FIRST SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

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*“Promise, Power and Purpose”* Isaiah 43:1-7

As most of us know, in our tradition of worshiping and hearing the story of Christ, every Sunday has a particular name that announces to us which part of the story of Christ we are going to be told. This Sunday is the known as the First Sunday After Epiphany. It is also the Sunday we remember and celebrate Jesus’ baptism in the Jordan River.

Having said that, I acknowledge that we did not hear a passage from the Gospels, nor any other part of the New Testament that specifically tells that part of the story. So, what am I saying about the passage I *did* select for this Sunday?

…To answer that question, I should tell you that lately, I have been experiencing the Bible in a slightly different way than I have before. And so, I have been thinking and writing about the Bible a little differently.

These days, I find myself wondering—in a new way and with a new sense of wonder—what it was like for the people of the Bible—ie. the characters in the Bible stories…the Josephs and Marys, the Noahs and the Jacobs, and the many, many others. What was it like for them when they heard these stories, or when they heard these proclamations and promises about their lives and their future? What was it like to be visited by an angel? What was it like to be in the midst of exile and captivity and adamantly and decisively *promised* that my suffering was over, my exile at an end, and a new beginning was very near, if not already on the horizon?

On this particular Sunday, I find myself wondering how Jesus heard the Scripture that was just read to us from the book of Isaiah.

On this particular Sunday, the First Sunday After Epiphany, I am remembering that something had been revealed, something important had been made obvious for all the world to see. Creation and all that is in it, has received an “epiphany.”

It is Jesus who was revealed after he was baptized by John the Baptist in the Jordan River. The Gospel of Luke tells us that after he rose from the watery grave of baptism and *“was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’”* [Luke 3:21b-22]

I cannot help but wonder if at that moment, of the many thoughts that might have been rushing through his heart and mind, if one of them was his memory of Scripture—*this* Scripture in particular (from Isaiah).

Did Jesus remember God’s emphatic promises of love and protection? Isaiah’s prophecy so many centuries earlier told the people of God’s deep and passionate love for them. This was a love that would go to tremendous lengths to secure their freedom. Was it divine hyperbole, or would God really give other peoples to ransom God’s beloved people?

As Jesus heard the fluttering wings of above him—the Holy Spirit descending to place an exclamation mark on God’s declaration of his identity and belovedness—was Jesus thinking of Isaiah’s words from God about how faithfully God would save all of God’s beloved people? God’s promise was rescue from watery depths of chaos, from flame and fire. Did Jesus remember God’s promise to reunite the people, to rescue them from the diaspora, and gather together all of the sons and daughters displaced through war, and through former faithlessness?

Was it ringing in his ears and his heart, that part of where God speaks about a love so grand and bold, but also hugely intimate—a love that recalls how God’s own effort formed the human creature, and called each one by name, like an attentive and loving parent.

Did Jesus remember all, or even *any* of these wonderful words of love and grace that Isaiah had proclaimed so many centuries before his birth?

We are not told…explicitly. However, later on in Jesus’ story, Luke tells us that when he went back to Nazareth and was asked to read from Scripture in the synagogue, he chose to read from the Book of Isaiah. [Lk. 4:14-40] He *knew* this Scripture, too. He knew God’s power and promise.

Did he wonder if the power and promise of this morning’s passage was going to be true for him too? Or did he hear Isaiah’s promises knowing that God had fulfilled *that* promise many centuries ago? God had acted and had rescued the people of *that* time and place in ways that were particular to their needs.

We cannot know for sure, but what we can know is that these words to a people being held captive and suffering so many centuries before his own time—God’s words of the power and desire to rescue and heal, God’s power and desire for the people to know of God’s love—all of these words and promises, Jesus knew they were timeless and therefore still good.

Jesus knew that God’s love and grace was not only to *one* group of people at one time in the history of the world. God’s love and promise to walk beside us, to shelter us and make our hearts, and spirits, and lives whole—this promise is as good in his day as it was for the captives in Babylon that Isaiah first knew. God’s promise and hope was still as good for the people living under the harsh conditions of Roman occupation, whom Jesus knew and walked among. And Christ knows that God’s love and hope is still true for us today.

That is our Good News—that God is just as desirous of rescuing each and every one of us, and all of us together *now* as God was all those years ago, among all those other peoples and places.

…It is really nice being here in this Sanctuary. Before I became your pastor (a couple of years ago), I would make it a point to revisit the Watanabe windows each time I found myself here for some church event. I have always loved them.

I know you love this sacred place, too, and would like for us to be back in it together.

I know these past couple of years have been filled with stress and anxiety regarding the virus and the way it continues to rampage through every people and country on the planet.

We have all been worried for our families and for ourselves. We have given-up so many of the comforts, even what seemed to be small comforts like going out for a walk, or to a coffee shop, or being with family and friends for a meal. I do not think any of us fully realized how much those small, simple comforts meant to us, until we had to stop doing them.

Do you suppose that the same promise God made to the people through Isaiah’s prophesy all those centuries ago is true for us, too, and in this context? As inconvenient and depressing as our lives have been, we must admit we have *not* been in the dire straits as the people described in Isaiah, nor in the Roman occupied Jerusalem of Jesus’ day.

How then are *we* supposed to hear this Scripture?

What I am hoping and praying for you and for me, is that we will really take Isaiah’s words of promise and love to heart and to allow ourselves to believe that God wants to rescue us from *every* danger—the ones that are physical and physically destructive, but also the “smaller,” sneaky ones, the ones that grind down on us day-after-day.

What I pray we hear is God’s desire to also rescue us, too. God wants to save us from frustration, impatience, and even boredom. It is these things that can cause us to lose hope, which can separate us from each other, and from God.

*That* is our river that is flooding-over and threatening us. *That* is the fire billowing smoke on our horizon.

What I want us to hear, and embrace is that Isaiah’s prophesy of love and hope is for all peoples in every age—including ours—all people whose lives are threatened by feelings of a lack of power and purpose—even if it is only for a while, those lives, hearts and spirits that have begun to doubt God’s promise of life—even life eternal.

It is even for us who are *not* suffering the way we read the ancient Israelites were suffering, or even the people we know of here in this time and place because, and here is some good news: God does not weigh your suffering against mine (or anyone else’s) and then turn toward the one that “seems” more dire or “deserving.”

God sees us *both*. God sees us *all*, and our good news is that we are all claimed by God, and *all of our* suffering, all of it, is important to God. And because of this, even this life—right now, as we are living it; as we are waiting and hoping for better news—God is blessing us and this life, and wants us to hear and believe the same words that Jesus heard, *“You are my Child, the beloved…”* so that we, too, may go on to live with power and purpose, because that is what being claimed and loved by God brings.

God’s declaration to the ancient Israelites gave them the courage and resolve to rebuild their homes and lives. Jesus also was able to face what laid ahead for him, too. And so can we. So can each and every one of us who have heard even a whisper of the promise Isaiah heard and proclaimed to the Israelites, or that Jesus heard and was able to build his life on for the love of God and God’s beloved people.

So, my prayer for us is that we will hear God’s promise with all our hearts, souls, and minds. I pray that we will embrace the power God’s love is offering us. Finally, I pray we will rejoice in the purpose love brings into our lives as individuals, but also as Nu’uanu Congregational Church.

May this be so. Amen.