

God Heals Those Who Are Torn Apart

Friends in Christ,

You may have heard the story of John Newton, the author of many hymns. He grew up in England, was impressed or forced, to become a sailor, but ended up liking it. He fell into many sinful habits, and even, late in his life, was captain of a slave ship. He then was brought to faith in Jesus, studied to be an Anglican priest, and late in life was a leader of the abolitionist movement. John Newton knew the highs and the lows of life. He composed this epitaph for his tombstone: **“John Newton, clerk. Once an infidel and libertine, a servant of slaves, was by the rich mercy of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ preserved, restored, pardoned and appointed to preach the faith he had long labored to destroy.”** He also expressed his faith by writing hymns, including the one we sang at the beginning of this service: **“Amazing Grace (how sweet the sound), that saved a wretch like me.”**

For John Newton, God’s love was a gift, completely undeserved. He could look back on the lows of his life and see that the Lord was preparing him for that grace. Today, we look at words recorded by the Old Testament prophet Hosea, which tell us, “God Heals Those Who Are Torn Apart.” God prepares us for his grace, then God heals us with his grace.

Things that are important need time to prepare them. You need to practice sport or music before you’re really ready to play. Teachers found out this past week how much work it takes to teach students on-line—even with all the apps and software out there, you can’t just flip a switch and you’re teaching. Teachers have had to learn a whole new way of doing their work, so their students can keep learning.

God’s love takes some preparation, too. God doesn’t force-feed his grace on anyone; no, first he makes sure that we are spiritually hungry. If you went without food for three days, you wouldn’t need to have your mother call you twice to get you to sit down and eat.

Hosea was a prophet of God to the Northern Kingdom of Israel, half of the Jewish people, at a time when the people needed to realize how far they had wandered from the Lord.

Israel was prospering. Under King Jeroboam II, they regained territories they had lost, and their economy was flourishing. But the prosperity concealed their sin. The prophet Amos preached that the rich were exploiting the poor, and the courts were dens of injustice. Worst of all, though they were God’s chosen people, they had fallen into worshiping idols like the nations around them.

So God allowed them to be attacked. Assyria threatened the nation from the north. But rather than seeking the Lord, Israel looked for other nations to defend them. The Southern Kingdom of Judah got drawn in—actually, North and South ended up fighting each other, like a Civil War among God’s people.

The real problem was that the people were looking everywhere else except to their one source of deliverance, the Lord God.

So the Lord allowed them to suffer. In fact, he said he brought it on them: **“For I will be like a lion to Ephraim, like a great lion to Judah. I will tear them to pieces and go away; I**

will carry them off, with no one to rescue them. ¹⁵ Then I will return to my lair until they have borne their guilt and seek my face—in their misery they will earnestly seek me.”

God’s people didn’t want his help? Then they would have to experience life without him. Once they felt helpless, once they experienced that true emptiness, they would turn back to their loving Savior.

This is one reason God allows troubles into our lives—to get us to turn to him. He wants us to stop trusting in our wealth or our brains or how strong our nation is.

God does not just want a little bit of your trust. He wants you to rest all your heart on him. He wants us to realize that we so often look anywhere else other than him. He is leading us to repent of our sin and pray for his mercy.

It’s like the chain smoker who sees nothing wrong with his life until he is gasping for breath because of illness, or the person addicted to—well, anything—who doesn’t realize she’s addicted so she won’t try to get help.

But with our sin, the problem is so much deeper. Sin separates us from God, and condemns us to hell. But God loves us too much to let us keep going on that path. So he calls us up short, by the trials and troubles of life—including a worldwide virus.

But always God’s purpose is to prepare us for the outpouring of his grace.

There are people who were brought to faith as God allowed them to sink into the depths. You may have heard of the Manson family which committed horrible murders—several of those people, as they sat in jail, were brought to faith in Jesus Christ. Or think of a famous person like Charles Colson, who had put all his trust in himself as an advisor to President Nixon, even in the Watergate affair—as Colson was about to be indicted for his crimes, he was led to belief in Jesus, and later organized a large prison ministry.

But the thing is, even after God brings us to faith, we still need his disciplining hand, like a little child who keeps being tempted by that cookie jar. So the Lord calls us to repent through the events of our lives.

The troubles of this world are not simply bad luck, nor can we just blame them on the government or our jobs or some cosmic mistake. God allows these troubles to call us back to him.

And when he restores us—that is not just good luck. Our God is healing us, who were torn apart.

Hosea, God’s prophet, called the people of Israel to repent. In fact, Hosea joined the people in confessing their sins—just like a pastor will join in our service when we confess our sins. **“Come, let us return to the LORD. He has torn us to pieces but he will heal us; he has injured us but he will bind up our wounds.”**

God injures us, but then he heals us. Our God is like a surgeon. A surgeon has to do something that would be harmful on its own—cutting into your body. But he does it for a good purpose—to fix what’s wrong in there. And after he has removed the tumor or whatever, he then sews you up, to heal you.

Your sin is serious. It requires surgery by God. He leads you to repent, and then he removes that sin completely. Think of Holy Baptism. God says that in Baptism, our old self is put to death, buried in Jesus’ tomb, and we come out of baptism as new people. Jesus said we are born again when we are baptized. This is a complete healing.

Hosea was certain that the Lord would act. **“After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will restore us, that we may live in his presence.”** Two or three days—Hosea wasn’t putting a time limit on God’s actions. His point was that this would happen soon. God’s discipline lasts a short time, while his love is forever. God would work faith in their hearts, even while they were still at war.

He would lead them back to him and heal their hearts, **“that we may live in his presence.”** No longer would God be like the lion hiding in his lair. The people would know his full love.

Hosea is telling us that God is good at healing. “You have fallen apart, but God will put you together again.” And this is the message we need to take to heart, as our world fights the battle with Covid-19. Things look very bleak. There will be suffering, there will be a lot of hardship. But our God heals. He forgives our sin. And he restores our lives.

Just look at what Jesus did. As we heard in our Gospel, Jesus did not simply go around preaching. He also spent time, much time, healing people. And it was no problem for him. He did not have to stay six feet away from people, because he is God and he can heal anyone. He healed Peter’s mother-in-law with a touch on her hand. He drove demons out of people with a simple word. He healed all sorts of sick people. He can heal us, if that is his plan for us.

But even more than that, Jesus healed us by his own death. As Paul said in our Second Lesson, **“While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”** His death paid for all of our sins, so that we are truly cleansed of all the guilt that would keep us out of God’s presence. We can be certain that, as Hosea said, we live in his presence; for eternity, we will live with God directly.

God keeps calling us back when we sin. Remember when the ancient Jews were wandering in the wilderness of Sinai. Even after 39 years, the people complained that they didn’t have the food and water they wanted. God sent snakes among the people, poisonous snakes, and some died. But the Lord told Moses to put a bronze snake on a pole, and anyone who trusted God enough to look at that pole was healed. Jesus later said that just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so he would be lifted up, lifted up on a cross, so that everyone who looks to him may have eternal life.

Prof. Donald Deffner suggested this: Imagine a person has arrived at the gates of heaven. A voice asks, “What is the password? Speak it and you may enter.”

“The password?” the person replies. “Well, is it: “whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved”?”

“No,” replies the voice.

“The just shall live by faith”?

“No.”

“For God so loved the world”?

“Those are all true sayings,” says the voice, “but they are not the password which I am listening for.”

“Well then,” says the person, “I give up.”

And the voice says, “That’s it! Come right in.”

You and I are saved by grace alone. The Lord prepares you for his grace, then the Lord heals you with his grace. The Lord heals those who are torn apart. Amen.

As Hosea said, **“Let us acknowledge the LORD; let us press on to acknowledge him. As surely as the sun rises, he will appear; he will come to us like the winter rains, like the spring rains that water the earth.”**