Nu’uanu Congregational Church

July 19, 2020

SEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

*“The Rock”* Jeannie D. Thompson

*Isaiah 44:6-8*

*6Thus says the Lord, the King of Israel, and his Redeemer, the Lord of hosts: I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no god. 7Who is like me? Let them proclaim it, let them declare and set it forth before me. Who has announced from of old the things to come? Let them tell us what is yet to be. 8Do not fear, or be afraid; have I not told you from of old and declared it? You are my witnesses! Is there any god besides me? There is no other rock; I know not one.*

This past Friday, July 17th, our country lost two of its greatest men: the Rev. Dr. C.T. Vivian, and Congressman John Lewis. Mr. Lewis was one of the original Freedom Riders who challenged segregated interstate travel in the South in 1961.

Both were black men who committed themselves to non-violent protests against segregation and racial discrimination as part of the 1960’s Civil Rights movement for equality. What this means is that both were “on the front lines of the bloody campaign to end Jim Crow laws.”

Both knew they could be killed at any time for the work they did. Both suffered beatings from white vigilante mobs, and law enforcement officers. They were also spat upon and burned with cigarettes. Mr. Lewis even suffered a fractured skull as he, and others, tried to walk across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama to demand voting rights for black citizens.

What makes a man or woman willing to face the hatred and violence of overwhelming odds? What fosters such hope? What keeps alive their dream for a better future?

These are the questions the men like Lewis and Vivian had to answer for themselves, and they were able to do so because there were others, throughout history who had done so, and both Lewis and Vivian knew about them because they were both men of faith who knew their Bible.

So they knew about countless others who had found the resources they needed from the promise of God’s mercy and justice. They knew about the character of God because they had read it, heard it proclaimed, and chose to build their life—*chose* to rest all their hopes that God’s words of compassion and justice—perhaps the very words we heard this morning—were for them, too. In the words of Isaiah and in many other stories of the Bible, Lewis, Vivian and countless others have found the rock upon which they could build their lives, and also their understanding of who they were—who God had made them to be.

C.T. Vivian, John Lewis, Martin Luther King, and so many others—including the ancient Israelites—were able to do what they did to recover their sense of self and self-worth because *they were told by God who they were*, and to whom they belonged, and it did not come even close to what they were being told by the culture that surrounded them, or the world in which they lived.

Like many of the black people of the American South in the last century, the people Isaiah knew and spoke God’s words to were people who did not know themselves to be anything more than what they were told they were by others. The Israelites were, at this point in their history, a nation of slaves who had been vanquished and marched-off from their homeland to serve the victors. Through the daily grind of living under the thumb of others, the people had come to think of themselves in just that way. For many, their identity was that of a slave, a broken people who could not hope for more.

The mission, which we see in the words God gives Isaiah, is help the Israelites formulate for themselves a new way of thinking of themselves, a new identity—or even better: the renewal of the identity they had had all along.

This renewal of the people begins, says Isaiah, with the recovery of their own mission in the world. God has called upon them from of old to be God’s witness in the world. This means that their own identity is to be understood in relation to *the character of God*.

Despite what has happened to them, God has not changed. Their history with God has not changed. God is still the redeemer they have always known, and they are called to testify to God’s liberative action in their lives which is a continuation of God’s redemptive action in the past.

Speaking to people who have been deeply wounded, God speaks consolation to the people saying: “Do not be afraid” (v. 8). The Redeemer God who has done marvelous things in the past, will once more act to save the exiles from their dire situation. Indeed, the God who has saved them in the past will do so again—this is who God is; this is the way God acts in their lives.

This is the Rock of Salvation upon which they are invited to stand, or cling to, or…whatever it takes. *This* is the identity they are meant to have. *This God, this love* this is reality the Israelites are meant to live out of.

The ancient Israelites had only to remember their own history and the long and enduring relationship God has had with them. They needed only to remember the Passover, and the journey out of Egypt. They could go even further back to remember Abraham and Sarah, and how two unlikely people gave rise to a nation because God was faithful to God’s word with them. They had only to remember the glory days of King David—his triumphs despite great odds.

This is their heritage.

*This is the way they are to think of themselves and who they are*: they are God’s beloved people whom God will redeem yet again.

The hardest part of human living, I think, is holding on to the reality of who we are, and to whom we belong. The reason this is so hard is because there are always those who will insist that we conform to their version of the world around us.

Usually, it is a world that is arranged to benefit the few at the expense of the many. In our own context, in recent years it has been especially impressed upon us that greed, self-interest, self-centeredness on a national and even international scale—*this* is what is supposed to be our reality. This is supposed to be our national slogan and character. Anything less than this is what we are told we are to resist. Compassion and generosity is for losers, we are told; a sign of weakness that should be discarded. Justice is what puts us and ours on top even if it disadvantages others or destroys the environment. We need to be tough and tough-minded.

What Isaiah tells the people of his time, is the same message that Lewis and Vivian heard in their time, and what we are to hear in ours: that we need not be afraid of anything because the God we worship is greater than greed, and selfishness, and self-centeredness, so we need not be afraid that we will be lost or forgotten in the rush and tumble of life.

The good news is that we need not fear or be anxious because the God who loved and redeemed the Israelites is the God who also loves and longs to strengthen us; that this is the God who saves, redeems, liberates, frees us. This is our rock.

The question we, and every generation must answer is: where, then, will we build our life; on whom will we place our trust and our hopes?

What Isaiah said to the Israelites, what he said to Vivian and Lewis, and what he says to us are these words that God gave him for all of God’s people for all time:

*Do not fear, or be afraid;
   have I not told you from of old and declared it?
   You are my witnesses!
Is there any god besides me?
   There is no other rock; I know not one.*

To these words of good news, let the people of God say: Amen!