

Dec. 4, 2022. Second Sunday of Advent

Pr. Steve

Texts: Isaiah 11: 1-10, Romans 15: 4-13, Matthew 3: 1-12

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

Healing into wholeness, healing into wholeness is God's deepest longing for us. We are all wounded people. We all get wounded and scarred by life. We don't necessarily like it. We often try to cover up our wounds. The really strange thing is that our woundedness doesn't increase our empathy for all the other wounded people. The experience we have most in common--of being hurt, cut down by life--we try to keep it to ourselves try to remain strong, try to pretend that nothing is really happening to us, and frequently project our wounds onto other people as a way of avoiding facing the pain and the healing of our wounds. Anytime you say to yourself, *"Thank you, God, that I'm not like Jen Clyde"*, you're in trouble.

God is not offended by our wounds. We're ashamed, embarrassed, God isn't. And that's partly why we don't understand God!

How can you be kind towards wounded people who hurt me? How can you care about those who've been wounded and who wound other people?

Our wounds do not bother God.

Bev and I lived in San Francisco during the 80's when the AIDS crisis broke out. It exploded. During that decade, 10,000 men died in San Francisco. That is a war zone. How many have died in Ukraine? And yet, to those of us who experienced it, that was meant with indifference by society, by government, by medical institutions. Because, *'Why would it matter? It was just gay men'*. And it was that vicious.

I had a friend who started the first AIDS ministry because he said, *'Nobody should have to die alone. Nobody.'* As it was quite common at that time, gay folks who came out of the closet around the country were often rejected and condemned by their own families and moved to San Francisco: Mecca for the gay community. Thank God for San Francisco!

And one of these men named Teddy, had contracted AIDS, was in the hospital approaching his final days, and miraculously our friend persuaded his family to come from the Midwest to see him in his dying days. They did come, and they were reconciled as a family. And on his death bed, Teddy said, *"I have not been*

cured, but I have been healed." Healed into life, healed into death, healed into the beyond.

God desires to heal all of us into wholeness. The prophet Isaiah today speaks of our healing in three sort of distinct voices. The first in that passage is saying 'You can recognize that you are in the presence of God whenever you are experiencing either within you or around you, integrity, quality, understanding, compassion, wisdom, mercy. You are in the presence of God.' For God is not some hideous, monstrous tyrant seeking our submission. That is not God, and nobody needs a God like that! God is one who sparks integrity and wholeness and healing--and practices it with us--and invites us to do the same.

But then Isaiah continues, God is not passive. Through the prophet, it is as if the rod of God's mouth speaks in confronting wickedness, and injustice, and intolerance, and God will not abide it! It is like a whip cracking.

And the third voice is this stunning vision, through the prophet, of the 'Peaceable Kingdom'. It's pictured on your bulletin cover. Take a look. Fritz Eichenberg did this--it's a woodcut. This is not pretty, this is not cute, this is not poetic. This is our destiny. This is our reality, that we have been called together to create with Christ--the peaceable kingdom. Distinctions abound, absolutely, like all of the distinctions among the animals. But the harmony is what takes precedence. It is not a celebration of differences, but of the possibility of coming together.

This is the real crisis of our time. So often, spiritually, we are reacting to everything that's going on, going down, and going wrong around us. Where is the vision that we need--this prompting of our spiritual imagination--to create anew this peaceable kingdom that calls, summons us, drives us forward to practice that integrity and quality of God that feeds us at the deepest soul level.

New beginnings. That's what God believes in too, constantly. And it's new beginnings for everybody. The most ancient religion of the world is the religion of the strong, who love to be strong. Anybody here ever come up against corporate America? Or lived inside of it? What do we worship? Strength, Numbers, Accumulation. It's not all bad. But it's the worship that's going on, isn't it.? You're not allowed if you're weak. What do we do? Do we get rid of the weakest then? I understand. I understand. But it's a religion, you see. And it's offended by weakness. Certainly in itself cut it out, or eradicate, eliminate weakness wherever you find it around you.

That's why Paul is so crystal clear as he begins this message to us this day in Romans 15. *'Brothers and sisters, especially those of you who are strong, make sure that you are welcoming the weak, the vulnerable, and those with susceptibilities. Whatever their source, you welcome them into that community for the sustaining of whole life and an honest life.'* Because people who are only strong are delusional. It's dangerous, it's dangerous.

You welcome the vulnerable that together we might become people of endurance, to find a way through together. When we live in that fashion, then hope becomes possible, genuine hope for people to become whole and real and alive.

John the Baptist was one of those guys who operates purely as the rod of God's mouth, commanding, demanding in the desert. And people came out for a national repentance-return movement. It's time to get back to the core of our faith, back to our God--to turn to the One who can make a difference. And people came in that occupied Israel, looking for hope.

Now John is shocked when the aristocracy shows up. *'What are you doing here, you brood of vipers! Are you clueless that there is a rain of fire about to come down upon all of us? And you don't stand a chance! God will gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff--those who exploit the poor--the chaff will burn in a fire that never goes out.'*

Can I get an Amen? Oh, doesn't it feel great! (That's the temptation of religion.) Boy, doesn't it make me feel good to be one of the righteous! I have no wounds. (I am better than Jen Clyde!) Right?

That's the way we live, though, isn't it?

Jesus is baptized into this Movement too. It was a movement for transformation. (It's not about our Baptism--it's very, very different.) This was a movement for returning to God. And then John continues, *'Already the axe is laid at the root of the tree.'* The axe is a symbol of Rome; the tree is Israel. And that axe came down literally on John--cut him down, cut him off. It came down on Jesus, too. It came down on many others in Israel, as well.

But there is a difference between John the Baptist and Jesus. John thought the ultimate was that retribution: God justifying the ultimate scorecard--who counts, who doesn't? Throw out the weak.

But Jesus comes for the reconciliation, the wholeness of humanity and creation, with all of the creatures in the cosmos coming together, healing the wounds of brokenness, that we might taste the fullness of communion with all life.

Today, this is what we desperately need, is that sense of aliveness in God. And I share with you a comment from the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr. Rowan-- who said this about 10 years ago--that what's essential today is a contemplative humanity, human beings who are praying and meditating, living inside of sacraments, nature, all of these things which deepen our identity and connection with God. Because, to put it boldly, he says, *'Contemplation from real, honest people of integrity and quality--contemplation is the only ultimate answer to the unreal and insane world that we now live in: a world overrun by financial systems with a greed beyond comprehension inside of an advertising culture and social media that corrupts and lies and deceives without abandon, a world overrun by a militaristic reality so vast we cannot comprehend all of its tentacles, and that leaves us in chaos, and as people with unexamined emotions who have nothing to offer anyone else. We need contemplation. We need to ground ourselves again. We need to be healed into wholeness that we might live truthfully and honestly. Otherwise, we will offer nothing to others except our own contagion and commotion, our own delusions and obsessions, our own greed and fears and hopelessness.'*

Come to me and rest, rest into the truth and beauty and marvel of who you are.

Come to me. Be healed into that wholeness, that very calling of aliveness in the depth of your soul.

Come to me, you who are broken in need, longing for unity. Come to me and rest. Amen.

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