

Chapel Message
2 February 2011
PRESENTATION OF OUR LORD
Hymn: LBW 532 (Gather Us In)
Scripture: Malachi 3:1-4

³See, 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.

“Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Today is the second day of the spring semester, but most of us know February 2nd as Groundhog Day. I'm sure all of us woke up early this morning and rushed to get the news on Punxsutawney Phil and whether or not he saw his shadow and whether winter will end soon or continue for six more weeks. Or, as in the 1993 film, *Groundhog Day*, perhaps we find ourselves repeating the same day over and over.

While Groundhog Day, and especially the movie of the same name, would be a fun topic on which to share a chapel message, I'll pass on that this year.

In fact, February 2nd is an important date in the Christian liturgical calendar. Today is the 40th day since the birth of Jesus, December 25, and the day, according to Jewish law and the New Testament, where Mary and Joseph presented Jesus in the Temple.

The reading we just heard is the Old Testament lesson for today, Malachi 3: 1-4. This is a favorite passage of mine, especially, “for he is like a refiner's fire.”

What is a refiner's fire? Simply, it is the process that a silver- or gold-smith uses to refine the metal, removing impurities. The end-result is a purer, cleaner metal ... a better metal.

Because I love education and the college-setting, I believe that college presents many opportunities to find a refiner's fire. That is, I believe college offers you the chance to become a better student and a better person. During your time at Bethany, if you allow us to be your refiner's fire, you will become better for it.

This morning, let me share two experiences from my college days that I believe were refiner's fire for me – making me a better student and a better person.

As I have reflected back on my college days, I believe my first refiner's fire moment occurred during the second semester of my freshman year. That semester, I was invited by the chair of the philosophy department to take the philosophy seminar, a 300-level course, comprised of almost all philosophy majors and upperclass students. As I recall, there were about a dozen students in the seminar – several were seniors and I remember one was headed to Harvard Law School and another to Yale Divinity School. The topic of that spring's seminar was the existence of God. We studied and discussed the ontological argument, the cosmological argument, and the teleological argument. The primary textbook was *Philosophers Speak of God* by Charles Hartshorne and William Reese. A textbook I learned later that is frequently used in graduate schools. I also learned years later that I was one of only a few freshmen the department chair ever invited to take the philosophy seminar.

This may sound exciting and quite an honor, but I can assure you that this cocky, 18-year old college freshman frequently asked himself, "What am I doing here?" But I trusted Dr. Trotter and pressed on. He saw something in me I was determined to find for myself.

That class was my first refiner's fire because I stepped outside of my comfort zone. I could have taken an "easier" philosophy course that semester, but I chose to challenge myself and let the class and Dr. Trotter be like a refiner's fire. This is not easy as many of us find comfort "inside the box," but as a result, I believe I emerged as a better student and better person.

The second refiner's fire I'd like to share this morning came when I made the decision to spend a semester studying at Harlaxton College in England. Originally, several of us planned on going to Harlaxton, to go as a group. As is frequently the case, before I knew it, I was the only one still planning on going.

Instead of changing my mind and not going, I persisted and spent a semester studying in England and traveling to the Highlands of Scotland, Edinburgh, London, Canterbury, Athens, Rome, Paris, and Moscow. To say that experience changed my life would be an understatement. I could have taken an "easier" path and spent all four years in Liberty, Missouri, but I chose to challenge myself and let Harlaxton be like a refiner's fire. This is not easy as many of us find comfort "inside the box," but as a result, I believe I emerged as a better student and better person.

Returning full-circle to our liturgical celebration of the Presentation of Our Lord in the Temple, as this spring semester begins, let us present ourselves to God by challenging each of us to get outside of our comfort zone, to find a refiner's fire, and to make ourselves better intellectually, socially, spiritually, physically, where ever and how ever.

Let us pray.

Almighty and ever-living God, your only-begotten Son was presented this day in the temple. May we be presented to you with clean and pure hearts by the same Jesus Christ, our great high priest, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

AMEN.