

enjoy the muck and frankly we like spreading it around. But not so with God; “for he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap.”

Our Old Testament reading ends with the phrase,

“Return to me, and I will return to you, says the Lord of hosts. But you say, 'How shall we return?'" God knows that when we go wandering, we often forget how to get back and our sinful nature encourages us to wander away not towards God. We ask, “How shall we return?” And God has just the ticket. He refines us and he washes us.

The soap is not exactly Dove. It is caustic and rough because it is no small task to wash away sin. Sometimes we think that the washing is worse than the alternative. We see little babies get baptized and we think baptism is sweetness and light. Maybe that's true the first time the baptismal waters wash over us but eventually those baptismal waters are more like being caught in a Maytag spin cycle as we get the dirty sin sometimes literally beat out of us. God is a good cleaner. He likes us clean and he loves cleaning us.

Done yet? Ready to return? Well maybe you think you are, but God knows better so he dumps you into the boiling cauldron of life where that which is holy will be drawn out and the sinfulness will be flushed away. You think that you will not be able to stand the heat, that there is nothing impure left but the refiner sits over the cauldron of this life and turns up the heat again until he looks into our hearts and nothing but the pure holiness of his image is reflected back.

That is when we return. Not as proud, haughty, spoiled children who have been on a secret, sinful adventure, but as humble, broken people who have no confidence whatsoever in our own abilities and choices and every confidence in the world in our God. For we return having been washed with fuller's soap and refined by holy fire and we know that our God has performed a miracle in our lives and brought us back from the brink of disaster. We really are his own. He really will never leave us nor forsake us. He really is our never changing father who watches over us when we wander and washes us and refines us and brings us back to him where returns are not only welcome but

glorified because life with God is always all about the one who has returned: the lost sheep, the lost coin, the lost brother. He who has never returned is either still out wandering or has never embarked into what will be the most frightening and yet most important journey of your life as we await Jesus' final return for us. AMEN.