

Story and Meditation: Never Alone

May 17, 2020

Sixth Sunday of Easter

John 14:15-21

by *Eric Anderson*

If you're a myna, the world can be a noisy place. In case you haven't noticed, mynas like to hop around on the metal roofs of houses, and they can sure make a racket. Bang! Bang! Bang! All day long.

Then there's the rush of the wind across a myna's feathers as it sits in the tree tossing in the trade winds. They'll fluff their feathers and listen to the rattle of the feathers against each other in the breeze.

And, of course, there's the sound of mynas having a conversation. Or an argument. Or a fight. I'll be honest; I have a hard time telling the difference with mynas. They seem to do everything at maximum volume, kind of like some people I've met, and probably like some people you've met, too.

As a result, this one myna was sure he was going to go deaf. Roofs he could stay away from. He could find a perch out of the wind. But the piercing cries of his fellow mynas, well. How to escape that?

He was sure he was going to lose his hearing and possibly his mind in all the noise.

From time to time he would try to find a quieter spot. Sometimes it worked for a little while, but the thing about mynas is that they move about a lot, and there's also a lot of them. This group of mynas was usually as loud as the last group of mynas. He thought he'd cry.

One day he'd been successful for far longer than normal. For a full half an hour he'd avoided any flocks of mynas, and the silence had been so lovely. Until... he noticed the hunting i'o. Sitting in the next tree. Above him. Watching him. Leaning forward to...

He didn't wait to see what it did next. He took to his wings, flapping as hard as he could, and screaming at the top of his own myna voice louder than he'd ever screamed before.

They heard him, his flock did. They charged the i'o. They flapped at him. They screamed at him. Confused (and a little deafened), the i'o gave up its pursuit and flew away to look for... a quiet spot of lunch.

All the mynas screamed happy screams, zipping around the sky and batting at their friend with their wings for being such a silly bird. Then they screamed their way back to the ground to forage for a noisy lunch.

Our friend the myna decided that in a world with dangers like i'o, he could live with the clamor as long as he didn't have to be alone.

In yesterday's UCC Daily Devotional, Rachel Hackenberg offers this paraphrase of Jesus' words to his disciples in this section of John's gospel: "You have heard me say, 'It's going to be bad.' I'm telling you again – it's going to be bad – so that when the bad begins and when the bad overwhelms you, you'll be prepared to hold on to love and remember that you're not alone."

Well, that's it, isn't it? That's one of the common features of all four gospels. Jesus warned his disciples that things would get bad. He told them that his path led not to a gloriously successful revolution against the corrupt usurping powers, but to an ignominious death on a Roman cross. All four of the gospel writers depicted the disciples struggling with that warning. In this farewell speech in John, Jesus made it about as clear as he could that the suffering was at hand. It's also clear that the disciples simply did not want things to go that way, did not want to accept that things could go that way.

It's kind of like April of 2018. The lava pressures rose in Kilauea such that the lava lake in Halema'uma'u overflowed. Rumbling earthquakes warned of movement below the surface into lower Puna. It wasn't that anyone had forgotten the previous eruptions that sent molten rock streaming into Kapoho and Kalapana. But who wants things to go that way? Who wants to accept that things could go that way?

If the lava just stops before it hits the Pahoehoe transfer station... Oh, in 2015 it did. Whew.

But two years ago it flowed over homes and farms and places of great beauty, places we didn't want it to go.

This year, COVID-19 didn't go the way we want things to go.

On that Thursday night, things didn't go the way the disciples wanted them to.

"And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever."

Karoline Lewis writes at Working Preacher, "Jesus promises the Spirit just when the disciples, just when we, are most in need of pastoral care. Yes, there are a few references to the Spirit here and there in the Gospel of John up to this point. But it is at this moment, the Farewell Discourse, Jesus' last night with his disciples, that the promise of the Spirit's presence is vital. Jesus knows that what lies ahead we cannot do on our own; that what we will be called to face we cannot do without his help; that in our temptation to do all the things, reminders will be necessary that it's not our job to do everything."

And whatever we are called to do, we do not do it alone.

When we are physically separated from one another, how would anyone expect to feel but alone? Even if you have a houseful of family, the world of humanity has contracted to a very small number of individuals in contrast to what you are accustomed to experiencing. “Is there anyone else I could see?” we wonder. “Is there anyone else I can smile with? Is there a world out there?”

Jesus knew that his disciples would shortly be feeling very lonely indeed. So he made a promise. “You will not be alone,” he told them. “I’ve been your advocate, but here comes another. Two advocates, two supports, two comforts. If you don’t see me for a while, the other will always be with you.”

The Holy Spirit will always be with you.

Andre Johnson writes at *The Christian Century*, “This passage reminds us that we are not alone. The Spirit is with us. The Spirit is moving us, abiding in us. We are being led and guided by the Spirit, and we are not alone.”

This is another of those uncertain times in the course of this pandemic. The numbers of new cases in the state of Hawai’i are clearly declining. It’s a testimony to the quick action of public officials and the good sense and community compassion of the citizens. The problem is that it isn’t over. For three days this past week, all the people diagnosed with COVID-19 on this island had recovered and there were no new cases. Well, that ended on Friday with a new diagnosis.

It isn’t over yet, friends. I really want it to be over. I really want to see everybody again. I really want to share the “ha” of “aloha,” that shared breath which is such a significant element of Hawaiian spirituality and of Christian spirituality more broadly. The Holy Spirit Jesus described flows on the breath. How did Jesus confer it on his disciples in the Gospel of John? He breathed it on them.

How frustrating it is that the breath of human life, the spirit, the pneuma, the ruach, the ha, is exactly what sets us at risk right now. It’s one of the reasons this is so hard to bear.

Instead, breathe in the ruach Adonai, the pneuma hagian, the ‘Uhane Hemolele. This is the breath of truth, the breath of renewal, the breath of life itself. This is the breath of God that always surrounds us, always embraces us, always restores us. Seek this breath for your hard and uncertain days.

“I will not leave you orphaned,” said Jesus. He will not leave us alone. He will not leave us without breath. He will not leave us without love. Jesus will not, and Jesus has not.

Breathe in the breath of the Spirit. Breathe out the breath of the Spirit. May it embrace you as long as these uncertain days continue.

We are not alone.

Amen.