Nu’uanu Congregational Church

July 5, 2020

FIFTEH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

*“People, Look Up”*

**Isaiah 55:10-13**

*For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,
   and do not return there until they have watered the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout,
   giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;
   it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
   and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.*

 *For you shall go out in joy,
   and be led back in peace;
the mountains and the hills before you
   shall burst into song,
   and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.
Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress;
   instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle;
and it shall be to the Lord for a memorial,
   for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.*

Welcome back, Church! It is so good to see all of your faces…even if it is only from the nose-up. A few video worship Sundays ago, Lori Yamashiro told us that this morning would arrive but that we were going to give everyone a chance to go to the beauty shop (or barber) first.

I am so glad we were all given the time to do that because that I will be how I will get to know you: by your eyes and your hair!

Oh well, being able to greet the tops of your heads is still such a blessing—welcome back into your church home. I don’t know if anyone else was keeping count, but we worshiped online for *fifteen* Sundays! I hope you saw last Sunday’s worship because Lori took some time to thank everyone who contributed to that effort.

I am still amazed at how quickly things came together so that we could offer an online service. It was nothing that any of us had done before, but it happened, and it happened quite beautifully, too.

You know: most of the time, I have to slow down and pay attention before I can discern God’s movement in my life. This time, there was no subtlety to God’s presence. In this case, God’s presence and purpose was like thunder. It was like the way God spoke to Moses just before he was given the Ten Commandments.

I do not mean that the earth trembled and shook with God’s power. Rather, there was real-time movement—in my mind, heart, and life, and in the lives of many of the members of our church. I can, with some certainty, assume that this was also true for people in many other churches throughout the world.

It is amazing and humbling to think about how, at least for a while, we were all on the same page throughout the world: we were all dedicated to maintaining our relationships, our communities, despite (and perhaps even because of) the safety concerns with which we are all still working through. Think about it: when the challenge came, we turned to the best and most faithful resource we have: our assurance that God’s Holy Spirit was going to accompany, encourage, and equip us for these weeks and months of change and uncertainty.

By the way, it is also a blessing to see you here, *in your masks*. It is good to know that you are taking care of yourself, *and* that you care enough for others to inconvenience yourself.

This is how I have come to think of the masks we are all wearing—as a small sacrifice of time and effort for the common good. This is an important part of what Christ taught and hoped for us.

Having said all of that, it must also be acknowledged that we have been, and are still in a very real way, people who have been displaced.

For a while, we were kept from being in this Sanctuary. Many of us did not leave our homes for all of that time. What is more: some of the friends we were used to sitting beside, or greeting after church at coffee time, are not here either. They have made the choice to remain at home where they feel the safest—and this is a good thing even though we miss them.

We are here, together again, but it is different, and will be for some time to come. What I am getting at, and want to acknowledge, is that the displacement we have all felt was, and continues to be, very real indeed. Whether we like it or not, even though we are here, we are in a new place, and so much of what was habit or routine practice is being modified by health and safety protocols. We are here, but much is new and different.

The Bible, of course, is no stranger to displacement. In fact, when you think about it, the people of the Bible are always in transition from one place to another. In one story after another—starting in Eden and continuing on—we are given stories of people being displaced, people travelling on—everyone seems to be on their way to a different place

In the passage we just heard from the Hebrew Bible—the Book of the Prophet Isaiah—God is sending an important and joyful message to the Israelites—they, too, were going to travel.

You see, the Israelites had been displaced from their historical home. They were living in Babylon and had been for some time. God’s message to them was that their time of exile was over. The whole nation had been conquered by the Babylonians who had sacked Jerusalem, destroyed the Temple, and carried off most of the people into captivity in Babylon. Dislocation, alienation, being strangers in a strange land—all of this was to end.

The thing is: all of that had happened a long time ago. The people Isaiah was speaking to had lived in Babylon for almost three generations. Many of the people who first heard Isaiah’s words of promise and return had been born there. They had not, like their parents and grandparents, known what it was like to live free and in Jerusalem—Babylon was all they knew.

It was to these people that Isaiah made this amazing announcement that they were going home:

*For you shall go out in joy,
   and be led back in peace;
the mountains and the hills before you
   shall burst into song,
   and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.* [v. 12]

 Leaving was not going to be easy. In fact, I cannot help but believe that there were some who did not like the thought of leaving. *This* place was home to them, not Jerusalem. Isn’t it strange how quickly we can become used to new ways—especially when we have no choice?

The question becomes: why? Why do that have to leave a place they have come to know as their home? Why uproot themselves and their families?

The answer is that the people are called to listen and come, because God is about to reestablish the covenant made so long ago with God’s special witness, the great David, he who was “leader and commander for the peoples” (Is. 55:4).

That nearly 500-year-old promise made to David that the covenant with God would never end [2 Sam. 7] is now reinstituted for the exiles, for those who have nearly forgotten what God had promised, who need a reminder of past promises out of which they must live. These are people who must also be reminded that God’s word is steadfast and faithful, and that God will always reach out to them and bring them into joy.

Indeed, their homecoming was to be so joyful that even creation was going to rejoice along with them. Even more than that, Isaiah reminds them that this homecoming is not only for them, it is for the whole world which will see God’s faithfulness—their good news will be God’s glory…and theirs!

So, even these people, these who have never lived in Jerusalem, these who have only known Babylon, they were a part of the long history God has had with their ancestors. They will also be a part of God’s future.

Remember also, God tells them, that God’s ways are not like our ways [v.9]. Yet, this is also the God whose thoughts will come down to us, just as rain and snow come down upon the earth. God’s thoughts will come down causing the earth to flourish and making it possible for all beings and animals to be fed and nourished.

This is a world that is brimming with beauty and life—this is the world God is calling the people to live in. First, they must leave where they are—that means leaving behind a place, but also, they must leave behind a way of being in the world. They must, once again, remember themselves as God’s beloved people for whom God has a future and an infinite life of hope and promise.

Earlier, I said that just about everyone in the Bible is displaced, everyone is sent out and away from where they have been:

Adam and Eve.

Abraham and Sarah.

Ishmael.

Jacob.

The Hebrew Slaves in Egypt.

Mary and Joseph.

Just about every story is the story of travel, danger, being immigrants and aliens. And yet, when you read through their stories what you find are people who on their way to their new home.

Perhaps we are, too. We are God’s people, and if we truly believe that we are, and that God loves us, then perhaps this is the beginning of a new home—a new life—to which we are being led.

Yes, we are back in our Sanctuary—but it is different, and it will be from now on. We are back, and yet we are in a new place. The one constant is that God has been with us every step of the way so far, and every indication is that God will continue to abide with us as we make our way forward.

So, people, look up. Look and see the skies here in Nu’uanu Valley that very often bring us showers. Look around at how those showers fill the valley with lush green foliage and flowers. We are back home with God, *and* we are on the threshold of a new life with God. So, look up, feel the sun or mist on your face, and rejoice, clap your hands, and give thanks.

Amen.