

"Hope In Diversity"
Rev. Ben Heimach-Snipes
Morgan Park Presbyterian Church

Isaiah 64:1-9

Mark 13:24-37

This congregation is a community that finds hope in diversity. This congregation has named diversity as one of the attributes of the kingdom of God that we are seeking with God here on earth. This congregation made a conscious choice to celebrate and nurture diversity as part of the identity of the community. AND In this congregation, that diversity is most notable in the racial identities that we claim.

Racial diversity in church is a rare quality in the Presbyterian church and in this country because of our shared history of racism that cannot go unnoticed in our neighborhood where black or blue lives matter depending on your perspective.

As part of my preparation for ministry in diversity, I participated in antiracism trainings with Chicago Regional Organizing for Antiracism (crossroadsantiracism.org). In these trainings, I learned about white institutional values - as in the values of dominant culture in the United States that perpetuate white privilege and power and are woven into our institutions. Not only have we as individuals been shaped by the sin of racism, but our institutions have also been deeply impacted by our history of racism.

One of these white institutional values that you can look for in the many contexts that you navigate each day is "either/or" thinking. Either/or thinking requires that there be one correct answer, that there is only room for one opinion, and that the simplicity of one correct answer is more important than the complexity of including the voices of others. Either tea OR coffee. Either Black OR white. Either Cubs OR White Sox. Either Presbyterian OR Methodist. Either love OR hate.

In our training, we learned transformational values that correspond to and seek to transform the white institutional values that we find in our communities. The transformational value that responds to either/or thinking is Both/And thinking.

Both/And thinking celebrates the complexity of our motivations, passions, families and communities. Both/And thinking transforms degrading competition into creative collaboration. Both/And thinking allows room for our diverse perspectives to be a source of wisdom rather than a source of conflict.

As a church, we Both seek to be thrifty AND generous.

Our history can be Both heartbreaking AND life-giving.

Our God is Both a just judge AND filled with grace.

In this month of Advent, we Both celebrate the story of Jesus' entrance into the world AND wait in anticipation of Jesus' return these thousands of years later.

In Both our scripture from the prophet Isaiah in the Hebrew Bible AND our text from the book of Matthew, we hear predictions and hopes for God's entrance into our earthly realm that

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would cause chaos and destruction for the status quo. God’s presence is so desired by Isaiah and his community in exile in Babylon as they experience persecution and subjugation under empire.

Jesus, too, speaks to an audience in Palestine that has been ruled by the Roman Empire for three generations - leaving Jewish Kings in place to collect their taxes and squash any opposition to their rule.

Both Isaiah AND Jesus speak of Hope found in God’s presence.

From the perspective of participants in empire, this message of God’s awesome AND destructive power - God’s presence - is a terrifying menace to the quiet of enforced peace. And from the perspective of a persecuted and captive people, having all-powerful God show up is a moment of triumph and liberation!

We, too, live under empire - the US-American Empire. AND we benefit from the maintenance of this empire to differing degrees based on our identity in this diverse congregation.

Each week, we pray together that “God’s kingdom come” and “God’s will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” We call upon God to bring to fruition the reign of compassion, justice and peace that has been prophesied by Jesus and the Prophets. In this prayer, we call upon God to empower us to live out this reign of compassion, justice and peace in our own lives and communities. AND we often return from church expecting for things to remain the same - for our jobs to continue as we left them on Friday; for our families to continue acting in the roles that they have been assigned; for the benefits that we have accrued to continue benefitting us in the same way. We BOTH desire God’s full presence and reign of Christ AND we want to maintain the security that we have developed for ourselves in our own ways.

I encounter this complicated juncture when engaging in the work of the Presbyterian Peace Fellowship that took me in as family when I was looking for a way to live my faith more fully - when I had lost hope in the church as a place to practice Jesus’ love and justice in empowering ways.

With this group, I have accompanied Presbyterian Churches in the South American country of Colombia. With German Zarate, a church leader and educator, I traveled across the western banana plantations of Colombia, visiting congregations who had come together after being displaced by armed groups in the region. People who came together after losing the benefits of the land that they had worked so hard to develop for their families. In this context, it is easy for me to see my own conflicting desires to return to my secure US American life AND be willing to give up everything - as Jesus did - to be part of the empowering community that is seeking life and hope in the midst of a violent hopelessness.

Straddling these two worlds, I have been given a new lens into our context here at Morgan Park Presbyterian Church. We do not sit at the edge of a war zone filled with bananas, tanks and military platoons, but we do sit at the edge of a war zone employed by poverty, assault rifles and our history of racism.

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AND we come to church for a variety of reasons: to receive hope in the midst of the chaos, to find the escape of peace, AND to be empowered and emboldened to take action as the body of Christ alive in the world today.

As we tell the story of the Jewish community and the world that waited in hope for Jesus, we also learn how to wait in hope ourselves. We are here because we find hope in diverse community. Alone we can easily be overwhelmed by the brokenness we find in the world AND in ourselves. In a time of unprecedented economic growth, we also see a growing gap between the rich and the poor; we see violence perpetrated by our military, by the police and by our neighbors; we see signs of the end times as predicted in scripture AND we recognize that these destructive signs in our scripture today have been seen by our ancestors in every age.

Jesus says - keep awake.

And while we keep awake, we grow tired and lose hope when our effort to bring peace and compassion and justice fall short. As people who have been given a diversity of opportunities, we still find limitations to living out our dreams, we experience our own imperfections, we can list our sins against our neighbors, against God and perhaps most challenging - against ourselves.

Imagine what it might mean for us to come into relationship with Christ as we experience Christ in community. While we wait for the completion of Jesus' ministry in the kingdom of God on earth, we are witnesses to the current manifestation of God in the Body of Christ that we are part of here in this place. The body of Christ is the community in which we can practice the ethics of God's reign of Compassion, Justice and Peace. The body of Christ is our diverse community here at Morgan Park where none of us are responsible for enacting the kingdom of God on our own, but we are invited into a diverse community where we can share our gifts with each other in the hope of embodying that loving presence of Jesus when we are together.

Archbishop Oscar Romero, who served over the Catholic church in El Salvador in the 1980's during a period of extreme state violence against the poor, prayed this prayer at the funeral of priests who died in protest of this violence, saying:

That is what we are about: We plant seeds that one day will grow. We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise.

We lay foundations that will need further development. We provide yeast that produces effects beyond our capabilities.

We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that. This enables us to do something, and to do it very well.

It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for God's grace to enter and do the rest.

We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master builder

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and the worker.

We are workers, not Master Builders, ministers, not Messiahs. We are prophets of a future not our own.

We find hope in our diverse community - not just diversity for diversity's sake, but diversity to live out God's reign of justice, compassion and peace. We find hope in knowing that we cannot do everything on our own, but in our diversity, our gifts become part of something greater. Together, we are the body of Christ.

Isaiah claims that God is the potter - reforming us in diversity and calling us GOOD. Society tries to take the place of God, forming us into our socialized identities - our racialized identities, but we are God's and God desires to reform us and heal us from our brokenness. We wait for Jesus to return to complete what he came for in Jerusalem 2000 years ago. We embody Jesus as the "body of Christ" while we wait.

AND by being open to the body of Christ that we encounter in this diverse community, we open ourselves up to be shaped and molded by each other. We experience God in Jesus, in Scripture, and in the Holy Spirit present in each other.

We are the clay and God is the potter. AND we find hope in our diverse community because God is present in our diverse community- Bringing inspiration, love and joy to each other through the movement of the Holy Spirit.

Allowing ourselves to be vulnerable to change - open to being reformed and transformed by those we encounter allows us to be reformed and transformed by God. To be open to the Holy Spirit in this community, we must be open to listening; open to receiving from others; open to being the clay - being molded - being flexible enough to learn from our diverse community. AND having hope that in that community we will encounter Jesus.

Jesus is coming! So we need to be ready. We need to be practicing this work of being the Body of Christ with each other. Embodying the compassion, justice and peace of Christ that is present in our diverse community today.

Keep awake

Amen