

Dec. 11, 2022. Third Sunday of Advent.

Pr. Steve

Texts: Isaiah 35: 1-10; Matthew 11: 2-11

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In the name of God, Abba-Imma, Son and Holy Spirit.

The Pope's tears. Did some of you see that in the news this week? (A couple folks) This was such a brief story. I don't even know the public occasion, but it was outside the Vatican, and the Pope was to offer prayer*[see prayer below] for the people of Ukraine. And he just broke down, and this long and enduring silence prevailed. We human beings don't know what to do with a silence like that, do we? And finally, some people began applauding, saying 'We're with you. We're with you.'

The Pope's tears. Sometimes I think that's why we worship, to come together to shed all of those pent-up tears--whether it's quietly and privately, and occasionally, publicly--to let the truth pour forth of who we are. And we also gather to be grateful for the grace we taste.

John the Baptist was in prison. It's a big deal. He was in prison, and he gets these reports of Jesus saying and teaching things like,

'Love your enemies.'

'Do good to those who hate you.'

'Bless those who curse you.'

'Forgive seventy times seven.'

And John sent his disciples to ask Jesus, *'Are you the one who's coming? Are you for real? Or did I just squander my life for nothing?'*

And Jesus says, *'Tell John what you see. The blind are seeing, the deaf are hearing, the lame are dancing, the poor hear Good News. And blessed are those who don't take offense at me. '*

Jesus is offering a new way, and a new way of understanding the Mighty One whom John said is coming. Last week, we heard in the text that John the Baptist was preaching in the desert, that a river of fire would consume and condemn all the powerful who care nothing for the impoverished. Frankly, a number of you

cringed when you heard that text. The Bible will never become popular for that reason:

‘You can't say things like that in public!’

Friends, we live in a world that has created the possibilities for a nuclear holocaust, a river of fire that would consume the earth and destroy all life. It's not just the madman in Russia. We have more of these weapons than anyone else. We use them, and we say, ‘Put your trust in them because they'll protect us.’ I think if John the Baptist were here, he'd be appalled at us.

Jesus accepts John's critique of the society: things have got to change. But he offers another alternative--not retribution, but reconciliation. That's the heart of the matter. Reconciliation from the depths of our being--with the community, and the society around us--that's the path. And John the Baptist was bewildered. And so are we. We can't do that, can we?

Tonight we will hear sung apex moments of the ‘Messiah’ [Handel].

And his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, the everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace.

That's why Jesus came. He sent the disciples out on numerous missions of peace, to proclaim peace, and make peace real. But I confess that I don't think of (and please tell me the exceptions, if you think of) when people say the Christian church they say, *'Oh that's those peacemakers--they're relentlessly committed to making peace!'* After 2000 years, why is that not our chief identity? But it's everything else--judgmental, institutional, colonizers. Wow! How did this get so derailed?

What Jesus says clearly is *'You've got to make a choice, friends--transformation or annihilation...in our daily lives, in small things, in the big issues before us.'* We have to choose because God will not save us from our choices. That's how much God respects us. We get to choose, and that's why it's tough to be a human being. We choose, and God works with us.

Throughout Advent we hear that [Hebrew] word, *Teshuva*, to turn and return to God again and again--to keep our choices to clear. We have to keep coming back,

turn, return again and again and again to the honest grounding of our lives. And Jesus also makes clear, but it has been seldomly practiced, that the kingdom of God is not a place, it's not a zone. It's not something that we are here to somehow implement--and get everybody else to cooperate with.

The Beloved Community is forever the means and the work--the means creating the ends. There are no ends in this lifetime. There are only means: the means of compassion, the means of understanding--even those who hurt us, the means of mercy, the means of practicing healing.

That's why the work of peace is so tough. There is no way to peace. Peace is the way. It emanates from within us, it connects us, it communes us with life. It's a mystery, which requires our involvement.

From Isaiah [35: 3-4],
*Strengthen all weary hands, steady all trembling knees.
Say to the faint-hearted, 'Be strong. Do not be afraid.
For God is coming with vengeance and divine retribution.'*

And Jesus says, *'Nope. Absolutely not. It's been overturned.'*
The deeper peace that we need to become human is that peace which gets crucified, which lives with an open heart, which refuses retribution and retaliation. And when we take that to heart, we realize how much deeper and deeper and deeper we have to go. And, like the farmers, we need patience with ourselves and each other. That's the faith. That's the community. That's the joy of it. That's the challenge.

All we have to offer is a pink candle to live disarmed, and a disarming life.

*The world is so big, my eyes are so small.
How can this great love be in me?
The world is filled with so much turmoil.
Our hearts are so small.
How can this great love be in us?*

International Human Rights Day yesterday. Nobel Peace Prize.
We prize peace, but there's nothing more demanding.

And it comes simply like in the concert last night: a violinist, barely as big as Gia, playing ferociously with our souls, opening up our lives like a pink candle. Kenny Washington, he's singing from the inside of us. Our souls release. I'm not saying you should have been there, because I'm not. I'm saying we are enriched and blessed constantly in this space by blessings beyond our imagination.

And the important thing is to show up when we can, and keep praying, and keep turning, and keep opening. And keeping lighting and burning this candle of joy, of hope, and anticipation--that we may live as the People of Peace. Amen.

The peace, which surpasses all human understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

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** Listen to the pope's prayer: "Immaculate Virgin, today I would have wanted to bring you the thanks of the Ukrainian people (for peace)." This is what he said before he was overwhelmed by emotion. And then he said, "Instead, once again, I have to bring you the pleas of children, the pleas of the elderly, the pleas of the fathers and the mothers, the pleas of the young people of that martyred land, which is suffering so much."*