

Refracting Hope

February 11, 2024

Disco Ball

As many of you know, Lent begins this week. On Wednesday, which also happens to be Valentine's Day, we'll gather here for worship, to invite God into the conversion we need in our lives, and will ritualize this with the ashes of repentance and the oil of healing. Lent is a pretty well known church season, even if it is often misconstrued. More on that next week.

But before we get to Lent, we need to wrap up the season we're in currently – the season of Epiphany. This season, which runs from twelve days after Christmas through the Sunday before Ash Wednesday, is bookended with scriptures stories of light. On the feast of the Epiphany, we tell the story of the Magi being guided by a star, and today we read of Jesus, Peter, James, and John ascending the mountain and having an encounter during which Jesus becomes radiant in their midst.

It's a season of light, which, frankly, we could all use a little more of. There's so much darkness in the world, so much struggle. The opioid crisis continues to devastate not only lives but whole communities. Climate change looms large in our consciousness and threatens to substantially alter our very existence. The wars in Ukraine and Gaza and so many other places rage on. I've been hearing from more and more people trying to make sense of it all, hoping that the scriptures will be able to lend some clarity, particularly to the war between Israel and Hamas, the war that is ostensibly rooted in the Abrahamic faiths. And then there's the societal trend to disregard truth, or perhaps better put, the trend to set truth aside if an alternative furthers one's personal pursuits. Sure, it's once again light outside after 5 p.m., but in countless ways, it seems pretty dark.

Friends, amidst this gathering darkness – and I'm sure you could add your own examples of heartbreak and struggle and lament – the season of Epiphany is calling the church to be a disco ball. You heard me right, a disco ball. Think about it – a disco ball is made up of hundreds of little square mirrors. Each one in and of itself doesn't do much, might even be scrap, but put them together (and here's the most important part) and add a light source, and those combined little squares of scrap mirror become something remarkable. Each one catches light differently and reflects it in a different direction, coming together to do something extraordinary.

The Scriptures and Hope

This morning we heard the story of Moses coming down the mountain after encountering God. He carries with him the Ten Commandments, but the reason this story is assigned for us to read today is because his encounter with God has left him glowing. He is so impacted by God that he is radiant.

When in our experience do we talk of people glowing? When they're pregnant. When they're in love. Those are the two most obvious, most common times, but along with those, I would add that folks glow when they're truly happy, when they're fulfilling their purpose.

The story of Moses radiating the glory of God is paired with the story of Jesus also going up the mountain and glowing. A couple of distinctions between the two: While Moses ascends the mountain alone, Jesus goes with Peter, James, and John; and while Moses' radiance is attributed to encountering the Divine, how Jesus' appearance becomes dazzling is more ambiguous. It is

implied that the source is divine, but nothing says that there was an external God moment. I take this to mean that Jesus shone from within, the Divine radiating out from his very being. And that brings me back to my disco ball image.

Today in the church, we celebrate the end of the season of light, and amidst the darkness, we the church are called to reflect that light, each catching the light a little differently and each casting it back a little differently, too. There's another image that would work well, too, that of a stained glass window. Stained glass is also a coming together of small pieces of glass which on their own may seem insignificant, but when gathered together create a vision of profound beauty. If we were to apply this metaphor to our scriptures, Moses would be a disco ball, radiating God's brilliance, whereas the source of Jesus' transfiguration is a light that shines from within.

Our Task

All of this is well and good, but what do we do with it? Kate Davies, whose work on environmental policy led her to study cultural change and, in particular, how to draw society toward transformation, wrote a book "Intrinsic Hope: Living Courageously in Troubled Times." In it, she names six steps for discovering and nurturing intrinsic hope.

First, being present. We talk about that a lot in church. Two weeks ago, I talked with you about one of the superpowers of church being that we're truly present to one another. Ideally, we see one another and are willing to be seen. We are present to one another in ways that foster vulnerability, which in turn fosters healing and growth.

We also acknowledge that the Divine is ever present. You'll notice if you're ever in a meeting in which I'm leading prayer that I begin by saying, "Let's take a moment to quiet ourselves, and remember that we're always in God's presence." This is a conscious, subtle shift from the introduction to prayers that we hear often, "to put ourselves in God's presence." Being present means to be aware, to limit one's distractions.

As the parent of a toddler, I'm so very conscious of presence. Yesterday alone I may have heard the sentence, "Look mommy!" a thousand times. Look. Be present. Nurturing intrinsic hope, that is impacting the world by sharing the light of God, starts by being present.

The next practice in nurturing intrinsic hope is expressing gratitude. Once we are present, we need to train ourselves to not only see what is good and right and holy and just, but then express that gratitude. In some instances, this expression comes out in prayer. Other times, we may express our gratitude to its source – telling our partner or co-worker or child or neighbor of our gratitude. Yet other times, expressing gratitude may come across as creating art or something else of beauty. Expressing gratitude is recognizing good in the world and making sure that it flows back out of us.

This sets us up for Davies' third step for fostering intrinsic hope: loving the world. To love the world is to be enthralled by it. To be in awe of it. To have its best interest in heart. To love the world is also to recognize that there are things about the world that you don't know yet. To recognize that there are ways the world can still surprise you. I also think that to love someone means to be willing to allow them to impact you. Loving the world means being willing to let the world shape us.

All of these practices dovetail with one another, because the next practice in nurturing intrinsic hope is accepting what is. This is a riff on the line from the Serenity Prayer, “to accept the things I cannot change.” It wouldn’t be a Super Bowl 2024 sermon without quoting Taylor Swift, “Haters gonna hate.” In the training the folks from Planned Parenthood did for us this fall on how to have impactful conversations on difficult topics, one of the first things they talked about is that there are some people who are so rigidly set in their ways that attempting to have impactful conversations with them won’t be productive. Trying to change the unchangeable is a thief of hope, is a thief of joy.

But that doesn’t mean being apathetic or immobilized. To foster hope, to reflect God’s goodness, requires taking action. The examples of encroaching darkness that I lifted up as we began – the opioid crisis, climate change, the war in Gaza – they’re all HUGE. And each requires each and every one of us to reflect the light on it in our own way. Some will shine a light head-on. For others it will be slant.

So often, we don’t do anything because our own individual efforts won’t be significant. The disco ball or stained glass window image tells us that we don’t need to be. You’re not the sun. You’re not the light source. You’re not God. But you ARE one tile, one pane, and the light that shines through you, that bounces off of you, makes a difference.

Last, Davies’ steps for nurturing intrinsic hope end with persevering for the long haul. Emily Dickinson tells us that “hope is a feathered thing with wings.” The hard, ugly, difficult things of this world are not easily transformed. The road is long. And that’s why I find the fact that Jesus’ trek up the mountain included three companions. Nurturing hope is transformational work, and it’s arduous. And again, that’s part of the genius of church. People coming together to reflect God’s goodness.

Conclusion

In just three short days, we’ll gather back here in introspection and humility to contemplate our faults and shortcomings as we commit to being different. But that doesn’t mean that our job of reflecting and refracting the Light of God ends on Mardi Gras. Our liturgy will turn its focus to a different aspect of our life in Christ, but that doesn’t change the fact that we’re each a tiny mirror in the disco ball which is the church, each called to reflect Christ’s light back into this world God loves so much. May it be so. Alleluia and Amen.

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