FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

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*“Escaping the Present”* Isaiah 43:16-21

In the Bible, as in life, time is important. The way we use time—our time upon the earth, the way we use our lives—this is all important. The Bible, or more to the point, God is also concerned with the progress we make toward home—this is what is to occupy the bulk of our time and effort. We are to journey toward our home with God—that is to say: to a place of safety and welcome; a place where we are free to be and to become the people God has made us to be.

And so we find ourselves, throughout the Bible, being invited, instructed, led, cajoled, entreated and encouraged to return home. All sorts of provisions are made so that God’s people will always find their steps turning toward home. One Old Testament scholar has even called it, “the poetry of homecoming.”

So it is with the passage we just heard. Indeed, Isaiah does an interesting dance between the home of the past and the home waiting, being prepared in the future. On the one hand, he tells his listeners, remember the mighty deeds of salvation and rescue God has performed to get you where you are.

And then he takes them all the way back to Egypt—

*Do* remember, he says. Remember the Egyptian army and the way it was swallowed-up in the Sea of Reeds. In other words: *do* remember how you were a ragtag bunch of refugees fleeing before the mighty Egyptians. Do remember that there was no way you could have put up a fight against such a force.

*Do* remember that it took God’s special attention and intervention to save you. Remember all of this good stuff because it proves that ours is a God who can be depended on. This is the God who is stronger than anything or anyone you know, a God who has the power, and the *desire*, to shape an amazing future for you.

And just as Isaiah’s listeners were warming to the memory of their ancestors’ rescue, just as they are recalling the Passover feast they still celebrate—even there in Babylon—commemorating that chapter of their history, Isaiah says—in the very same breath—do *not* remember. “*Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old.”* [v.18]

Of course, what he is really saying to them is: do *not* look around at your current situation. Do not dwell on the fact that you are far from your homeland which is still devastated, nor about the destroyed Temple back in Jerusalem.

Do not remember that you and your families are still refugees—just like your ancestors—except that you are also still captives, and so far, God has not made any kind of promise about a new Moses coming after you.

Of course, Isaiah’s concerns are actually about the peoples’ attachment to their *present* circumstances. He is talking to them about their current life in Babylon. They have been there for quite a while—the Babylonian captivity having lasted some seventy years.

Thus, many of the people Isaiah was prophesying for had been born there. Many only knew Israel by the stories told by their parents and grandparents. In all that time in captivity, they had built new lives for themselves.

And so, Isaiah’s task is to get them ready to move on. He needs to prepare them to leave their present life, and everything they have known, in order to receive the “new thing” God is doing; in order to *be* the new people God is forming them to be. And to receive this, the faithful of God must come to terms with how their *present* environment and how it is limiting them. They must escape their present, they must break free of what they have come to know.

Captives in Babylon is *not* who they are—this is neither their identity, nor their destiny. Despite everything they may currently have, and everything they have known, God is calling the people to bring an end to their exile.

It is always like that with God. God is always calling us out further, and into something new—and with God, the “new” thing, and we hear their story, and these words that Isaiah offered to his people so many centuries ago because—Alright, I am just going to have to say, this is a really bad paragraph. Just cross this out. Pretend I did not write it.

What God is saying to the people through Isaiah is that it is time to get ready. It is time to lift yourselves out of the routine of your lives because God is doing a new thing. And God knows how entrenched we can become in routines that we have. But now it is time to go. It is time to leave what we know, leave the comfort and familiarity that we know. That is a difficult thing. *Leave comfort and familiarity,* what is that? That hardly sounds like good news.

During the past two years, you and I have lived within a kind of exile, haven’t we? Haven’t we felt like that? We have been taken out of our regular routines. We were even exiled from being here in our Sanctuary, except for a month here and there.

In those months, that turned into years, we longed for so many things: being able to gather and have a meal with family and friends, being able to leave the house and walk down the street without a mask. All though, I must admit, I have a whole wardrobe of these things (masks) now. This has become my routine, my comfort and familiarity.

Despite all that we have longed for, we have developed new habits and even new routines. We have learned to manage.

Despite all that has happened, we are still here. Indeed, we are still together, and I hope you can and do rejoice in that. Even if they have not been completely satisfying, we must still acknowledge that we have found ways to stay in contact, and to support one another and our families—and I hope you cherish what you have accomplished because new ways are rarely easy, and only very seldom welcome.

Yet, God is calling us to *more* newness, but before we groan at the thought and wonder, “good grief, what next?!” Let us remember that God’s desire is always to draw us closer. Let us remember what the ancient Israelites finally remembered through Isaiah’s words for them: God was not just calling them—and us—into something new. God is calling us *back*. We are being called *out* of exile, and back to our home, our *real* home.

And perhaps, what we are being called to do is to take our present circumstances—our hopes, and even our disappointments—and allow God to reshape these things into our future life, our future together.

Have you longed to be back here with your friends? Have you found a new appreciation for what it means to have a place like this to gather and to be at home?

Well, then perhaps our good news is that our church home is also on track to become even more of a presence in the life of the Nu’uanu community. In a way, we are going back to who we have always been. We are going to celebrate and be the congregation that built a dormitory so that neighbor island men and women would have a safe, comfortable place to live as they pursued education and training here on Oahu.

We are renewing that spirit of mission and ministry that has always been a part of who we are, but we can only go there again if we are willing to leave our present comforts—that is the way the future always comes upon us. That is what the future always requires.

We are going to go home to God, but this time we will go with our hearts and spirits rekindled to the question around who else are we going to gather-in with us. Who else will we work and journey with toward the home God is preparing for all of us?

One of those groups on this journey includes the children, youth, and seniors that will be a part of the programs of the YMCA, as we explore together how we can use the gifts we have to be in partnership with them.

Along the way, we may also welcome into our church-home the stories of their lives, their hopes, desires, and needs. We will pray about and ask them and each other questions like: what is missing from their lives that we can come along side them, supporting and assisting them where we can, as they make their way toward home—as we journey together toward the home God wants us all to have.

Letting others in, including more people who are different from ourselves, even venturing out to join with other communities, this is not always an easy thing to do. We will need to leave the place we are right now to get there.

Our good news is that the new place we get to will soon be home—a place of comfort and safety, but now, also, a broader home capable of sheltering many more.

A little later this month, April 24, we will hear more about this journey and the new partners to whom we are listening and talking. Please plan on being there so that together we may join with each other, and with God, as we make our way toward God’s “new thing.” Let us escape our present, and come home to God. Let it be so, Amen.