FIRST SUNDAY AFTER EPIPANY

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

January 10, 2021

*“The Voice”*

I began writing this sermon feeling the call to talk about the voice of God and its power, and what it means to have this power in our lives as people who have been baptized into life with Christ, into life eternal.

Last week, I spoke to you about Jesus’ baptism. This week, I wanted to talk about what *our* baptism can mean in our lives, and in the lives of the rest of God’s beloved people.

I wanted to begin our time together by talking about the voice of God, as we heard it in Psalm 29, as it thunders and roils throughout the world, pressing each person who experiences it into an attitude of awe and respect. We are told that this Divine Voice is powerful enough to break the cedars of Lebanon and cause earthquakes to rumble through the land.

The important thing to remember is: that this is the same voice that we heard last week at Jesus’ baptism—as he rose up from the waters of the Jordan River, a violence in the heavens also happened and tore open the clouds, but then the voice of love spoke and claimed Jesus as its own; Jesus was claimed by God as the beloved Son.

There is so much to say about what this can and should mean to us. However, as I write this I was also watching what has happened in Washington, D.C. as Congress attempted to certify the electoral college votes for the office of the President of our country, and I believe it is important for us to reflect on this incident and what it means—because our baptism into Christ Jesus has implications for us here. Yes—even in this incident, there are claims on us and the way we may come to understand it and enter into it.

As I write, thousands of our fellow country men and women have become an angry mob—some have called them domestic terrorists. This group of people broke into the Congressional chambers. They have disrupted what has been—for 245 years—the peaceful transition of power from one administration to the next. The ensuing mayhem has caused members of Congress to be evacuated, and has left four people dead, many others wounded, and many, many others traumatized. Many of the traumatized are us, we who have been so far away, yet been able to witness this by way of television.

As I wondered how to frame this tragedy for myself and for our church family, I came across an email written by one of my colleagues to her congregation. Her name is Rev. Moira Finley, and she wrote these words: *what happened today is mired in deep and complicated questions about who we have been, who we are, and who we truly want to be.*

Remembering Psalm 29, what I want to say is that God’s voice, of course, has power, but so do ours, and that it is with a particular voice that such questions are answered daily in our lives, and that, besides our own and God’s voice, there are also many other voices with which we care confronted every day of our lives.

The question is, of course: which voice are we going to listen to? Will it be a voice of truth, or a voice of lies, a voice of fear, or a voice of confident hope and compassion?

It is with our own voice, with the words we utter or write, that we create the world that we live in—it is the way we describe the world around us to ourselves. It is in the way we declare something good or something bad, something pleasant or ugly or sad—as we do this, we create a particular quality of reality through which we see and experience the world around us.

Alone, we tend to create realities that answer only our own egos, only our own needs, our own desires—often to the exclusion of most other possibilities and people.

However, we have an alternative. We can allow God’s voice to enter into our reality and change *everything*. The voice of God can even change who we are, who we have been, and (ultimately) who we *will be*, who we *want to be*.

What I want to say about the psalm and about our lives here and now in 2021, is that this is essentially what our baptism was—and *is*—all about: it is about embracing death to *this* life, and being raised to new life *in Christ*—God’s new reality for us and for the world*.*

Through our baptism, we die to the ways of the world and are turned, instead, on to pathways toward the real meaning of life—pathways of sharing and compassion, of hope and courage—the kind of courage which is best exemplified by an open hand, as opposed to a clenched fist.

Courage allows us to see possibility and relationship when we are confronted by strangers, or even people we know with whom we do not entirely agree. Compassionate courage allows us to see and welcome each other’s humanity, rather than harboring feelings of dread or loss. It allows us to take the awful but profound gamble of treating each other with justice and dignity.

Throughout baptism’s ritual of death and re-birth are the words of life that are prayed for us, baptizing us in the name of the Father/Mother God, our Savior Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit.

We are not passive in this ritual of the faith. We are called to give our assent—once again—to use our voice to affirm our desire:

* to receive Christ’s grace,
* to follow Christ,
* to resist oppression and evil, and to show love and justice
* and to bear witness to the work and word of Jesus Christ.

This is the promise and blessing of our baptism. This is what we gave voice to when we were baptized, and today, as we remember our baptism and reaffirm our commitment to it.

We use the breath God gives us to breathe meaning into our voices, whether raised in song, or in prayer, or praise, in speech to multitudes, or whispered prayers to confidants or God, or any other way we can use it. Using our voice is a real and important power that each of us has been given.

So, I hope you will continue this day to remember and contemplate what your baptism is in your life, what it continues to be. I hope you will allow yourself to accept the claim that has been made on you life when God claimed you through baptism.

And I pray that, hearing God’s voice throughout Holy Scripture, reaching out, over and over again, to comfort, gather-in and bless you. I pray that you will allow God’s voice to guide your life into habits of confidence and courage that can cause you to live-out your baptism, which is to say: to live with hope and love and righteousness. God bless you all. God bless our country. Amen.