FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

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*Second Wind* Ezekiel 37:1-17

In nine days, April 4, it will be the 55th anniversary of the assassination of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.  Many of us in this church probably remember where we were and what we were doing when the news of his death broke that day.

We also remember that in the days after, great numbers of African Americans took to the street.  In the throes of despair and fury, one hundred and twenty-five American cities exploded in violence after Dr. King’s death.

In Washington D.C., President Lyndon Johnson ordered 4,000 Army and National Guard troops to cordon off the White House.  While, nationally, 70,000 military service members and National Guardsmen were deployed in 29 states.

For many, it was as if our nation had descended into a valley of dry bones—a place where our dreams of peace and justice had gone to die.  However, instead of the quiet we usually associate with the dead, we, as a nation, experienced the angry grief of a people who thought their hope had died, but they had decided that they were not going to “go peacefully into that good night themselves.”

It was a sad and frightening time.

Actually, in truth, it was not unlike most times in our recent history.  If we are really clear-sighted about it, there has been a current of unrest running through our lives for most of our recent history—and by “recent” I am referring to a period longer than our own lifetimes.  Historically, linguistically, etymologically “recent “history is much longer that just our lifetimes.

Most of us tend to think of “recent” history as being just the few years we can remember, the few years in which we live and move and need and want,…and perhaps that is a big part of the problem.

If the only history in which we find value and hope in is in our own lives, our own efforts, our own achievement (or failure), then we effectively cut ourselves off from the lives, the struggles, and the progress of all the men and women who came before us, as well as from the hopes, and dreams of those who will come after us—the children, grandchildren, and on and on into the future.

This means that a valley of dry bones can be a place *or* it can also be a way of life—a life that longs to be stationary, that wants to make time to stand still, that wants life to *stay* still and unmoving.  Perhaps we come upon our own valley of dry bones whenever we are tempted to draw back, when we stop trying new things, stop listening to others who tell us the unique stories of their lives and experiences that are sometimes very different from our own.

We shut down.  Many are trying to turn back the clock and the calendar on our life together.  This involves not listening, not trying to understand the life stories of others.

We see that a great deal these days.  All across the country new laws are being passed that are intrusive in reproductive health care for women, and new laws like the ones that prohibit gender-affirmative health care for transgender people.

In December of last year, in Kentucky, state Sen. Karen Berg spoke openly about her son, Henry Berg-Brousseau. He is a transgender rights advocate whose story helped inspire opposition to trans-restrictive legislation in Kentucky.  Despite his story and Sen. Berg’s testimony to her colleagues, the law passed.

Unfortunately, Henry died in December at the age of 24.  He “long struggled with mental illness, not because he was trans but borne from his difficulty finding acceptance,” said Sen. Berg in a news release.  “This hatred building across the country weighed on him.  In one of our last conversations, he wondered if he was safe walking down the street.”  The cause of his death was suicide, she said.

Scholars tell us that the bones that are described in Ezekiel are not only stripped of all flesh, all muscle and all other semblance of human existence, in point of fact, the word used in this passage, describe bones in which the very marrow in them had also crumbled away into dust.  In other words, there was no hope for life to rise up or restart in this wasteland.  The bones Ezekiel saw were no more than a pile of useless, inaccessible calcium waiting to also turn into dust and blow away.

I imagine Berg-Brousseau, and others like him, often feel as though they are speaking their truth across fields of dry bones.  And, very often, their despair turns inward and they, too, become dry bones.  They, too, become the despair they have seen in others.

That is what Ezekiel’s dry bone story is all about.  It is about a human, a prophet—one who is used to the ways and the power of God—being confronted by his own acceptance of the limits of his own strength and capacity.  God has taken him into the valley of dry bones which is supposed to represent the whole of the Israelite people whose civilization has been almost completely destroyed—their cities were pounded into dust, their people carried into slavery in a foreign land of strange gods.  Even the great temple where God lived had been destroyed—everything they loved and held dear and sacred.  All had been taken from them.  These are the bones God showed Ezekiel.

“Mortal,” says God, “can these bones live?”

Does Ezekiel reply, “Yes!  You can make it so!”?  He does not.  Does he reply, “No!  They are bones, never to walk about again”?  He does not.

Instead, Ezekiel says: “Only you know, God. *It is entirely up to you*.”

Only God’s will can make it so.  Only God knows what hope can do through proclamation of God’s Word.  Only God knows what hope can come back into any person, or community, who stands beside the covered hole in the ground where are buried all his or her or our hopes and dreams.  And what one of us has not stood by such a graveside?

The thing is: God insists and continues to speak to us of hope, of new life, of resurrection.  For every follower of Christ, and every Christian community, resurrection is both a promise and a challenge.

It is a promise that opens us to God’s life, which inspires and empowers us every moment.  It is a challenge not to shy away from the sacrifices and struggles that we will inevitably face as we work for life and justice in our world—as we follow Christ who leads us to life—as we lean on and lean into our God who breathes God’s Holy Spirit into us and bids us rise and live.  Our God is life, a perpetual “second wind”, who will not leave us breathless and broken, but will constantly stand us on our feet and give us hope.

The question is: what will we do with this “second wind” of God and the Spirit?

On this particular Sunday, Prince Kuhio Day, I am reminded of something that most of us here also experienced in the late 1960s and ‘70s—the amazing re-emergence of Hawaiian history and culture.

Inspired by the struggle for freedom and dignity that was happening among many ethnic and community groups, fifty years ago, young kanaka maoli embraced the sacred “ha” in their bodies, and brought forward a renewed focus on Hawaiian language and music, hula, ocean wayfaring, discussions of Hawaiian identity and sovereignty, and the reclaiming of sacred land like the island of Kahoolawe. People called it the movement, the struggle, the Hawaiian Renaissance.

And it is not over yet, as most of us know. As we breathe the word under our breath the word Maunakea.

It is like breathing in and breathing out—we have to do both. There is always the next moment. With God, there is always a second wind waiting to be breathed in and out.

This is where a longer view of history becomes so important in our lives, and especially in our faith lives. We cannot let the struggles, the failures, or even the achievements—perhaps especially the achievements—of the past allow us to stop moving forward.

Even when the air grows thin, let us remember that the future is in the next breath, in the ha of God who is in our future, just as God is in our present and our past, and because of this, we need not be afraid of drawing breath and going on.

I opened this sermon with an observation on the death of Martin Luther King. Let us also remember his last sermon.

Speaking to the striking sanitation workers in Nashville, the night before his death, Dr. King seemed to foreshadow his own untimely passing, or at least to strike a particularly reflective note, ending with these now-historic words:

*“I’ve seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land. And I’m happy tonight. I’m not worried about anything. I’m not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.”*

Friends, let us gladly receive the “second wind” of God’s holy breath.  Let us continue our journey and our ministry as Nu’uanu Congregational Church.

Let this be so. Amen.