

LIVE INTO HOPE

Sermon delivered by Rev. Dr. Viki Brooks

Rensselaerville Presbyterian Church

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Greetings on the last Sunday of our gatherings in 2024. It may seem odd, if not slightly daft, to open this worship with what we consider to be a Christmas carol. I hope at the conclusion of this sermon my motivation will be clear.

I started the mental process of writing this sermon soon after session determined our theme for the year...I think that was in February. It is astounding how many sermon ideas can percolate in one's mind over six months. And add to that the reality of hearing or reading the profound reflections of five of our 11 summer preachers.

Our first preacher offered the thought that words of God, the tender calls of love and kindness, offer us a common ground in the language of the faith community. Rev. Spalding stated "let one piece of our common ground be our high calling to speak the words of new creation... words like: 'This must change' or 'This is unjust' or 'I was mistaken'. Our second preacher, Rev. Phelps, made a thoughtful case for recognizing that we can find our common humanity and thus our common ground among the truth of human struggle and compassionate response. Indeed he suggested we may not need to fear the fractured images of our current circumstance as our common ground is built into this community. Rev. Whitehead offered us an invitation to observe the brokenness of our world and lean into what we can affirm, what we share, with those we perceive to be on the other side of our fractiousness. The imam left us with a message, reminding us that division can be a source of creative change and suggested we might be wise to embrace its lessons. The rabbi outlined the cooking tools of a covenant that might allow us to move from me to we . His was a specific call to governing with an eye to peace and unity as an attainable reality.

Such wonderful reflections on the year's theme of "Finding Common Ground". And this is only half of the sermons offered on our topic. Most have not been secured for our web site as yet. There are many truths in the insights of our speakers. Those insights don't claim to be the whole piece, the only answer. These thoughts are offerings at a table rich with possibilities and ripe for further discussion. While I have confidence that I can add to this smorgasbord of thoughts, like all of our speakers, it is but a partial response. However, taken with the thoughts of others, as a whole, we have some solid shared ground to celebrate in this year's collection of sermons.

The portion of the First Letter of John that was read today was written to a community amid great turmoil. Community systems were broken, organizations were corrupt, people were untrusting and vicious. Violence and killing was a common reaction to differences. Politicians were vying for power, communities lacked leadership and reliance on the statements of faith communities was scarce. John was writing to a fighting, broken community. His response to this scenario is to call upon a form of doctrine evidenced throughout his writing. In this letter as well as the gospel of John, Jesus, the Christ, is the source of all that is loving and good.

Jesus, the God-human, born in a manger, supported by a carpenter, loved by a mother who watched him die. That Jesus.

In this letter, John points his community to a sustaining tenet of the Christian faith. It is a bedrock starting point of faith development: Jesus is God's love in our midst, Emanuel. For Christians, the story of this embodied faith begins with an angel and a young virgin. It is our Christmas story. The arrival of the goodness and love in the flesh. The narrative gives us hope that God's activity in our lives translates dogma to practice.

That said, I don't think Jesus is the only expression of the divine that emanates love and truth. God has chosen many vessels to convey the truth of divine loving activity in the world and like the advice of John to his followers, the truth of behavior, of taking on the backbone of divine love and purpose, is the measure of faithful allegiance. I see this embodiment in Gandhi and the Dalai Lama among others. I don't think Christians have a corner on the truth of divine experience or expression. However, the symbols of my wheelhouse, the words of my training and formal affirmations, live in the Christian story. And while I am pretty sure if I had been raised in a Jewish or Muslim community my narrative would match their stories. Jesus is my language for God in the world. So, in the words of the hymn, "hail the incarnate deity, pleased in flesh with us to dwell, Jesus our Emanuel".

We share a common ground as Christians with that line. Jesus is our Emanuel. Taking it one step further, we share common ground with a broader world using a similar idea that where the divine dwells, we can find common ground.

It is rare that I watch situation comedies, and even less rare that I use any television entertainment as an image for a sermon but last month I was moved by an episode of Young Sheldon; the pre-story to the sitcom "Big Bang Theory". This is a story of an over-the-top brilliant child, Sheldon, who approaches all interactions with the dispassionate and encyclopedic knowledge of a scientist. His family is a typical 1960's group other than their rather spectacular ability to love and nurture the unique boy in their midst.

This episode begins with the family sitting in church. The preacher talks about the saving acts of Jesus on Earth. He preaches with a with a don't- mess -with- this-statement tone that by its very tenor discourages doubt. Sheldon immediately raises his hand, interrupting the sermon and asks, did you mean Jesus saves the Earth or the universe? Once establishing that the bungling reverend meant universe, Sheldon begins a line of inquiry about the nature of Jesus's work in nonhuman venues. He asks, will the eight legged octopus alien be saved by a human Jesus or an octopus Jesus?

Sheldon understood that Jesus might have a different task given a different population of listeners. The common ground of divine revelation might require a different communication platform. Is it possible that our current divisions require a similar translation? Maybe we need to highlight or even celebrate when we see the existence of God grounded in unity even if it takes a different form than our previous understanding.

Each of our preachers pointed strongly to ethics, born of love and of an understanding of a reality larger than our own, as a way through our divisions. I take great hope in this consensus. Love, not just in word or dogma, involves us in healing brokenness. Love in action is evidence of God's place in our world and experience.

As I watch the wars in the Middle East, the ripping truth of families at odds over election politics, or even tumult created by book banning and an imploding healthcare system, I take hope that there are tools in our life of faith to help heal the brokenness.

I can image young Sheldon raising his hand right now and asking this preacher: If God is made manifest in loving actions, why are there wars and evil in the first place? A younger me would invoke the mystery of God and move on. Now in my 39th year of ordination, I feel confident in offering a response that is not consistent with my theological training: God is not all powerful. But, God is all loving. God cannot be all loving and all powerful at the same time or our world would be a safer, kinder place than it is. God sent a human

embodiment of love to assist in building good and dismantling evil. God engages us, in our own limited and vulnerable ways, to continue the work of making God manifest. High calling, yes, impossible, no.

In so many ways the world is a mess right now. I don't need to list the doomsday reasons for that statement. You can fill in your own. And, it is not the first time it has been a mess—an unholy potentially fearful bullocks of messiness. I have been known to rail against the travesties of Hamas and Israel and then lose sleep over the helplessness we all know in light of the conflict. I have shed tears over the political arena and I have lost my temper over government programs and corporate executives that seem to care more about survival than justice. There is reason for deep despair and deeper anger over much that we see. And yet, and yet, I seem to stumble upon those individuals and groups that work with conviction and kindness to create a place, like the stable in Bethlehem, where we are visited by enough common good that we have hope. Times when we rely on an understanding of our place in a larger picture: call it divinity or call it a universal will for good.

The narrative of Jesus, the story of God in our midst as a baby, requires some suspension of Sheldon-like logic. That said it is a story rich with symbol and meaning and goodness. In this story we have a claim to the best aspects of common ground. We can embrace and even embody that goodness. We can take actions to perpetuate goodness. We can ask the questions of a new creation, relying on the goodness of this community that helps stave off fear, taking up the tools that make for a covenant and learning from our missteps along the way.

I am hopeful...I spend time in the terra firma of hope contemplating the ways that we can translate the goodness of God into the behaviors that help us move toward divine unity. It is my prayer that we learn the language of this eight-legged time in history while hanging on to the hope of God's intent to bring us all to the common ground of divine unity.