

Watching On the Move
Reading from the Old Testament: Malachi 3:1-4
Reading from the New Testament: Mark 13:35-37

Richard Ayoade is a BAFTA award winning British actor, comedian, and presenter who came to fame as a socially awkward computer geek in a sitcom called *The IT Crowd*. The quiriness, even if caricatured, is maintained in his more recent gig as a travelogue host on a series called *Travel Man*, an offbeat romp through grand travel destinations around the globe with the Travel Man whisking individual celebrities through a flurry of sites, trying to capture as much a flavor of their destination as they can in a brief 48 hours.

In one episode, Ayoade tugs Australian comedian Adam Hills through the vast, exotic, and ancient city of Istanbul, Turkey. Having traveled there with a group of preachers a number of years ago, I knew I had to check this one out. They cruised the Bosphorus, toured the Hagia Sophia, and walked through the impressive and thriving Grand Bazaar, a 500-year-old indoor market that dwarfs America's shuttered suburban malls in size and activity. Some 90 million shoppers walk through its halls each year. Travel Man and his guest bartered for a Turkish rug, drank Turkish coffee, and did not pass up the opportunity

to visit one of Istanbul's famous barbers. The conclusion of a Turkish haircut is rather disarming. The barber lights a Bic lighter and brushes its flame close to each ear, thus singeing any stray hairs trying to escape notice there. Yikes. Earwax is bad enough, but I certainly don't think I'm ready for any ear candles.

Fire, an essential among the first human discoveries of nature's gifts, has always produced a love/hate/fear relationship with us. From warming your hearth, to lighting your way, to grilling your burger, to firing the bricks for your home, to caramelizing your creme brulee, to lighting your candle on Christmas Eve, we regularly work closely with fire, but quickly learn that close has its limits. At least in Istanbul there is a very fine line between a smooth ear lobe and a trip to the emergency room.

Still in Turkey, if you travel east to the curious, alien, and captivating landscape of Cappadocia, this is where the first evidence of worked silver was located, dating to 4000 BCE. Technologies may have changed but that silver bracelet didn't make it onto your loved one's wrist without some significant heat along the way, allowing the silver to be extracted refined, and purified. So, the idea of burning away the bad

and leaving the good has been around for a long, long time. However, it's one thing to contemplate forging silver and quite another to consider putting your life through the same process. And yet, life has a way of doing that. The flames of trial and suffering are an unavoidable obstacle along life's journey. The upside/down world post diagnosis. Job loss. Relationships deconstructing. Death in the family. Dreams deferred. Unintended consequences. Injury. Accident. Aging and the loss of independence.

The question is not whether you will encounter these flames, the question is when you will suffer them and how you will endure them. Will you exit the flames stronger or resembling burnt toast? Will you echo the Psalmist? "The Lord is my refuge and strength, a very present help in time of trouble." Or will your groans take the form of another psalm? "Why, O Lord, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?" Both reflect emotions that are real and heartfelt. Both are addressed to the same God. What makes the difference? The difference tends to be whether you have learned to see God as the strength to see you through the trouble/the fire or are inured to the naive notion that it is God's job to never let you see suffering, which just

doesn't work in a finite and flawed world. Does your exit from the flames reflect the glory of the Creator's work, or the ashes of a wasted gift and dashed hopes?

There was not much doubt about what the prophet Malachi was observing amidst the dance between life's inevitable flames and the people of Israel. The book of Malachi is set in the second temple period following the Babylonian exile. A series of iniquitous kings, a broken covenant, a failure of religious leadership, and an indifferent populace had so weakened the nation that they were easy prey for the armies of Babylon. The city burned, the temple was razed, and the people were sent into exile — a loss of home; a loss of identity; a loss of hope; living as outcasts, illegal aliens in a foreign land. The year was 587 BCE.

Close to 50 years later, Cyrus of Persia conquered the Babylonians and gave the Israelites permission to return to the ruins of their former home. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah recount the bittersweet journey home, the Israelites experiencing the sweetness of homecoming while at the same time feeling the bitter burden of self-inflicted loss as they look over the ruins of their former home.

Even as they rebuild the Temple and the city walls, the reality of all that had been lost due to their negligence and the negligence of their ancestors, dampened their hope with regret. When Ezra gathers the people for the reading of the Sinai covenant, there are teachers present to help the people understand its meaning. The weight of the past and challenge of the future causes the people to weep as the covenant is read, the mixed emotions of history, failure, and hope. Negligence toward the covenant had cost the people dearly, and yet, the faithfulness of God means the renewal of the covenant is still possible. Bittersweet.

When life is disrupted, when negligence leads to loss, when accident or tragedy strikes, there is an immediate flurry of calls for renewed focus, reform, repentance, rededication; promises to do better and be better. Yet, emotions are fleeting, promises recede as normalcy encroaches, attention is distracted, commitments weaken. Our *must-dos* become *I'll-get-around-to-it when not so busy*. Negligence, indifference to the covenant, and malfeasance of leadership led to Jerusalem's fall and a half-century of exile. A fifty-year sentence. The return to Jerusalem brought forth promises to do better and be better, to never

let such loss happen again. But memories are short, and it wouldn't be that long before the same problems were plaguing the people of God that had vexed the prophets a century and a half before. Malachi presents as a priest calling out his peers and the populace for ... guess what? Negligence, indifference to the covenant, and malfeasance.

Malachi laments: "Has not one God created us? Why then are we faithless to one another, profaning the covenant of our ancestors? Judah has been faithless, and abomination has been committed in Israel and in Jerusalem; for Judah has profaned the sanctuary of the Lord."

I think we've heard this song before. In fact, it is a song played throughout scripture more than Mariah Carey at the mall in December. *All I want for Christmas is a different soundtrack.*

Malachi, like the prophets before him, reads like a scene from Seinfeld. "You know how to make a covenant. You just don't know how to keep the covenant, and that's really the most important part of the covenant. The keeping."

Over two centuries earlier, the prophet Hosea groaned, " What shall I do with you, O Ephraim? What shall I do with you, O Judah? Your love is like a morning cloud, like the dew that goes away early."

Some 500 years later, Paul would call out the Christians of Galatia, "I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel."

Certainly, this wouldn't ever happen here, but how many preachers hear this said in the produce aisle of the Piggly Wiggly? "Preacher, you haven't seen us in a while, but we're hoping to get back in the routine real soon!" "Okay!" I wonder what they'd say if I let my inner Malachi out? "The Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. ... But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?" Can you imagine the reaction to that? "So ... yeah ..."

Granted, Malachi sounds a little like the turn or burn street preacher here, but there is good reason for the passion. A look at history reveals that the vigor of promise/commitment dissipates in the heat of distraction. Formula One racing is experiencing a surge of interest here in the states because of the Netflix show, *Drive to Survive*. During the

broadcast of an F1 race, which ironically takes place during Sunday's worship, the broadcast includes a table that keeps you abreast of exactly where each driver stands, how many seconds they are ahead or behind the drivers around them. When a driver starts to encounter problems with their car, you can watch their name drop slowly down the list: P1, P2, P5, P10...

What prophets and preachers have observed in regard to faithfulness through the centuries are people who start out in the pole position (vigorous heartfelt confession, fresh commitment ... they're all in). But routine returns, distractions visit, impulses crash the party, and the pole position of commitment starts its slide down the list of priorities. Good intentions become "we'll get back in the routine soon!" When I see it happening, I have no reason to judge, or think any less of someone, but even so, there's a pang in my gut, knowing that when trials come, and they will come, they may have no ballast for balance, no resources to keep the flames from consuming them.

It's not that God lights or fans the flames of trial, they are just there. It's part of the mystery and odyssey of life. I'm sometimes amazed by how surprised we tend to be when trials arrive, as if we're

the first one to ever face them, as if no one understands what we're experiencing. What do we say? "You have no idea." Well, I may not but there's a legion of folks who do. And there's a good chance one may be sitting in the next pew or living next door.

Our purpose here is not to check the heaven box on our eternal loan application. We are here to encourage one another, support one another as we train for the trials to come, and honor the One who alone can bring us out of the flame stronger than when we went in. That is why we read in Hebrews, "Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching." That is why we read of the early Christians, "Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people." That is why Paul challenged the Philippians: "The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God

... whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you."

It is the difference between silver and ashes. Will life's trials refine or destroy? Some of us here have a friend who used to work for the Panthers, and at the start of training camp he would be shaking his head at the players coming up limp, pulling hammies, tearing tendons, wheezing through sprints. He knew they hadn't done the work, availed themselves of the resources, knowing the flaming trials of training camp were coming.

The Psalmist said, "Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me," because he knew, he had learned the signs to watch for, the strength that was far beyond him. That's why Isaiah promised, "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel,

your Savior." Isaiah had learned, he had paid attention, he had felt the singe of life's flames, and he knew; he knew it to be true.

The covenant was not an act of hubris by a prideful god; the covenant was a gift from the One who created and knows us, providing us the wherewithal to come out of life's inevitable refining fires stronger than before. Amen.