

**Podcast Transcript**  
**December 5, 2021**  
**Advent 2C**  
**Scripture: Malachi 3: 1-4**

**Suddenly, Burn**

<<**Music:**  
**“Building Up a New World,”**  
**1st verse, fade out under opening sentence.>>**  
<<**“We are building up a new world, builders must be strong.”>>**

Welcome, friends, to *The Word Is Resistance*, a podcast of Showing Up for Racial Justice, or SURJ. This is the podcast where we explore the weekly Christian scripture readings with an eye toward racial justice and collective liberation.

My name is Nichola Torbett. I use she/her pronouns, and I’m recording this at my home, which is on the ancestral and unceded homelands of the Ohlone people in what is now known as Oakland, California.

As many of you know, this podcast is aimed at white Christians like me who are responding to the call to dismantle white supremacy. We recognize that as white Christians, we have our own particular work to do - that it is our responsibility to learn how to resist the forces of white Christian supremacy from which we’ve benefitted and with which we are otherwise complicit. We are seeking to find and uproot white supremacy wherever it shows up, including in our own Christian tradition. And from there, we are seeking to follow the leadership of people of color as we build up a new, more joyful, more just world.

We are building up a new world.

That’s also the song you are hearing throughout this podcast. This live recording of Dr. Vincent Harding’s song for the freedom movement is of a multi-racial “movement choir practice” in Denver, CO in December 2014, being led by Minister Daryl J. Walker. We are deeply grateful to the Freney-Harding family for letting us use the song for this podcast.

This week we find ourselves coming up on the second Sunday of Advent, a season that literally means “to come” or “arrival.” In these weeks leading up to Christmas, our scriptures are pointing us toward the possibility of newness on the way, even a dramatic reversal of fortune. “Something’s coming. Something good,” as the late great Stephen Sondheim wrote in WEST SIDE STORY. The change that’s coming won’t be easy. It might be frightening. But the end result is the love and justice we’ve been praying for.

This is good news for a pandemic weary, climate-convulsed, heavily traumatized, and deeply divided world. It's meant to be good news for all of us who are struggling to put one foot in front of the other—and that's a lot of us these days. I'm writing this just two days after the news broke about the new omicron variant of the coronavirus, and while we don't know enough about it yet, it doesn't look great. And of course, this mutation of the virus is the predictable result of inequitable vaccine distribution, coupled with vaccine skepticism that is actually very well founded in the horrors of colonial medical experimentation and abuse in places like southern Africa. White supremacy and settler colonialism are about to devour more lives. We knew this was likely, and now it's here and...I don't know....I think a lot of us feel pretty powerless to do anything other than hunker down for another wave. So, some good news would be welcome. Maybe a little hint of how to orient ourselves, how to move from here....

Today I want to look with you at the lectionary passage from Malachi. It's Malachi 3: 1-4, if you'd like to pull it up. I should say, too, that this episode contains a brief, nonspecific mention of sexual violence and the healing of sexual trauma, so if that's not something you're up for hearing about, you might want to hold off on listening.

With that said, let's turn now to the scripture.

<<timestamp 3:54>>

<<Music interlude, verse 1 of “Building Up a New World.”>>

<<“We are building up a new world, builders must be strong.”>>

In a moment, I'm going to read Malachi 3: 1-4. In particular, I've found myself drawn to the word “suddenly” as you'll hear it in this passage, as well as to the concepts of “the Lord of Hosts” and the “refiner's fire.” Here's the passage:

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.

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; 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. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of old and as in former years.

Now this passage was written about 450 years before the birth of Christ, and it was addressed to the people of Judah about a hundred years AFTER they had returned from exile in Babylon. It was addressed to a people who, if you read the whole book of Malachi, seem pretty disheartened and disillusioned with their faith and with God. There is a lot of skepticism about this God who claims to be coming. It had been a generation or two since God dramatically delivered the people out of exile, and the parents of those alive today had been part of rebuilding the temple, just as God had demanded, but...life just wasn't panning out the way the people had hoped. There had

been no triumphant restoration of Judah's dignity. God had not brought about justice. In fact, in many ways, oppression seemed to be winning the day. Frequent divorce was leaving women economically abandoned. Workers were being exploited. Immigrants were being cast out, and corruption was rampant among the religious leaders. It felt like evildoers were gloating over their deeds; unjust acts were brazen, right out in public. Where was the triumphant transformation they had been promised, the time when God would make Judah "a land of delight"? Where was this God they were supposed to worship and obey, the God who promised justice and abundance in return? If that God has gone missing, what exactly is the point of this worship?

Honestly, I think I was drawn to this passage because I kind of relate. I can't escape this sense that it was supposed to be better than this by now.

It was just over a year ago when we banged pots and honked horns in the street to celebrate the defeat of an aspiring despot, not quite a year since we heaved a sigh of relief as his replacement was peacefully inaugurated in front of a Capitol still surrounded by barricades and military guard and in the presence of socially distanced dignitaries. Six months ago, we began to take off our masks, to gather again for potlucks and picnics. It seemed as if things were looking up.

But as we lurch into Advent with our masks mostly back in place, with this so-called democracy deeply divided, with a court system that continues to protect white supremacy even as it occasionally gets it right, and with our government grinding its gears over even a stripped down skeleton of the visionary legislation we'd hoped for from the new administration, I feel this dull but pervasive sense of disappointment. And I don't think I'm alone. I hear it from others, too. It was supposed to be better than this. Wasn't it? Where is God? Where is the justice we are trying so hard to bring about?

So I'm drawn to this word "suddenly."

"The Lord whom you seek will SUDDENLY come to [their] temple."

I like being reminded that everything can change in an instant, that this dull and deadening drone of injustice can be radically interrupted at any moment.

"Suddenly" feels so different than the glacial pace of reform where we work so hard to pass legislation that does SOMETHING, even a LITTLE bit, to lessen the immediate suffering. It feels as if we are pushing a boulder very slowly uphill while gravity works against us the whole time. We need to do this. It's essential AND it's exhausting.

But "suddenly" is different. "Suddenly" is, well, SUDDEN. Instantaneous. BAM! Everything is different. I want that. I want justice now. I want the new world now.

So, because I love words and believe that they have salvific power—poetry for the revolution!—I did a little word study, or rather, I asked my housemate, the Rev. Jean Jeffress to do it, because she is just as much a scripture nerd as me, and she actually HAS an interlinear bible, and here's what she found.

The Hebrew word that gets translated as “suddenly” has overtones of terror and calamity. It is often used to describe military attack. Suddenly, the coup. Suddenly, the invasion. Suddenly, the disaster. Suddenly, the God you seek will come into the temple.

I don’t know about you, but I just got goosebumps.

“Who can endure the day?” asks the scripture, and “Who can stand when God appears”? The coming of God’s justice is a startling and even scary event.

There is a military metaphor at work here. God is referred to here as the “Lord of Hosts,” in other words, the commander of a heavenly army of praising angels.” And the people of the tiny nations of Judah and Israel knew all too much about military invasions. (We know less, here in the United States, but people in poorer and less well-defended countries know a lot more about it. And actually, people living in predominantly Black and Brown neighborhoods of this country know something about it—those early mornings with the SWAT team breaking down the door and ICE vans at the ready.)

God is coming suddenly? Like that? Terrifying. As terrifying as those fiery images in the next verses have been for many of us. It is hard to read about the refiner’s fire without thinking about the fires of hell and the weeping and gnashing of teeth that we have heard so much about in certain strains of American Christendom....

But also, IS this the God we know? Is this brutal imperial God the God we worship? Is this the “not by might, not by power, but by your Spirit” God? (Thank you, Tasha Cobbs, for the song—I’ll link to it in the transcript.)

Maybe we can think together about this question if we turn now to the refiner’s fire.

<<timestamp 11:40>>

<<Music interlude, verse 2 of “Building Up a New World.”>>

<<“Courage, sisters, don’t get weary, though the way be long.”>>

So, the thing about a refiner’s fire is that it burns not to destroy or consume, but to purify. It burns very hot, but it does not destroy what it touches. Instead, it strengthens it. A refiner’s fire is used to burn away impurities in something that is essentially good and valuable; in the process, that substance becomes stronger and more resilient. Being subject to the refiner’s fire is not a condemnation but an affirmation of our essential value—our preciousness to God— and a clearing away of everything that obscures that.

Like the burning bush, the refiner’s fire burns bright without destroying.

Like many who live on the West coast, I can’t hear about any kind of fire these days without thinking of the out-of-control wildfires that have rampaged across this region in recent years. No doubt those are destructive, and yet, they also have an element of the refiner’s fire. There are

certain seeds, among them the redwood cones, that can only germinate after they have been exposed to fire. I wonder what there is in US that needs to be singed in order to blossom.... What defensiveness, what false pride, what conditioned assumptions and habits need to be burned away in order for us to shine with God's full glory?

I have this sense that maybe the refiner's fire prepares us to be part of that "heavenly host" of which God is the head. I'll come back to this later....

But for now, the wildfires, the burning bush, the refiner's fire—they are so intense, so dramatic, that they demand our attention and enable us to see what has maybe always been there but was shrouded by our habitual vision, the way we see what we are accustomed to see. Suddenly, SUDDENLY, everything is different.

I think of Annie Dillard's description of "the tree with the lights in it" in PILGRIM AT TINKER CREEK:

Then one day I was walking along Tinker Creek thinking of nothing at all and I saw the tree with the lights in it. I saw the backyard cedar where the mourning doves roost charged and transfigured, each cell buzzing with flame. I stood on the grass with the lights in it, grass that was wholly fire, utterly focused and utterly dreamed. It was less like seeing than like being for the first time seen, knocked breathless by a powerful glance. The flood of fire abated, but I'm still spending the power. Gradually the lights went out in the cedar, the colors died, the cells unflamed and disappeared. I was still ringing. I had been my whole life a bell, and never knew it until at that moment I was lifted and struck. (Dillard 35)

"The flood of fire abated, but I'm still spending the power." I'm interested in this power, what it is, what it can do....A refiner's fire that strengthens and empowers....

Annie Dillard witnessed the moment when suddenly the God she sought entered God's temple—the cedar tree. There have been moments when I have witnessed this dramatic entry, as well. I have been thinking lately about the Occupy movement, since we have been marking its ten-yr anniversary—about how SUDDENLY an economic system that has seemed inevitable was thrown into question, SUDDENLY ordinary people from all walks of life were flooding into the street. Here in Oakland, more than 75,000 people marched in a general strike and shut down one of the largest ports in the country for nearly 24 hours. Like Annie Dillard, we are still spending the power of that day. We know now that something like THAT can happen! We have all the relationships that were forged during those heady days. And it is now commonplace to question and critique capitalism, a word most people didn't even know before Occupy happened. That flash of power from the so-called 99%, plagued as it was by internal racism, is even now laying the groundwork for we know not what. Something's coming, something good.

What's more: The heated debates that happened at general assemblies here in Oakland acted as a kind of refiner's fire. So many of us emerged from those fiery debates with more nuanced

understandings of white supremacy and settler colonialism and SO MUCH more humility. Suddenly, we were changed, and so was the whole political landscape.

That's one example of a moment when God came into God's temple. I want to tell you about another example, this one in some ways very personal and in other ways deeply political. For years, I have prayed for the healing of some sexual trauma that I incurred when I was young and that has significantly shaped my life and my politics in ways both useful and not. In the past few weeks, the refiner's fire of a new intimate relationship has nudged me into the profoundly vulnerable place of healing, now! At the ripe old age of 51! And let me tell you, there have been some terrifying moments, when I have had to feel and say some things that felt impossible to feel or say until...SUDDENLY...I was doing it. Oh, the Terror! But on the other side, such powerful healing. A thawing of so much that had been frozen in me. I imagine I will be unpacking this thawing for a long time to come. Still spending its power. Sometimes healing is delayed so long you think it will never come, and sometimes God moves quickly and dramatically. Suddenly!

In the wake of all that, I am thinking so much about how our politics are shaped by our trauma. I find myself wondering what traumas are bringing us Q-ANON, or the resurgence of white nationalism, and what that means for our political organizing. What does trauma-informed organizing look like? That is maybe the topic for another podcast.

But for now, I want to return to this concept of suddenness.

There are these moments when God seems to move in dramatic new ways, AND...I think I'm starting to sense that these movements are not so sudden after all, though they look that way from a certain angle.

If we take the metaphor of a military invasion, this becomes clear. An invasion seems sudden to those who are invaded, true, but in reality, the military doing the invading has been planning and strategizing and training for weeks or months or years, right?

Likewise, the power of the Occupy movement was made possible by years and decades of organizing, training, and relationship building—not to mention decades of economic injustice—that culminated in a massive coming together in the streets.

And the trauma healing? It's the fruition of decades of both personal work and relational support—a combination of footwork and surrender that bore fruit when I surrendered to the vulnerability of the refiner's fire.

Friends, I believe that circumstances are always, always conspiring for healing and liberation. The heavenly host of which God is the head is comprised of all that is—all of us who are seeking to turn toward God, along with all of the rest of creation, the worms and the mycelial network and the deep trees and the vultures whose poop is rendering Border Patrol communication towers inoperable and maybe even a tiny virus—all of us plotting together for the new creation.

It's true that we do not know the day or the hour when God will come rushing into God's temple, when we will finally see the tree with the lights in it, when the people will finally take to the streets or self-organize into mutually supportive and sustainable communities in cooperation with other species. It might seem sudden when it happens. It might take the form of a disaster or an invasion or...maybe even a global pandemic.

But in some sense, "suddenly" is always right there, in the next moment, if we are willing to join in the heavenly host—the conspiracy of all that is—if we are willing to undergo the vulnerability we have been avoiding, if we are willing to step into the refiner's fire. Something's coming. Something good.

I'll close with a Zen koan that has puzzled and haunted me for years and years. It goes like this:

Ride your horse along the edge of the sword  
Hide yourself in the middle of the flames  
Blossoms of the fruit tree bloom in the fire  
The sun rises in the evening.

Our healing and liberation—our salvation—is at hand, friends.

Amen

<<timestamp 22:24>>

<<**Music interlude, verse 3 of "Building Up a New World."**>>

<<**"Courage, people,: don't get weary, though the way be long."**>>

I've got a two part call to action for you today. The first part is to do some thinking about where the refiner's fire is in your life, and where are you in relation to it—are you avoiding it? Are you in it? Have you just stepped through it? Where is the vulnerability that you need to step into next? And what is your testimony of God's coming into God's temple, and who can you share that with?

And then, because liberation is material and concrete, I want to invite you to participate in not one but two heavenly host conspiracies that are underway now in the southern US. Both of them are deeply relational and vulnerable in just the ways this week's scripture highlights.

The first is an exciting housing justice campaign being led by our friends at the Good Neighbor Movement called "Away with the Mangers—Keep Jesus Housed." This campaign involves a combination of door-to-door relational organizing, fundraising for mutual aid, and advocacy for just housing policies in the city of Greensboro, North Carolina.

Here's what the folks at Good Neighbor Movement say about their campaign: "The makeshift shelter in which the holy family settled, and the manger which held the Christ child, represent toxic charity and unsafe housing. We say, do away with the mangers! Away with the mangers of bottlenecked rental assistance programs. Away with the mangers of slumlords and decrepit

housing. Away with the mangers of developers displacing low-income residents. Away with the mangers of American imperialism that displaces foreign neighbors. Away with the mangers of toxic charity by churches that resettle the same foreign neighbors our country displaces. Jesus said that how we treat the least of these is how we treat him. We are calling on people of faith and all people of conscience to put Christ back in Christmas by amplifying the message to #KeepJesusHoused that advocates for housing justice and safety for all.”

The second is a struggle against displacement of rural renters in Tennessee led by SURJ partners Workers’ Dignity and the Bedford County Listening Project.

Now, I know you might not all live in North Carolina or Tennessee—I don’t, either! But every place where God’s creation is is a microcosm of the whole, and I think there is something really powerful about all of us coming together to support God’s work in one or two small places. We have an opportunity to make a real difference in a way that could then be replicated elsewhere.

So, let’s do it! In the transcript, I’ll link to the donation pages and some materials for you to share out to spread the message.

Finally, before we close, I also wanted to mention and give a shoutout to a likeminded resources you might want to know about, and that is GEEZ Magazine. That’s G-E-E-Z Magazine. They recently released an issue on composting white theology that is really excellent, and the next issue will be on Jubilee. Check it out! Regular and gift subscriptions are available.

That’s what I’ve got for you this week, folks. I’d love to hear your thoughts on this episode. You can comment on our podcast at Soundcloud; search for “The Word Is Resistance.” You can also comment on this episode where we’ve posted it on our Facebook page; look for SURJ Faith, or visit our website, SURJ.org, to respond to our listener survey. We’d love it if you give us a like wherever you are listening to this podcast; that helps us reach more folks.

Oh, and be sure you don’t miss next week’s episode, which will feature Rev. Anne Dunlap along with special guest M Barclay from enfleshed. It’s going to be amazing, so subscribe now!

Finally, I want to thank our sound editor for this week, Claire Hitchens. Claire, so much love and gratitude to you.

That’s it for now, friends. So many blessings to you for far-reaching healing, deep transformation, and loving connection as we build up a new world. Until next time, I’m Nichola Torbett.

<<Timestamp 27:15>>

<<Music: “Building Up a New World,” verse 1>>

<<“We are building up a new world, builders must be strong.”>>

## RESOURCES



Donate to SURJ-Worker's Dignity-Bedford County Listening Project collaboration:

- <https://secure.actblue.com/donate/wd-surj>

Away with the Mangers campaign:

- Donation page:  
<https://goodneighbor.churchcenter.com/giving/to/housing-mutual-aid-fund-2021>
- Follow the Good Neighbor Movement for lots of social media resources to share out:  
<https://www.facebook.com/TheGoodNeighborMovement>
- Search #KeepJesusHoused for more to share out.

GEEZ Magazine: <https://geezmagazine.org>

## **REFERENCES**

Cobbs Leonard, Tasha. "Your Spirit." Accessed 30 November 2021.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BZT8jqsc8lQ>

Dillard, Annie. PILGRIM AT TINKER CREEK. New York: Harper's Magazine Press, 1974.

## **PERMISSIONS AND COPYRIGHT**

"We Are Building Up a New Word," tune public domain, lyrics by Dr. Vincent Harding, used with permission of the Freeney-Harding family. Sung at NoEnemies movement choir practice, Denver, CO, December 7, 2014.

Unless otherwise stated, scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright © 1989 National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

Revised Common Lectionary, Copyright © 1992 Consultation on Common Texts. Used by permission.