

WHOLENESS THROUGH COMPASSION

12/13/20 ~ St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Encinitas, CA

Advent 3 (B): Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; Psalm 126; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24; John 1:6-8, 19-28

This morning we lit a pink candle on our Advent Wreath. That's because today is what's called "Refreshment Sunday." It's a carry-over from the old days when Advent was viewed as more of a penitential season—more like Lent. So, the "refreshment" was a respite from the work of repentance. As in Lent—Refreshment Sunday is the third Sunday of the season.

Sometimes the rose color in Advent is seen as a symbol of joy—again, to counteract the heaviness of repentance. But others see the rose color as a reminder of our wholeness; a reminder that though we are broken, flawed and constantly in need of returning to God in a penitent state, we are also already whole, because we are created in God's image.

The Apostle Paul is communicating this concept in his letter to the Thessalonians that we just read: "May the God of peace...sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless." This is one of the earliest letters we have from Paul, and his words exude the love he has for these people and his hopes for them—a life centered in the knowing that in God they are sanctified and whole.

Paul—like any good legal person—presents things in a cause-and-effect manner. So, as he describes what we get from God, he simultaneously throws in what our response to God's mercy and grace ought to be. Here, he encourages the Thessalonians to: "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances," and adds, "for this is the will of [NO PAUSE] God...for you."

In our reading from the Gospel of John—which reiterates the passage we read last week in Mark—there's an extension of that response. The description of John the Baptist indicates we are to reflect the light of God into the world. The passage proclaims that John: "came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light." In this case, "testifying to the light" is essentially reflecting God's light into the world.

Both passages—the one in John and 1st Thessalonians—share another important prompt that it's not us who are the light, or the source of all. The Gospel describes God as the light, which John the Baptist reflects. And Paul coaxes the Thessalonians that they can relax into the understanding that it is God who makes us whole. He writes: "The one who calls you is faithful."

That reminds me of something voiced last week in the presentation we had at coffee hour about being peacekeepers. One of the presenters relayed a helpful distinction she'd heard at the "Border Summit," which was that God's mission is restoration, and our vocation is to be peacekeepers in our daily lives. In other words, it's not our job to bring the entire world back into communion with God—that's God's work. We just need to find the little places, in our everyday interactions, where we can help maintain, or bring about, peace.

I heard an example of that in an NPR story recently. My ears perked up when the reporter announced he was talking to an RN at a hospital in Billings, Montana. I was aware that the few city hospitals in my home-state are being stretched thin by the surge in COVID cases in rural areas.

This RN talked about trying to recover from COVID himself, and how it's a long process. Despite that, he explained he could not not work, because he just can't bear the thought of not helping. So, he goes into the hospital every day—even though he tires easily and is in pain.

What really impressed me about him—after listening to his touching story of a patient he befriended only to have them die—what impressed me is that he said, “If we think we can wait for everyone to have more compassion—in terms of how to care for each other by distancing and wearing masks—then we'll never get there, because some people are just not ever going to react in a compassionate way.

Instead,” he continued, “Instead, I think what the rest of us need to do is practice double compassion.” Wow! Talk about peacekeeping...practicing double compassion. In the book I mentioned last week, [Mystical Hope, Cynthia Bourgeault](#) writes: “Pure acts of compassion or attention always affect something on the planetary level.”

To me, that's what the line from today's Psalm is getting at: “Those who go out weeping, carrying the seed, will come again with joy, shouldering their sheaves.” When we enact peacekeeping in our everyday lives, it can be hard work that makes us want to cry, and we'll probably not have done much more than plant a seed. But in God's economy of time, restoration will happen, and there will be much joy at the harvest!

In the meantime, be gentle with yourselves; remember that we are under what's called a chronic state of stress, and, until we're on the other side of this pandemic, that's probably not going to change. You aren't crazy when you can't concentrate long enough to read a novel right now. You're not losing your mind that you can't remember things as well as you used to. You're not alone when you have moments of hopelessness. These are stressful times, and our bodies react to stress in different ways.

So, breathe deep, remind yourself that it is God who sanctifies us; that it is in God's faithfulness where we find our wholeness; and because we are God's, let's practice double compassion whenever we can!

-AMEN

Collect of the Day

Stir up your power, O Lord, and with great might come among us; and, because we are sorely hindered by our sins, let your bountiful grace and mercy speedily help and deliver us; through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom, with you and the Holy Spirit, be honor and glory, now and for ever. Amen.

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; to provide for those who mourn in Zion— to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, to display his glory.

They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations. For I the Lord love justice, I hate robbery and wrongdoing; I will faithfully give them their recompense, and I will make an everlasting covenant with them. Their descendants shall be known among the nations, and their offspring among the peoples; all who see them shall acknowledge that they are a people whom the Lord has blessed.

I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.

Psalm 126

- 1 When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion, *
then were we like those who dream.
- 2 Then was our mouth filled with laughter, *
and our tongue with shouts of joy.
- 3 Then they said among the nations, *
"The LORD has done great things for them."
- 4 The LORD has done great things for us, *
and we are glad indeed.
- 5 Restore our fortunes, O LORD, *
like the watercourses of the Negev.
- 6 Those who sowed with tears *
will reap with songs of joy.
- 7 Those who go out weeping, carrying the seed, *
will come again with joy, shouldering their sheaves.

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise the words of prophets, but test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil.

May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this.

John 1: 6-8, 19-28

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.

This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed,

“I am not the Messiah.” And they asked him, “What then? Are you Elijah?” He said, “I am not.” “Are you the prophet?” He answered, “No.” Then they said to him, “Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?” He said, “I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’” as the prophet Isaiah said. Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. They asked him, “Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?” John answered them, “I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.” This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.