

*"I am the vine, you are the branches; abide in me and you will bear much fruit." John 15:5*

# Vine & Branches

from St. Elizabeth's Episcopal Church, 720 N. King Street, Honolulu, HI 96817 • Phone (808) 845-2112

**Weekly Edition**  
**January 13, 2021**

## Ghost Story



Scott Janssen tells this story: "For months, as I've visited Evan as his hospice social worker, he's been praying to die.

In his early 90s, he's dealing with colon cancer for more than four years, and he's tired.

His long days of illness have turned his life into a tedious, meaningless dirge with nothing to look forward to other than its end.

He often talks about killing himself. But today, his depression is lifted. He's engaged and upbeat — and this sudden about-face arouses my suspicions.

Has he decided to do it? Is he planning a way out? "You seem to feel differently today than on other visits," I say casually.

"What's going on?" He looks at me cryptically. "Do you believe in ghosts?" he asks. It's not the first time a patient has asked me this. People can have unusual experiences when they reach the end of life.

Out-of-body experiences. Visits from spiritual beings. Messages given in dreams. "There are all kinds of ghosts," I respond seriously.

"What kind are you talking about?" "You remember me telling you about the war?" he asks. How could I forget?

He traces his long-standing depression to his time as a supply officer for a World War II combat hospital. The war soured him on the idea that anything good could come from people. It left him feeling unsafe and alone.

"I remember." "There's something I left out," he says, as he describes one horrific, ice-cold autumn day. Casualties are coming in nonstop. He and others scramble to transport blood-soaked men on stretchers from rail cars to triage, where those with a chance are separated from those who are goners.

"I'm hustling all day. By the time the last train arrives, my back feels broken, my hands are numb." He swallows hard. "What happened when the last train got there?" I ask softly.

"We're hauling one guy, and my grip on the stretcher slips." Tears roll down his face. "He hit the ground, his intestines oozing out. Steam rises up from them as he dies."

"Later that night I'm on my cot crying. Can't stop crying about that poor guy, and all the others I'd seen die. My cot's creaking, I'm shaking so hard. I'm thinking I'm going insane with the pain." "Then I look up," he says.

"There's a guy sitting on the end of my cot. Wearing a World War I uniform, with one of those funny helmets. He's covered in light, like he's glowing in the dark."

"What's he doing?" I ask. Evan starts crying — and laughing at the same time. "He's looking at me with love. I can feel it. I've never felt that kind of love before."

"What's it like to feel that kind of love?" "I can't put it into words." "I guess I just felt like I was worth something. Like all the pain and cruelty isn't what's real."

"What is real?" I ask. He replies, "knowing that no matter how screwed-up and cruel the world looks, on some level, somehow, we're all loved, we're all connected."

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The ghostly visits continue, with the same message of love and connection, but stop when the war ends,” he says.

“Years later, there I am cleaning out Mom’s stuff after she died, and I find this old photograph. It’s the same guy.

I look on the back. Mom’s handwriting says: ‘Uncle Calvin, killed during World War I, 1918.’ ”

We talk some more, then I ask, “What’s this have to do with your better mood?” “He’s back,” he whispers, staring out the window.

“Saw him last night at the foot of my bed. But now, he’s talking.” “What’d he say?” “He says he is here with me. He’s going to help me over the hill when the time comes to go.” S. Janssen, *Pulse — Voices From the Heart of Medicine*, modified.

My mom recently had hip surgery after she fell and broke hers. Coming out of the operation, her face is filled with peace and joy, as she recounts a visit with my dad, dead now nearly 20 years, who came to see her, along with his mom and dad.

She knew from that visit that all will be well - but it took a busted hip to get there.

Fred Buechner tells of a friend who dies in his sleep, unexpectedly. Not long after, that friend pays Fred a visit, in a dream.

The friend is wearing a blue knit sweater. The next morning when Fred wakes up, there, at the end of his bed, is a blue knit thread.

Did it fall off the sweater his friend was wearing? A young man sits in a Kahalu’u church late at night, wracked with guilt for ending his marriage — leaving behind his precious little girl.

The marriage was a disaster, but the guilt is nevertheless all consuming, and nearly overwhelming, because he was raised with the notion that divorce is the worst thing in the world. Until in that dark church, a gecko laughs — and the young man does too.

Why tell you these stories on a Sunday devoted to the baptism of our Lord?

Perhaps because the whole point of baptism is to help us come to see that heaven and earth, life and death, aren’t separated by the Great Wall of China, as we usually think.

I share these stories with you because heaven and earth, life and death, are separated only by gossamer.

By mere spiderwebs. Or, if you like, perhaps the sheerest of silk.

Baptism symbolizes death, by drowning. And the death by drowning that baptism symbolizes is intended

to help us see that all of the beloved, who’ve gone before, and the great cloud of witnesses among whom they now stand, are as near to us as our nose.

As close to us as our fingertips. And I wonder, if when Jesus came up out of the water that day, I wonder if he laughed?

Having seen the great truth that tears and troubles are a necessary tool to crack us open.

I don’t know why that’s true, but it does seem to be true. That the agonies of this world, while brutally real and most definitely painful, are also not the last word.

That while this life can sometimes seem like a zero sum game, full of absurdities and pointlessness, the rose still blooms from among the thorns.

The sky is still painted anew every morning — with colors Matisse himself must envy.

And joy, as rare as it sometimes seems to be, still pokes her mischievous head out at the most unexpected moment.

Baptism invites us to at long last see, if only at a glance, if only by overhearing whispers off-stage, that all of life is wrapped tightly in a loving God.

Who knows every hair on your head. Who holds you in the palm of her hand.

Baptism invites us into that “too good to be true” hope that everything is connected.

That we are, with one another, and with God, united, even if for now we see that truth only dimly, as through a smoky glass.

That forgiveness and healing and peace is the common destiny of every human being, even if that news comes upon ears that can barely hear it.

Isn’t that why Mark tells us that at Jesus’ baptism, the sky is torn in two?

Isn’t that why Mark tells us that the Spirit appears, in the form of a dove?

Isn’t the Spirit’s main task all about connecting heaven and earth, the sacred with the profane?

I leave you with this: “Listen to your life. See it for the fathomless mystery it is. In the boredom and pain of it, no less than in the excitement and gladness; touch, taste, smell your way to the holy and hidden heart of it — because in the last analysis all moments are key moments. And life itself is grace.” F. Buechner, *Now and Then*.

+amen

# The Power of Words

by Niambi Mercado



"The power of life is in the tongue." This sentence was spoken by Barry C. Black, Chaplain to the United States Senate around 3:45am on January 7, 2021, after the ratification of the electoral votes for Joe Biden and Kamala Harris as President and Vice President of the United States. I believe Mr. Black was paraphrasing Proverbs 18:21 "The tongue has the power of life and death." I interpret this as meaning our words have the ability to send us on a path of life or on a path of death.

We need to hold our leaders and ourselves accountable for our words. The first amendment of the US Constitution protects the right to free speech. This amendment does not protect one against the consequences of their words. Too long have leaders of our nation been able to spew lies as truth, dragging us on the path of death without consequence.

The insurrection at our Nation's Capitol on January 6, 2021, should be enough of a warning to prove the need of accountability for words spoken. Four people died, bombs had to be disarmed, traitors to our nation walked freely in the Capitol for hours. Not only is this not normal, this is what the fall of Democracy looks like. This is what the path of death looks like.

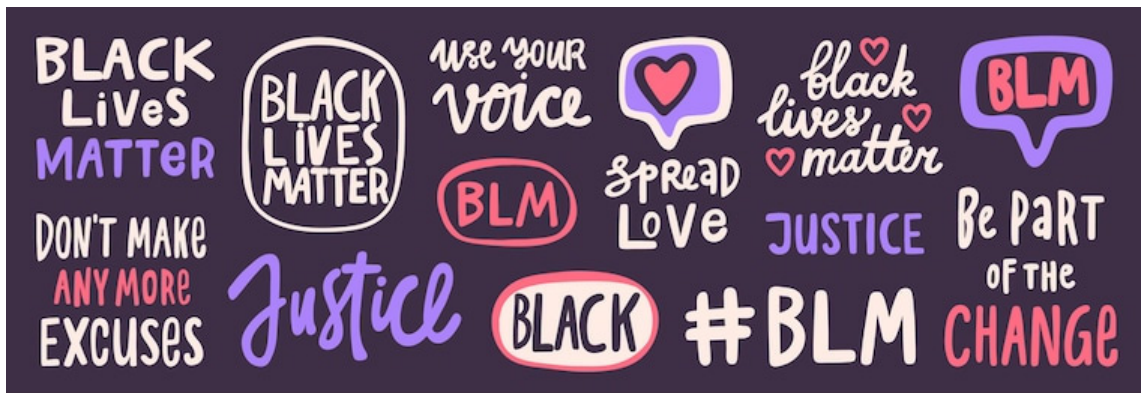
There should be no celebration about how Congress was able to rally and ratify the votes for our next president in the early morning the day after the votes were scheduled to be ratified. In a healthy democracy this insurgence could not have happened. If violence of any kind is needed to solve our problems, then we are automatically on the path of death.

Right now the need for introspection of one's words is dire. I too must review my words. I pray these words I put down in writing now will inspire you to do the same, that these words help guide us to the path of life.

Spiritual leader Eknath Easwaran tells of the Sufi advice: that we speak only after our words have managed to pass through three gates. At the first gate we ask ourselves, "Are these words true?" If so, let them pass on; if not, back they go. At the second gate we ask, "Are these words necessary?" At the last gate we ask, "Are they kind?"

What path do your words currently have you walking on? Would they pass through all three gates?

Amen.



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## A STATEMENT FROM CONCERNED CLERGY OF HAWAII

WE ARE CONCERNED CLERGY OF HAWAII who condemn the insurrection that occurred at our nation's Capitol on Wednesday, January 6, 2021. Ironically, this disgraceful exercise in mob violence occurred on the feast day of the Epiphany, the day God's love is poured out upon the whole world.

In stunning contrast to a day celebrating the joy of human salvation, an insurrection exploded in our midst. An insurrection that was aimed at destroying the peaceful transfer of power to President-elect Joe Biden and Vice-President elect Kamala Harris. An insurrection that was directly and intentionally set in motion by Donald Trump. We, along with so many others, watched in horror as a predominantly white crowd, some carrying weapons, stormed the halls of the House and Senate, as many in law enforcement seemed to stand down and stand by.

We recalled the many peaceful protests last summer by people of color that were met with often violent, over the top responses, from law enforcement. What the Wednesday Insurrection revealed for all the world to see was the original sin that has infected our nation since before its founding. The sin of racism was on full display yesterday; not only in the way in which law enforcement failed to respond, but in the effort to overturn a valid, honest and decisive election victory that chose decency over demagoguery, facts over lies, and justice over bigotry.

The Wednesday Insurrection was nothing less than an effort to disenfranchise people of color in this nation, who voted overwhelmingly for our new leadership. Now is the time to excise the cancer of racism from our body politic. Now is the time to confess that white America owes Black America reparations, restitution and sincere remorse.

Now is the time to examine and cure mass incarceration, red-lining, school inequality and all of the other structural and systemic barriers we have placed before our fellow citizens of color for centuries. Now is the time to make these fundamental policy changes that will help establish peace with justice in our society!

This challenge and this disgrace does not only lie at the feet of Donald Trump. Countless politicians and fellow travelers have encouraged baseless conspiracy theories, outright lies about the integrity of our election, and have made frivolous arguments in too many courts.

As a nation, we really do need to re-examine our fundamental values, and return to a place where we can see one another as sisters and brothers and not as enemies. We need to confront the deep-seated fear that motivates so much hatred. We need to recognize that at the end of the day we are all one people.

As people of faith we trust in the light that shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. (John 1:5) We call upon all people of good will to harken to the Light of the Gospel values of the inherent God-given dignity, equality and respect due every human person. Our nation's founding principles are noble, yet are often unmet. Now is the time to meet them. The soul of our nation is on trial.

The Rev Brian Grieves  
The Rev Jazzy Bostock  
The Rev Diane Martinson  
The Rev David Kawika Jackson

The Rev Alison Dingley  
The Rev David Gierlach  
The Rev Raymond Woo  
The Rev John Hau'oli Tomoso