Nu’uanu Congregational Church

Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost

October 29, 2023

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FROM EARTH TO EARTH Deuteronomy 34:1–12

Psalm 90:1–6; 13–17

Matthew 22:34–40

In our study of Psalm 90 last Wednesday evening, we asked ourselves: “What is the good news announced in this psalm, and Susan Iha quickly responded: “The good news is that God is everlasting; God was there before we had life and God will be there after our lives are over.” We added that an additional piece of good news is that we have an eternal home with this God. We come from the earth and we return to the earth, but no matter what, no matter how difficult life on earth becomes for us, we have a dwelling place in God.

Besides the question as regards the good to news to be found in this psalm, there is another question I would have us consider, and it is this: “What about the news that we all must die?” We are all borne away, something this 80-year-old is beginning to really understand. As the words of a beloved hymn we will sing declares:

*Time, like an ever-rolling stream,*

*soon bears us all away;*

*We fly forgotten, as a dream*

*Fades at the opening day.*

In the words of our psalm:

*You turn us back to dust, and say,*

*“Turn back, you mortals.”*

*For a thousand years in your sight*

*are like yesterday when it is past,*

*or like a watch in the night.*

*You sweep them away; they are like a dream,*

*like grass that is renewed in the morning;*

*in the morning it flourishes and is renewed;*

*in the evening it fades and withers. —*Psalm 90:3–6

William Sloane Coffin, the outstanding preacher of The Riverside Church in New York City, once recalled a funeral he attended as a young person when one of his friends had died. When the minister intoned the words, “The Lord giveth, and the Lord taketh away, Blessed be the name of the Lord,” William Sloane Coffin thought to himself, “The news that the Lord takes away is not the bad news; the bad news is that if it is the Lord who giveth then we are simply guests on the earth, and life is not really ours to live just as we please.

Perhaps death is not the enemy we once thought it to be. After all, who would like to live forever? Church meetings might then last for days! Heaven forbid! No, death may be more friend than foe. For one thing, the fact that we must die, and not only us, but all of humankind, and all living beings, makes us all equal. I must die, you must die, but so must Donald Trump and President Biden and Bill Gates and the homeless guy we see on the street as we pass by. So must Moses die even without having had the privilege of entering the Promised Land, how unfair, as we heard in this morning’s reading from Deuteronomy.

I recall the times when I wandered through Graceland Cemetery in the city of Chicago. Have you ever seen that cemetery? This is where many of the notable political and business leaders of Chicago are buried. I was overwhelmed when I looked at the magnificent tombs of the rich and powerful— huge, magnificent structures made of granite and stone, each attempting to outdo the others. And I thought to myself: how silly for these human beings to think that they could possibly preserve all their prestige and status after death by erecting these monuments. The truth is that they are dead, or as we say in Hawai’i: *”make, die, dead.”* Contrast Graceland Cemetery with a Moravian cemetery. Moravians bury their dead in rows with identical tombstones in the order in which they die. And so, if a person dies, he or she might be buried right next to the person he or she has considered to be an enemy in life. I like that!

Death is the great equalizer and that, my friends, is good news. It means that no one is more valuable than anyone else. This truth was behind Nicholas Kristoff’s recent opinion piece in the *New York Times* (NY Times: We Must Not Kill Gazan Children to Try to Protect Israel’s Children, 10/21/23) when he declared that in the war between Hamas and Israel, there can be no hierarchy of human worth and value. In his article he quotes Giora Eiland, a former head of the Israeli National Security Council, who declared, “Gaza will become a place where no human being can exist,” and then added, “There is no other option for ensuring the security of the State of Israel.” It seems that Israel is well on the way to fulfilling this dreadful vision. Thus far, according to the United Nations, in this war 45% of Palestinian homes in Gaza have been destroyed or damaged. To me, this all sounds like a blueprint for genocide. If you watched with a critical eye the recent mainstream media coverage of the war, you might get the impression that the lives of Jewish children are more valuable than the lives of Palestinian children. This simply cannot be. We mourn the loss of life of both Jewish and Palestinian children, and the injustice is that Palestinian children are losing their lives more than tenfold the number of Jewish children. That makes our hearts break, surely, and perhaps can lead us to advocate even more strongly than we do for an immediate ceasefire to all the violence and killing. Yes, all human beings must die, but the prophet Isaiah gave his vision of a new Jerusalem in which God says:

*For I am about to create new heavens*

*and a new earth:*

*the former things shall not be remembered*

*or come to mind.*

*But be glad and rejoice forever*

*in what I am creating:*

*for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy,*

*and its people as a delight.*

*I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and delight in my people:*

*no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it,*

*or the cry of distress.*

*No more shall there be in it an infant that lives*

*but a few days,*

*or an old person who does not live out a lifetime.*

—Isaiah 65:17–19

Truly, this is a word for our time. President Netanyahu and President Biden; are you listening?

A final question, at least for this sermon, comes to mind: If every human being on earth faces the same destination, the destination of death, why bother? Why try to do good on the earth? Why try to stand up for the children, all the children, both Jewish and Palestinian, the poor, the oppressed, anyone who is considered less than human? If everyone must die, where is the incentive to do what it good and right and just? For me, that is the real question.

Forty years ago, I attended a lecture given by the process theologian Charles Hartshorne. I do not remember the lecture, but I do remember a question a student asked after he finished his presentation. The student asked: “Professor Hartshorne, is there anything in the Bible you would like to get rid of?” The good professor thought for a minute and then said something like this: “Why, yes, there is. I would like to get rid of all notions of heaven and hell, because if you have heaven and hell, you have people doing the right thing for the wrong reason. The problem is doing the right thing so that we might get into heaven, instead of doing the right thing without any thought of reward, doing the right thing simply because it is the right thing to do.

My friends, we try our best to do what is right simply because it is the right thing to do. We do the just and faithful thing because God is God and God has given all of us life. Life is a gift from God to be lived humanely and humbly and gratefully because God has given us the love and grace simply to be guests on the earth for as long as we live.

This coming Tuesday we will observe Halloween, All Hallow’s Eve, which is the eve before All Saints Day, November 1. And so we are invited to remember the Saints, saints like Queen Lili’uokalani who urged her followers not to take up arms against those who were intent on destroying the Hawaiian Kingdom, and our own Mrs. So and St. Francis, and Martin Luther King Jr. and all those loved ones who have gone before us. The saints we remember are those who simply did the right thing, the just thing, the faithful thing out of their gratitude to God for giving them the gift of life. Recalling the words we heard earlier from the Gospel of Matthew, not expecting anything in return, they were those who loved God with all their heart, and with all their soul, and all their mind, and yes, their neighbor as themselves. We are to do likewise.

I close with the last part of our reading from Psalm 90, which sums it all up. Praying to God, the psalmist pleads:

*Turn, O Lord! How long?*

*Have compassion on your servants!*

*Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love,*

*so that we may rejoice and be glad all our days.*

*Make us glad for as many days as you have*

*afflicted us,*

*and as many years as we have seen evil.*

*Let your work be manifest to your servants,*

*and your glorious power to their children.*

*Let the favor of the Lord be upon us,*

*and prosper for us the work of our hands—*

*O prosper the work of our hands.*

And let us pray a prayer offered by Josie Ing at the close

of our Lectionary Study last Wednesday:

Dear God,

in a world where it’s easy to sink into darkness

and despair, give us the hope and strength to

find the love, the joy, and the good that life has

to offer.

Remind us that our purpose is bigger than

ourselves and keep us on a path to building a

more compassionate world.

Amen.