**Nu‘uanu Congregational Church, 2651 Pali Highway**

 **United Church of Christ Honolulu, Hawai’i 96817**

**Online Worship & Sermon May 10, 2020**

**FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER**

PRELUDE Jieun Kim Newland

*Vater unser im Himmerlreich (Our Father Who Art in Heaven)|* George Böhm (1661-1733)

ANNOUNCEMENTS Lori Yamashiro

GREETING/CALL TO WORSHIP **—**based on 1 Peter 2:4

Let us offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God, through Jesus Christ our risen Lord.

***Alleluia! Thanks be to God!***

OPENING SENTENCES

 Friends, in Christ we are shown the way to truth and everlasting life. Therefore, let us keep our eyes upon him, that we may see his path more clearly, know God’s truth more fully, and receive life more abundantly. Let us worship God.

PRAYER SEEKING Reconciliation

*Let us prepare ourselves to receive God’s gift of holy Scripture*

*by setting aside all that burdens our hearts and spirits.*

Almighty God,

your word offers freedom from sin,

but we confess that we have not obeyed your word. *1 Peter 2:7*

We have harbored malice toward our enemies;

we have been deceitful in our relationships;

we have been insincere in our commitments;

through gossip we have slandered our friends. *1 Peter 2:1*

We thank you for the grace that covers us even in our sin

and we pray that you will lead us to genuine repentance.

Help your children long for your pure, spiritual milk

that we may grow into the joy of salvation *1 Peter 2:2*

through Jesus Christ. Amen.

Let us keep a short silence to reflect on what we have prayed.

AN Assurance

Hear the Good News:

 Sisters and brothers,

 once you were not a people.

but now you are God’s people.

Once you feared condemnation

but through Christ’s efforts on our behalf

 we are covered by grace.

In the name of Jesus Christ, receive God’s love and mercy.

A READING FROM THE NEW TESTAMENT Kimo Akinaka

## Acts 7:55-60 *The Stoning of Stephen*

55But filled with the Holy Spirit, he gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. 56‘Look,’ he said, ‘I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!’ 57But they covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him. 58Then they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him; and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. 59While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, ‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.’ 60Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, ‘Lord, do not hold this sin against them.’ When he had said this, he died.

SERMON *“How to Open a Space for Hope”* Pastor Jeannie

 *The Stoning of Stephen,* the passage I have chosen to preach on this morning is, I admit, an unusual one—even for me. Although it has always been a part of the cycle of Bible readings scheduled for this fifth Sunday of Easter, it is not a passage I have ever preached on before. This time around, as I read through the selected readings, this is the one that caught my attention.

 Specifically, what caught my attention was the part of the story where the people are so deeply outraged and angry at Stephen and the vision he tells them he is seeing of Christ, that they cover their ears. They do not want to hear about Christ and his ways. To prevent him of telling them anymore, they rush at him and stone him to death.

 Stephen is, of course, the first Christian martyr. And his story is not only violent and ugly, it is also surprisingly brief. He dies because he will not renounce what he knows of Christ. Nor will he keep silent about what his faith calls him to proclaim about how we should live in the world. Stephen’s, you see, is a heart, a soul, and a life that is thoroughly immersed in the hope that love creates. Only God’s love can create hope. This is what Stephen’s story offers us. It is what he offered his own murderers—hope of redemption.

 What gets Stephen into trouble is not only that he was intent on proclaiming Christ, but that he was also not hesitant to call to account those around him who were not living up to the way they professed as right and good.

 As you may remember: Stephen was not a member of an exclusively Christian community. He and the other followers of *The Way* were still a part of a mixed community of traditional Jewish believers and those who still considered themselves Jewish but also recognized Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah. Stephen and the others like him were still members of a synagogue.

 In earlier chapters of this book, Acts of the Apostles, we learn that this community of believers were still organizing themselves along traditional lines. They were following the Laws of Moses even as they navigated the mixture of the people—a number of Greek followers as well as the Jewish community. Charity and justice was an important part of this community.

 So, when the Greek part of the community began to complain that their widows were not being treated fairly, not receiving their portion of food and assistance, it was decided to select for themselves a committee of seven men who would see to this. They were to be the ones to make sure that justice and charity was being served among the people. They were the first deacons in the church.

 Stephen was chosen to be one of the seven. At first, he was well regarded by all. It was said that he was a man who was “full of faith and the Holy Spirit,” “full of grace and power.”[6:5,8]

When it came time to commission them, Stephen and the others were called before the whole assembly to stand before the twelve Apostles who prayed and laid hands on them.

 That must have been a special moment for all concerned. If any of you have ever been in such a gathering, or been the recipient of such a blessing, it is a moment of deep feeling. Whether you are the one reaching out to lay your hand upon another in prayer, or the one being prayed for, it is a moment out of time; a moment when you and your community are one heart, one spirit, and your objective is whole and good.

 This is who Stephen was for this community. This is what the community was to him.

 So, what went wrong?

 The Bible tells us that Stephen, as he continued to proclaim Christ and remain faithful in his duties as one of the seven “did great wonders and signs among the people.” [6:8] However, it was not long before Stephen was challenged by some of the others. In chapter six, Acts tells us that “some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), Cyrenians, Alexandrians, and others of those from Cilicia and Asia, stood up and argued with Stephen. But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he spoke.” [6:9, 10]

 Whether it was because they were not as skillful at arguing their position, or were not happy about being shown the error of their ways, the people Stephen came into conflict with were determined to have their way. They began to secretly meet to plot against him. They began to tell lies about him saying that he blasphemed against Moses and God. They agitated and stirred-up peoples’ feelings against Stephen until at last he was arrested and brought to trial before the council.

 Stephen offers a defense that is a detailed history of God’s mighty and wondrous acts among and for the people. He tells them how they have been given everything—all of God’s love and attention—only to neglect and even abuse the very goodness that God has given them. The last straw comes when he points out that they were given “the law as ordained by angels,” but have not kept it. [7:53]

 At this point, Stephen is dragged out and the ugly deed is done.

 So, what has this story to do with us? And why are we hearing it in the weeks following Easter?

 One of the most uncomfortable things about the Bible is that it does not let any of us off the hook when it comes to who we are. And that is really the whole point of our faith, and of Easter in particular.

 We are meant to remember who we are; who the apostles were—our and their triumphs, but also the failures. Indeed, the whole point about Easter is God’s message to us that no matter how badly we go astray, God’s love and grace will not fail to cover us—Christ is our witness.

 I believe we are meant to hear this particular story about Stephen because his community, like ours, had only recently celebrated the resurrection.

His community, like ours, were not all touched with the same conviction about God’s grace. We can reasonably make this assumption because, as we have seen in Stephen’s story, violence was still a close ally for many people.

Rather than live together and learn how to include difference of experience, opinion—or the host of other differences we can have with one another—silencing difference through all sorts of means—especially violence—is a constant danger with us.

I believe we are meant to especially hear and meditate on this story so soon after Easter, while the urgency of God’s message of grace is still in our hearts and on our minds.

Hopefully, this is always on our minds, but it seems to me that this time of the year we should be especially well prepared to hear and to consider what this means to us individually, and as a community.

As I said earlier, I was especially moved by the image of the people covering their ears to prevent themselves from hearing anything else Stephen has to tell them. They especially do not want to hear about how the love and grace of Christ is what has triumphed. It is this very grace that can save them from the violence they are doing—not only to Stephen but to themselves and their lives together.

This is the point of Easter: that God’s response to the cross on which God’s own son hung in agony until he died—God’s response was ***not*** more violence and retribution, it was the forgiveness that Christ himself asked for with his dying breath.

This is what Stephen has learned and it is to this that he clings as he, too, asks forgiveness for those who are stoning him. He saves his last breath to ask for that same mercy for them.

As you and I make our way through our lives, even more than two thousand years removed from Stephen, we find ourselves coming upon the same challenges, the same sins that are so well recorded in the pages of the Bible and the lives of people like Stephen—in the life of Christ himself—and we wonder what it all means and what the point to all of it can possibly be.

And sometimes it seems so difficult to believe that righteousness will one day triumph over violence, that the light will finally defeat the darkness.

The thing to remember is that Christ has already done the hard part—the part that none of us could do. It is Christ who has already walked the road of violence, destruction, and death. The Son of God has already known what it is to suffer and die.

Our Good News is that Christ also knew what it was to love. He knew what it was like to yearn for a better life for his loved-ones—which is all of us. He knew this and he demonstrated it by his steady procession to Jerusalem and the cross.

This is the point of Stephen’s story and why it is so well preserved for us. Stephen, as we have seen, staked his whole life on the reality of God’s love for us. What we see in Stephen is his desire to not only follow Christ, but also to be a partner in Christ’s ministry of mercy and grace. Even in the midst of unspeakable ugliness, through Christ’s example Stephen had been taught how to speak words of grace and forgiveness.

Even when people covered their ears to prevent them from hearing his message, he would not stop offering them the love he had learned from Christ. He would not stop offering them his vision of a powerfully loving God; a God whose love and whose story has not been drowned out even after two thousand years of human history.

Stephen’s story is offered to us that we might also learn what he did, and do what he did.

Can we do it?—even in the face of the darkness we face today? That is our challenge.

Our Good News is that Stephen did it—we have his model…and there are many others, too. You can name some and so can I. It was said that Stephen was “full of grace and power.” Stephen was a great man. Was he unique? Is his example too much to hope for in our own lives?

Someone, a lot like Stephen, once said: “Anyone can be great because anyone can serve.” The man who said that was also killed in the service of love—but as we all know: Martin Luther King’s light did *not* go out because he had received the light he held from Christ, and his is the light that the world will not overcome.

Stephen and Martin, and so many more—those whose histories are written about, those who are known only to their families, and those who are only known to God. All of them have received and guarded the light for us as we must do for each other and those who come after us.

We are called together so that we can encourage each other—build each other up. One poet put it this way, he said, *“One of the most beautiful gifts in the world is the gift of encouragement. When someone encourages you, that person helps you over a threshold you might otherwise never have crossed on your own.”* [― John O'Donohue, [*Eternal Echoes: Celtic Reflections on Our Yearning to Belong*](https://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/130067)]

We are called to be together to encourage and to strengthen the light that was given to each of us, and all of us together. In this way, hope is maintained and a space is opened so that something new and of God can be planted and nurtured.

I know we are living in a strange time that often seems very dark. What I pray for is that you and I will participate in God’s love and mercy the way Stephen, Martin, and many others have. I hope we will see and rejoice in the space that hope can open-up in the world, a space that can crowd out violence, and encourage life and thriving for all God’s people.

I pray that you and I will do this together and will know the blessing of serving and making whole, for this is what has been done for us.

May this be so. Amen.

HYMN OF RESPONSE *“Great is Your Faithfulness”* Kristen Young

PRAYERS OF INTERCESSION & THE LORD’S PRAYER

*Let there be a brief time of silence after each petition.*

Let us unite our hearts in prayer, saying,

***God of resurrection, hear our prayer.***

For the church throughout the world,

that all who profess to honor the risen Lord

may be faithful in their witness

and courageous in their testimony to the way of Jesus:

***God of resurrection, hear our prayer.***

For pastors and teachers, that, by the power of the Holy Spirit,

they may seek to build the church upon Christ, the cornerstone,

and humbly lead in faithful service;

***God of resurrection, hear our prayer.***

For the governments of the world and its leaders.

that the nations may dwell in peace,

that good will may prevail over strife,

and people of faith may freely worship as their hearts direct;

***God of resurrection, hear our prayer.***

For rain and sun in proper measure,

and for abundant food and water for all who dwell upon the earth;

***God of resurrection, hear our prayer.***

For the sick and those in need,

and for any who are oppressed by wounds of the soul;

***God of resurrection, hear our prayer.***

For our neighbors

that we may live together in harmony,

and that strangers among us may find us to be hospitable friends;

***God of resurrection, hear our prayer.***

For our enemies, that their sins may be forgiven them

and that they may find your peace.

***God of resurrection, hear our prayer.***

Almighty God,

your son promised to grant whatever we ask in his name.

By your Holy Spirit empower us to minister to the world

as his faithful disciples

that our work may testify to what we pray

and show forth your eternal glory,

through Jesus who taught us to pray saying:

 “*Our Creator who art in heaven…”*

DOXOLOGY

Praise God from whom all blessings flow;

Praise God all creatures here below;

Alleluia! Alleluia!

Praise God above, ye heavenly host;

Creator, Christ and Holy Ghost.

Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!

**BENEDICTION**

 May Jesus Christ, the way the truth and the life be with you.

 May the Spirit empower you to serve in Christ’s name.

 May God, who raised Christ from the dead, keep you forevermore.

 ***Alleluia!***

POSTLUDE Jieun Kim Newland

*Fugue from Little Prelude and Fugue in F Major* | J.S. Bach (1685-1750)