

150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the church in Hawai'i  
11 November 2012  
St. Andrew's Cathedral, Honolulu  
*Anniversary of the Dedication of a Church*

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These islands are frequently compared to paradise, a word that comes from Middle Eastern roots meaning “a walled garden.” It’s one of the ancient biblical images of heaven. That walled garden was a place of plenty – the orchard or vineyard of the Hebrew Bible, as well as a parkland where animals abound – where the lion lies down with the lamb, and children can play with snakes and not be hurt. It’s an image of creation restored, without violence or death.

The walls that hold Hawai'i's garden's treasures safe are the rocky shores and coral reefs and vast reaches of water that bound these islands, like the four rivers that surround the Garden of Eden, or even God's separation of land and waters on the third day of creation. The biblical understanding of paradise has always had a sense that it includes God's rich creation in a state like heaven, close to God and living in peace.

This Pacific Eden shares something with Jacob's dream in its echoes of voyagers moving from earth to heaven, from far off places to these mid-ocean islands. The romanticizing of Hawaii in novel and film draws on ancient human dreams, even if the reality is still a long way from those yearnings.

The animals and plants that first populated these islands came like Jacob's visitors on fragile conveyances – like mounting flimsy ladders, they were blown in on wind or waves, riding spider silk or bird feathers. The first human beings came on equally delicate craft, piloted by intrepid explorers who navigated the seas like winged ones. Those canoes also brought new plants and animals for food, which changed the landscape here – and the creative and chaotic result also has something to do with the story of creation.

God has indeed given an abundant land to the people of this place, and later inhabitants have continued to shape and re-create these islands both wittingly and unawares. The authorities work hard to ensure that pests don't arrive with fruit or plants, that exotic species can't cross the bounds of these islands: “There will be no ladders of transport on airplanes or boats!” At the same time those exotic creatures have arrived, and will undoubtedly continue to do so, whether they are spiders or human beings. They are part of the richness of creation, and God's creation has always been mobile.

God's promises to Jacob of land and offspring and blessing extend to all, and they have always involved migration. These lush islands and the people and communities they contain are also meant to be blessing, for those here and far beyond – all the families of the earth, now and for generations to come. This community has been blessed by the Jacobs before us – what will the offspring of this generation, and theirs, know and do of blessing? How will these living

stones, chosen race, royal priesthood, and God's own people be a blessing for generations to come?

Kamehameha IV invited English missionaries here because he saw something of that royal priesthood in their houses of prayer. We can imagine what he saw: collegiate choirs singing matins or Morning Prayer, the monastic traditions kept alive in a daily round of prayer in parish churches, the stately language of King James' Bible, formal and reserved worship in ancient churches. You can still find that tradition in the churches of England today, but you can also find a great deal more variation in music, style, word, and image.

If you go to Britain today to look at churches, you will discover a lot of ruined abbeys, and the remnants of enormous medieval monasteries. Henry VIII closed those monasteries in the early years of the Reformation, and almost immediately they began to be quite literally dismantled. The stones were sold for building material (sometimes by their former abbots), and carted off to be incorporated in homes, fences, forts, and castles. Some found their way into new churches. In a few places you can see new construction atop parts of old walls, and recent renovations that have made modern dwellings out of ancient rock.

This house of prayer called the Episcopal Church in Hawaii has been built of living stones in the same way – the strength of generations joined together with the adaptability of new ones. These stones aren't joined together with inflexible mortar, nor are they set up like dry stone walls by the careful sorting and fitting that rejects stone after stone if it doesn't quite "fit." This new house is built from a web of relationships that transform the members into a living organism, a body that works together for a purpose larger than itself. These stones become more than any individual might alone – they are re-created by their joining to this body.

Jesus' challenge in the temple is about how those stones are used. He calls it a den of robbers, a hiding place, a place of exploitation and death, rather than what it was made to be – creative and healing and life-giving. Jesus is confronting people about their stony hearts, their willingness to steal the life-bread from their fellow human beings, both in taking their money for profit and in trying to deny healing to the blind and lame. His listeners have become dead stones, rather than living ones. He is rejecting the violent use of stones to kill and maim and wall others out.

Today marks two essential elements of wall building. This church is setting up a marker on the wall that notes the passage of 150 years since construction was started here. It could just be a lovely brass memorial marker, noting the lives given in the years since the beginning, or in special service to this work. That is certainly a good and noble thing, but the paradise wall is meant to keep growing to enclose a community of peace. The stones in that garden's wall are low enough, or porous enough, to admit all creatures who are seeking the good and godly. The living stones also have to be challenging enough to confront violence. While there may not be an end to violence this side of the grave, it should be questioned and confronted at every turn. When these living stones are strong and confident enough they build walls of justice, and bring peace.

Today's observance of Veterans' Day is an invitation to give thanks for the living stones who have offered themselves in the pursuit of peace, those like Jesus himself who have been subject to the world's violence, injured or killed as a result. Some will indeed be remembered as markers on the wall of the garden that is still being built. Others have returned home chipped and broken, seeking peace. How will the living stones build them in? It can take a lot of flexibility, re-creation, and resurrection to help the broken find a fruitful place – yet the healing of the whole depends on it. The garden will be built by studying war no more.

Let me share two brief examples of that sort of building project. St. Andrew's Episcopal Chapel in Sewanee, TN, has a set of bells like yours. The money for them was given almost 100 years ago by Episcopal Church Women in Morristown, NJ. They'd been raising money to send chocolate to soldiers during WWI, and when the war ended, they still had several thousand dollars. They sent the money to Sewanee on the condition that those bells be rung every year on this day at 11:11 in the morning, to remember the signing of that peace treaty.<sup>1</sup>

Yesterday we saw a similar building project here at St. Elizabeth's, where people from almost every tribe and language and people and nation of the Pacific were gathered to give thanks. Children read books and showed videos and robots they had created, others sang and danced their joy, and still others prepared the soul foods of many cultures – all to celebrate the peace-building work that goes on thanks to some living stones in this Episcopal diocese and their partners in the wider community. That garden is being built one child, one family, one gardener at a time.<sup>2</sup>

We are people of God, given gifts to build peace. We are descendants of a royal priesthood, sent to break down walls of division and build pillars of justice. Give thanks, and let the joy ring out in bells and song and dance and alleluias!

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.timesfreepress.com/news/2012/nov/10/bells-peal-for-peace-St-Andrews-Sewanee-to-retur/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://stelizabeth720.org/wordpress/>