Nu‘uanu Congregational Church, 2651 Pali Highway

 United Church of Christ Honolulu, Hawai’i 96817

Online Worship & Sermon March 22, 2020

INTRODUCTION Lori Yamashiro

Welcome to worship with Nu’uanu Congregational Church. Good morning, I am Lori Yamashiro, NCC’s Diaconate Chair. Welcome to NCC’s first Sunday worship online. I realize this is new and strange for many of us, but let us give thanks that we have the technology that allows us to faithfully meet, despite the challenges we are all living with right now.

 We do not know how long we will be having Sunday worship in this format. We pray it will not be too long, and that we will all be patient with one another as this chapter in our lives unfolds.

 For now, take a deep breath. Let the Holy Spirit rest on you and within you preparing all hearts and minds to worship God.

GREETING Pastor Jeannie

 The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Let us pray…

OPENING SENTENCES & READING OF HOLY SCRIPTURE

 As Lori has said, worshiping this way is “strange and new.” It is especially strange for me, as this is my first Sunday with you as your pastor! The thing is: this is what has been given to us—for now.

 This business of being together but spread-out all over Oahu at the same time reminded me of something I encountered at another church here on Oahu. When someone moved away, that person, that family, would not be lost or forgotten. They would move to the status of being one of the “Scattered Pilgrims,” and all of us would pray for them, and think of them as continuing in our church family as they continued on their journey in a distant place.

 That is what we are right now. We are still together in heart and spirit, but for now, we are simply spread-out—our journey with Christ and each other now includes the practice of “social distance.”

 We are still pilgrims—we are still travelers on a journey with Christ. He is before us, leading the way, and he will not leave us. Indeed, it is his spirit that is knitting us together even in this moment, and for all of our lives, into an important part of his body. Let that sink in to your mind and heart: that in Christ there is a unity that cannot be broken, neither can it be hindered—the love of God in Christ will always go forward, finding a way for all of us.

 Let us take a moment to hear that assurance from Holy Scripture. One of the lectionary readings for today is the 23rd Psalm. For this particular day, I will read it in the beautiful poetic language of the King James Version:

*1The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.*

*2He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.*

*3He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.*

*4Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.*

*5Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.*

*6Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.*

 Let’s read that again, all of us together. Let us *pray* this psalm together. As we do, let yourself receive the kind of comfort and reassurance that people of faith have received from these words, and God’s promise, for thousands of years:

*1The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.*

*2He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.*

*3He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.*

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*5Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.*

*6Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.*

SERMON

 As I was saying earlier, people of faith have known this psalm for more than four thousand years. These days, most of us associate the 23rd Psalm with funerals because that is where it is most often heard.

 Today, however, I would like to invite you to hear it as our most precious resource for daily living—*for these days we are living through right now*. Indeed, one of the most important things we can notice about this psalm is that God (through David) is not saying that the trials of life are going to magically vanish.

 Instead, what we are promised it that no matter what human life brings, God’s divine presence will accompany us through all our trials. God will bring us comfort and protection, an out-stretched hand that offers us courage and strength.

 This should not be too much of a surprise for any of us. The fact that we are meeting in this strange and wonderful way online is one more way in which we all can see and experience the persistent love of God in our lives.

 It is because of the love that drew us together in the first place that the NCC council and members of the various committees have scrambled to get together this time of worship.

 This moment together is a time of grace. It is a time to be reminded that we are all in this together, and we will help and support each other through it.

 Let us also accept and embrace the notion that although we may be in the midst of a pandemic, ***we are not without resources.*** Indeed, we are surrounded by deep and sincere offers of help and caring.

 There is one more thing I would also like to point to in the 23rd Psalm—the psalm describes a life that continues on, even in the face of adversity. The shepherd leads the flock onward, ***not to a place of hiding and seclusion***—social distance does NOT have to mean complete isolation.

 What I would like you to think and pray about is what this means for us today. We may not be able to go out into the world the way we did just a few days ago, but there is still so much we can do even from our “socially distant” location.

 This may be an opportunity to learn more about the kind of technology that is bringing you this video. Perhaps this is the time you needed to read and contemplate Holy Scripture. (We could even group text a Bible or book study together.) Maybe we are being given this time so to reach out to relatives and friends we have not been in contact with via the telephone, or even the old fashioned practice of writing a letter.

 This may even be the time to learn more about some of the critical topics in our community and our nation. One topic that comes to mind most immediately is our health care system. Now more than even, it is crucial for the well-being of all people that we have a way of tending to all who are in need of care. If nothing else, this should become especially clear to us all, and we are going to need everyone’s help and insight to put into place a system that will serve all of us well.

 There is still so much we can do, and so much we can still do together—even as we are scattered—because Christ has brought us together in one body, and that Christ continues on with us—even in this time of emergency and strangeness.

 This is the Good News Christ came to proclaim to us—that Christ is still leading us on toward new life. It is a promise that we can hold close, and in fact, I would like to challenge you to look all around you as life continues to unfold.

 I challenge you to notice and share the gift of love and compassion that you see in your life. I challenge you (and myself!) to find more ways of offering the love of God—even in these times of faithful social distancing. What can you and I come up with? How will God use us, even I these trying days?

 Friends, I pray the words of the 23rd Psalm will sink deeply into your hearts and lives, making you courageous and hope-filled. I pray you will experience God’s leading and sheltering love as the Good Shepherd leads us into fields of life and light.

 As I bring this first online homily to a close, let us remember to give thanks by praying the prayer that Jesus taught us, “Our Creator who is in heaven…”

CLOSING WORDS

 Thank you for praying and worshiping with me this morning (or whatever time you are seeing this). I would also like to ask that you remember your pledges and that this morning is the morning we gather-in our special offering for One Great Hour of Sharing. This is the offering that goes out to help people in need all over the country and the world.

 Through OGHS you engage in holistic development programs including health care, education, agriculture, food sustainability, micro-financing and women’s empowerment. Because the UCC relates in mutual partnership to churches and organizations through Global Ministries and worldwide response & recovery networks, your contributions to One Great Hour of Sharing put you in the right place at the right time for the relief, accompaniment and recovery of the most vulnerable. You meet immediate needs and you address the underlying causes that create those needs in the first place.

 I would like to thank you, in advance, for your generous contributions to One Great Hour of Sharing.

 As we bring our time together to a close, please keep in your thoughts and prayers all who are struggling—financially, emotionally, spiritually—all who are mourning, like the family of Edith Matsuoka who went to be with God this past Tuesday, and all who look to the body of Christ for reassurance and compassion. I pray that each one of us may be the presence of Christ in the world.

BENEDICTION

 May God bless you and keep you.

 May God’s face look upon you with grace.

 May you know the love and strength of Christ, now and always.

 Amen.