Nu’uanu Congregational Church, 2651 Pali Highway

United Church of Christ Honolulu, Hawai’i 96817

Online Worship & Sermon March 29, 2020

**FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT**

GREETING & OPENING PRAYER

The grace of our lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Let us pray:

*Savior of the world, you are resurrection and life. As we worship you this day show us how to be bearers of the good news you brought to us; messengers of your resurrection. Help us to be faithful and trusting in your holy ways alone. By the power of your Spirit, set our hearts and minds on the source of life and peace. Amen.*

CALL TO CONFESSION Romans 8:6, 10

To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. Trusting in the Spirit of God, let us confess our sins.

A MOMENT OF SILENCE

*Let us take a moment of silence with God to unburden our hearts.*

AN ASSURANCE

Friends, if Jesus Christ dwells in you, the Spirit of God will be your life, and the grace of God will be your righteousness. And if the Holy Spirt dwells in you, then God, who raised Jesus from the dead, will also give life to your mortal bodies. This is the good news of the gospel: in Jesus Christ we are forgiven.

READING OF HOLY SCRIPTURE:

Ezekiel 37:1-14—The Valley of Dry Bones

*1The hand of the Lord came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. 2He led me all round them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. 3He said to me, ‘Mortal, can these bones live?’ I answered, ‘O Lord God, you know.’ 4Then he said to me, ‘Prophesy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. 5Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. 6I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the Lord.’*

*7So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. 8I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them. 9Then he said to me, ‘Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.’ 10I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.*

*11Then he said to me, ‘Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, “Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.” 12Therefore prophesy, and say to them,* *Thus says the Lord God: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. 13And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. 14I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act, says the Lord.’*

SERMON *Spirit of Life*

Dry bones. This is what remains after death has visited, after time has done its part to strip away all semblance of human living—this is the way the Israelites were feeling. A lot had happened to them. They had lost a war and had seen their country overrun by the Babylonians who destroyed the temple and much of the rest of Jerusalem. Many of the people—family and neighbors—had been killed and the rest had taken many miles away into captivity and slavery in Babylon.

Had God abandoned them, they wondered and worried? Would they cease to exist as a people, hundreds of miles from home? Would they ever return? How could they survive in a strange land?

God’s response to these questions is the content of the passage we heard. God takes Ezekiel and instead of a garden (as you might expect if you were going to hear a message of hope), God sets him down in a valley full of dry bones.

Not only were the bones dry, the Bible says they were very dry (v. 2). It is as though a vast army had been slaughtered, their armor and clothing stripped, and their bodies left unburied for scavenger birds and animals to pick clean and scatter, and for the winds to scour and the sun to bleach white, lifeless.

God then asks Ezekiel if those bones would live again. “How should I know, Lord,” he says, “only you could possibly know that.”

Although Ezekiel’s answer sounds a little disrespectful or defiant, I hope, instead, we hear the absolute confidence Ezekiel was proclaiming about God. His words were about a God he believed could make sense and bring order out of a scene that he and other humans could only see as devastation.

Ezekiel was identifying his limitation and telling God that only God could possibly know how to address what looked hopeless to him.

God responds by telling Ezekiel to prophesy—to speak on God’s behalf—to the bones. God tells Ezekiel exactly what to say, that God is going to cause breath (in Hebrew *ruah)* to enter them, so that they would live.

The Hebrew word ruah (hard “h”) appears 10 times in verses 1-14. It can mean wind/air, breath or spirit, depending on the context; all three meanings appear in Ezekiel 37.

So Ezekiel prophesies to the bones (v. 7). As he does and there is a rattling and shaking—think of all the noise this must have made! Noise and even shaking of the earth as the bones from the separated skeletons came clanking together, properly linking “bone to its bone,” along with correctly attached muscle tissue and skin.

But the bodies were still lifeless -- “there was no breath in them.”

In a second step, God tells Ezekiel (v. 9) to prophesy to the breath (or wind or spirit) that the cadavers might be animated. And Ezekiel prophesies, and “the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude” (v. 10).

Dry bones and dry times. Many would say we are experiencing such times right now. Like the ancient Israelites, we are displaced. We are fortunate in that it has not been a violent displacement. However, we should not minimize our own feelings of loss and disorientation. Instead, we should be asking ourselves what God is also showing us in this moment.

Before we ponder what this may mean for us personally, I would like to suggest that one of the things we are being shown is what it is like to be a refugee, as individuals and as families.

Refugees are forced out of their homes and often their home country, sometimes at a moment’s notice. They are made to flee from everything that is familiar, everything that makes for comfort and security. They are thrust into new landscapes, homeless, and adrift.

I wonder how many of the people all over our country are considering this idea, and if we are, I wonder what we are learning from it?

For us, let us also consider the folks we serve in the Family Promise ministry. In a very real way, we now know a bit more about their situation, don’t we?

I wonder what can this mean for our church and for our continued ministry? How much deeper can we go in our own faith journey because of what we are learning?

What I pray for for myself and for all of us is that we will allow ourselves to be like Ezekiel as God leads him around that strange and terrifying valley.

As scary and confusing as it must have been for him, when God asked him to prophesy, he did. When God gave him words of life to say to those bones, he said them.

Can we do that, too?

This is what I am praying for right now—that we can look over the dry bones that surround us right now and still hear the good news of God’s love in our hearts and spirits.

I pray that what we will hear is the promise God made to Ezekiel all those centuries ago because it is also what God said to us though Christ, and it is what God is saying to us today.

I am aware of how difficult this time is for all of us—not just the displacement from our routines and habits of living, but also the fear we all live with about contracting COVID-19. I congratulate all of you who are guarding your health and the health of your families. You are doing an important thing.

I invite you to open yourself to more ways of coming together—this is one of them—and continuing to be the body of Christ together.

What I hope you heard in this story from Ezekiel is the tremendous love God has for God’s people. It is a love so strong that it can and will overcome the grave. Ours is a God who not only animates us, God puts God’s own spirit into us—we are drawn that close.

What more can we do in response but to draw close to one another in God’s name.

I have only been here on Oahu for three weeks—only one as your settled pastor—but I am here. God has put me here for you, and I sincerely hope you will take that to heart. I look forward to out life and ministry together, and I pray you do, too.

I pray you will continue to feel God’s spirit within your life, giving you strength and joy to love and to be loved; to rise and live—breathing in and out—as God’s Holy Spirit continues to lead and shelter us in our faith and our journey.

Amen.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE & THE LORD’S PRAYER

Let us keep in our prayers all the first responders throughout the world, who are putting their lives on the line to serve and to heal. We pray they will receive the tools, supplies, and support they so desperately need.

Let us pray that those in charge, our elected leaders, will come to terms with the seriousness of these times, listen to those who know best what the people need, and serve with humility and faithfulness.

Let us pray that we will find ways to support them and the many who are sick, whose jobs have been affected or even lost.

Most of all, let us pray for the many who are sick, especially Taylor Young (the son of Karen Fay and Darryl Ramos-Young) who has been in the ICU in California for several days, and for all the other patients and their families. May they be surrounded and lifted by our prayers, and by the God’s own Spirit…and through it all, let us trust and praise God, especially when we pray the prayer Jesus taught us saying…Our Creator who art in heaven…, and let us sing our praise together…

DOXOLOGY

Praise God from whom all blessings flow;

Praise God all creatures here below;

Praise God above, ye heavenly host;

Creator, Christ and Holy Ghost. Amen.

CLOSING WORDS Ezekiel 37:5; John 11:43

Arise, dry bones and live!

Come forth, Lazarus, and give glory to God!

BENEDICTION John 11:25

May the Lord Jesus Christ who is the resurrection and the life, bless you and keep you in this life, and in the everlasting life to come. Amen.