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# Homily

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Episcopal Church at Yale

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Homily

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in your sight, my God and my creator.*

Four years ago today, I sat in the pews of ECY as a college junior, the shock of Trump's election disorienting, bitter, and raw.

The service was likely reassuring—remember when we could hold hands, smell incense, sing and kneel and break bread?

But if our worship offered comfort that day, I couldn't receive it. My mind was stuck in another space, with other people: the basement of Pierson College, where the Tuesday before I'd sat with friends and roommates and watched the election unfold.

I pictured my suitemate, a DACA recipient, afraid for her future.

I saw my best friend, a queer black woman, weep for a leader who doesn't acknowledge her personhood or her rights.

I thought of my brother, differently abled, and imagined a future with no healthcare, no social services, no empathy for those who are most vulnerable.

I wondered, What does Christianity have to say to these people?

Can I face the suffering in our nation—truly grapple with division, discrimination, violence, systemic evil—and *still*, in full honesty, stand in this chapel and proclaim the Christian message of hope?

Four years later, these questions have only intensified.

Like many, I rejoiced when I heard the news yesterday. I hugged my roommate, texted loved ones, ran into the street to honking cars. As I watched Vice President Harris—the first female of color in that office—speak of equity and visibility, I felt genuinely joyful and proud.

But like many of us, my joy was complicated. My hope is laced with realism—awareness of how much work stands before us, and how much *cost* these last four years have incurred.

Hundreds of thousands of deaths due to COVID.

Police brutality, separation of families, violence and fear.

Crucial years lost in the fight against climate change, species and landscapes gone for good.

I wonder: Am I allowed to feel happy when so many have suffered?

By being hopeful this weekend—by training my vision to what lies *beyond* this election, not behind it, by choosing to focus on good—am I being naïve, disrespectful, blind to the reality at hand?

Some people say that Christianity has no good answers to these questions. “Religion is over in America,” liberal friends tell me. “How can you go to Divinity

School when you see how much damage the church has done?”

They point to images of Trump last May, clutching a Bible in front of St. John's Church; they cite the

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wedding of Evangelism to conservative politics, the tribalism and “group think” and rigid dogma.

Religion, they say, is harmful at worst, distracting at best. If you were *really* awake to suffering in America in 2020, you’d stop going to church.

At the core of these statements is a painful but necessary truth. In many ways, American Christianity *is* built on inadequate response to suffering—not just denial, but outright justification of harm.

From our nation’s beginning, Christianity was used to justify slavery, then lynching, then segregation, drawing on Biblical stories to, in the words of James Cone, “claim white power over black people as divine right.”

To this day, womanist theologians ask us, How can we reconcile “Jesus as savior” with the centuries of slavery and oppression that came after?

These questions are as relevant in 2020 as they’ve ever been, and the division in our nation can partly be traced to our church’s reluctance and failure to face them head-on.

But beneath this necessary racial reckoning is a deeper, more fundamental truth:

The symbols of Christianity, like the people and institutions who express them, *are* ambiguous.

The cross can be used to liberate, or to subjugate.

Within each of our hearts and minds, the capacity for greatest empathy and generosity coexists right alongside the capacity for fear, intolerance, and hate.

If this last election season has shown us anything, it’s that this tension, in individuals and communities and political parties, is alive and strong.

The job of religion can never be to “solve” these contradictions: to provide a one-size- fits all rubric for action, or neatly fit every sorrow into a calculus of hope. Nor should religion try to shield us from the presence of such tensions in our selves and our world.

Instead, the Christianity I know provides a set of tools to confront these tensions with courage:

To face sin, doubt, division, and evil, in all their personal and collective manifestations, and emerge with a message of hope nonetheless.

How do I know this is possible? Because I’ve seen it.

This last week brought countless invitations to affirm my core belief.

The morning after the election, I heard Reverend Willie Jennings, professor of black theology, speak openly and personally of racial discrimination, yet *choose* to preach a message of love over hate.

On Thursday, I sang with a Zoom choir, “Nada te turbe”—nothing can trouble—a musical assertion that doesn’t *deny* turmoil but confronts it, expresses it, and melodically transforms it into peace.

On Friday, I took a run to my favorite spot in Farnam Garden—where, as a college junior, I sat after the 2016 election and sensed the grip of depression, the very real threat of despair...

And felt that little grain of defiance awaken inside me that insists, over and over against the forces that threaten to quench it,

that love, light, and life will win.

This is what I mean when I say “the hope of Christianity.”

In Christianity, I find people who are willing to confront the greatest and most particular suffering—to sing it, preach it, let it pierce their hearts and speak through their words—with the faith that love is greater.

I find people whose lives grant them every right to lapse into blame and cynicism, who choose generosity, healing, and grace instead.

I find symbols that help me wrestle with paradox, confront the tendencies toward distortion and un-loving

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inside me and around me, and find strength to persevere in the lifelong choice toward good.

This isn't naïve, and it isn't ignorant. It's a vision of Christianity whose hope comes not in spite of, but *because of*, the fact that it's "awake" to the world at hand.

Our gospel message today is the parable of the ten bridesmaids: five wise ones, ready to meet the long-awaited groom; and five unwise ones, who run out of lamp oil, break their vigil, and miss their chance. Setting aside some possible objections, the message for us is clear.

"Stay awake!" Jesus tells us. The arrival of what you hope for may take longer than expected. Through absence and doubting, we must attest to our hope by staying prepared.

So what does it mean to be "awake" as a Christian today?

If the last four years have taught me anything, it's that "awake-ness" as Christians cannot occur separately from "awake-ness" to the particular issues and sorrows of our modern world.

To proclaim its message with any legitimacy, Christianity must first show it can speak the language of our deepest doubts and divisions, then counter this language with equally concrete hope and love.

Where are the sites of inequity and suffering?

Where are the places where the Christian message, misinterpreted and politicized, has done more harm than good?

How has our church failed people on the margins, and how can we do better?

The Christianity I believe in doesn't shy away from these questions. It doesn't cling to dogma and outdated symbols, but *welcomes* criticism, *embraces* revision, and recognizes that these forces bring not the death of the church as we know it, but the awakening and enlivening of a faith equipped to meet the needs of our day.

I believe this work can be done, because I see it, and it makes me so excited and so full of joy.

It's the task that drew me from a PhD in genetics to Divinity School, eager to use the language of science to make faith compelling to modern audiences.

I see the passion in my Divinity School classmates, as they organize task forces for anti-racism, revise our hymnals, and lead groups for queer young adults in the Episcopal Church.

And I draw hope from each of you who showed up today, this Sunday after the election, to join in worship—testifying with your bodies that you believe that *something*, in this fraught and imperfect thing we call "The Church," is worth keeping around.

How will your voice contribute to Christianity's re-awakening?

How will your unique identity—your major, your culture, your ethnicity, your gender, your ability, your passions—enrich the language we bring to this task?

And along the way, we're allowed to be joyful. Hope is not distraction or indulgence, but a vital resource and well-earned right.

So let us rejoice this election weekend—let us sigh, weep, smile, and celebrate— and use the hope of today as sustenance for the work ahead.

*Amen.*