SECOND SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

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June 6, 2021

*“They Shall Return to Praise”*

Isaiah 60:1-6

Welcome back to your church home. As you can see, little has changed here in the Sanctuary. We, ourselves, look much the same—just a year older.

Yet, we all know that much has changed in the last ten months since we have worshiped in-person, like this. A great deal throughout the world has changed, and even though we *look* the same, we, too, *have* changed—*inside*—maybe in ways that we do not even yet realize. This was inevitable. We have all gone through a thoroughly unusual year.

What I would like to acknowledge—on this first Sunday back in our Sanctuary again—is that: we did *not* go through it alone. I want to give thanks to the diaconate and their telephone calls with all of us. Through their ministry, we have continued to share our joys and sorrows, and we have been reminded that this really is a group of people who have been called together by God. We really have been blessed with a deep sense of compassion, affection, and appreciation for one another.

We are, in fact, *more* than the sum of our parts. We are the body of Christ.

Let that sink in for a moment. We. Are. The. Body. Of. Christ—in fact, let’s say that together, everybody together: We are the body of Christ! Oh my goodness, are you sure? Try it again, fill your lungs with air, no matter what kind of mask you are wearing. Now: We are the body of Christ.

Try it again; Let us pretend that we are all 6 years old. We have been cooped up inside for 10 months. Inside is a place where we do not run and play and we do not raise our voices. Suddenly, we are outside and we are on our home turf and our parents have said, “All right, you can use your outside voices.” Now let us try that again: We are the body of Christ. Very good! Now stay in our socially distanced places, but I want you to look across the aisle and say it to each other!

Yes, we are, indeed, the body of Christ. What this means is that a good portion of the affection and caring we have received *and* given has risen out of the stirring of Christ’s gift to us. It has come to us out of the Holy Spirit within us and between us, and the Spirit’s gift to us, which is God’s love. It is this love that binds us together, and will go with us into the future.

I wanted that to be the message for this morning because even though we are back here at home: as I was saying earlier, home is *not* what it used to be, it never is. Things are perceptibly different, like the face coverings all of us are wearing.

Rather than let that upset us or make us hesitate, I wanted us to hear the same message that was given to a group of people facing changes and in understanding of home and life, just as we are.

Our ancestors in the faith, the ancient Israelites to whom Isaiah was speaking in the passage we just heard was facing a future they could neither see nor understand. But God had some words and some promises for them, and I wanted us to hear it so that we may come to terms for ourselves and our within context the same message of hope and victory that revitalized and rebuilt a nation that had gone through even more hardship and loss than we can imagine.

As you may remember, Isaiah was charged with helping the Israelites regroup themselves and return to their home after a long sojourn in Babylon. They had been there long enough for a couple of generations to have lived there. But now, the Persian King, Cyrus the Great, had declared their captivity was over, and they could return to their homeland.

After such a long time away from home, many were reluctant. They had grown used to the life they had lived in Babylon. Some did not know any other life—what kind of claim did that homeland have on such people?

The simple answer is that it was their home—their *true* home—in the sense that it was the place where their future with God would unfold for them.

For the ancient Israelites, Isaiah promises wealth, and prestige. He describes it in the wealth of his day: “a multitude of camels,” the “abundance of the sea,” and dignitaries from foreign lands subjugating themselves and bringing gold and precious frankincense as gifts to lay before the Israelites.

The implication is that their future is going to be filled with abundance, indeed, *riches*. And with this wealth will also come esteem among the nations.

Actually, what Isaiah describes is more than respect. Isaiah sees a future where the Israelites will regain their position as a military and political force. You see: Isaiah is not only promising a return home. He is promising a victorious return wherein the once oppressed and beleaguered group of people will see their fortunes reversed: indeed, says Isaiah, they will rise victorious over all who oppressed and opposed them.

I chose this passage for this morning because I believe, in a very real way, God wants us to hear the same message of return because it is also a deeply joyous return that is promised. The scene that is described is nothing less than a parade filled with light and the sounds of confidence and enthusiasm for life, for the future, for the good fortunes of the people.

This is the message I wanted us to hear and reflect on together.

So, are we victors of some sort?

Well,…yes. Afterall, we are here, together. For some reason, we have been spared the death virus that took so many lives here in this country and around the world. We are here together. We are home once more, and even with our masks on, we can breath a sigh of relief and thanksgiving.

So does this mean that all of the riches of heaven are waiting for us in this new chapter of our lives?

The only way I can answer that, the only way I *want* to answer that for you, is to ask you this: are these the same riches—these piles of gold and other human-made signs of wealth—are they the same ones Christ has offered to us? Or is there something else to the riches of heaven that are given to us through Christ?

The Rev. Dr. Michael J. Chan has answered this question in this way in a commentary that he wrote a few months ago. He writes that as followers of Christ, we are offered tremendous power and wealth, however:

*“not in order that [we may] subjugate others, but rather that the Christian might empty himself, take on the form of a servant, and in every way deal with his neighbor as he sees that God through Christ has dealt and still deals with him. The divine power we have in Christ, in other words, is power for the neighbor.”*

This is the message of hope I believe God wants us to hear. It is a message of return and of reversal of fortune, and I believe this is *our* message to hold on to and from which we may gain confidence, strength, and courage for our future. We have all been through a great deal, but God has brought us through and we are all still together.

What is more, we have learned how important and beloved we are to one another—something we are not likely to take for granted again. Most of all, we have learned, again, that God’s word is good and to be trusted, and we have seen evidence of this in the way we have found ways to stay connected and faithful to one another and Christ.

Finally, as we are gathered together again, we, too, are facing a future of promise. In the intervening months, we have set for ourselves a new direction—a new future for our church and our community.

We have done this with the guidance of prayer and with one another’s help and insight. And I believe the riches of heaven are waiting for us in that new future wherein we discover, once again, what it means to be in mission, what it means to be led by Christ into service and blessing.

So, once again: welcome home!

And may we all give thanks for our gracious Creator who has brought us this far, and goes with us into the future! Amen.