

On my first morning in Seattle, after arriving to my new apartment at about midnight and getting less-than-adequate sleep due to nerves and the time change, I awoke early--very early--around 5:30 am. Not on purpose. There were a bunch of crows (which are apparently quite common here) cawing at other birds around my apartment building, having a grand ole time flapping around and cussing in bird-speak at each other. Or perhaps they were saying good morning. But for my purposes, it was cussing. How could they be so rude? How could they not know that I just moved across the whole entire country and needed some rest? The thought crossed my mind: "now I'm awake, I have more time to contemplate how much nicer sleeping would be."

What a cynical response, Pastor Anita! How snarky you are! And yes, we all do have our moments where cynicism seems like the best response, either to get a laugh or relate to someone or just to cope with life's ups and downs. And y'all, there's a lot of coping to be done right now, isn't there? This week has hurt. This week has been filled with disappointing and dangerous announcements from our government; with stories of children separated from their families, unsure of how and when they will reunite; with tales of horror from Nicaragua; with news of fires devouring homes; with heartbreaking stories of yet more young black people being targeted for violence by white people with weapons. I'm sure we can add our own personal hurts, disappointments, fears and anxieties to this list much too easily.

The author of our Scripture text today knew a bit about the suffering and injustice in the world. Psalm 14, in the Common English Bible, reads: "Fools say in their hearts, there is no God. They are corrupt and do evil things; not one of them does anything good. The Lord looks down from heaven on humans to see if anyone is wise, to see if anyone seeks God, but all of them

have turned bad. Everyone is corrupt. No one does good—not even one person!” This is quite an indictment, and one that surely transcends time.

You see, the psalms were composed thousands and thousands of years ago, when the ancient Mesopotamian world was controlled by warring empires who sought to stretch their borders and increase their might and enlarge their purses. They were willing to do this at any cost, which often meant the lives of the least among them. Many cities were allowed to maintain their own governments after the large empire swept through, as long as they would pay tribute. And so, seeking to please the empire and keep the empire’s army far away from their cities, local governors and bureaucrats would turn to corruption, keeping the peasant class disenfranchised so that they might maintain their own standard of living. And so, in the ancient world, mind you, it became so that cities and nations and empires were highly stratified societies. The rich got richer and the poor got poorer under the careful and threatening watch of the empire. And so, many people turn to psalms of lament and exasperation, to cynical responses, to getting their news from late-night satirists, to jokes-that-aren’t-really-jokes,if-you-know-what-I-mean ... or did I just skip over a few millennia?

The author of psalm 14 refers to “fools” who do no good and “devour my people like they are eating bread but never calling upon the Lord.” Injustice was rampant in ancient Israelite society, particularly after the Assyrian and Babylonian exiles, and the author expresses their exasperation as the psalmists do so well: heavy-hitting truth-telling coupled with a “prophetic oracle of judgment.” (J. David Pleins) These “fools” are blamed for the exploitation of people that is as common as eating bread, these “fools” are

predicted to panic when Israel's salvation comes, when the Lord changes the people's circumstances for the better.

If I am honest, I have always heard that these "fools" the psalmist condemns are the atheists. Have you heard that as well? "The fool says in his heart there is no God," quip vociferous TV evangelists and mega-church preachers. "And do you want to be a fool? Turn to Jesus!" And honestly, no, I don't want to be called a fool. And I find the assertion that atheists and non-Christians are fools upsetting and offensive to people who have found a moral code somewhere other than in Judeo-Christian teachings. As we know all too well, just saying you're a Christian does not exonerate you forever; we Christians are as capable of moral failings as non-Christians. But that's neither here nor there, really, because it's not atheists the psalmist condemns. In psalm 14, "fool" is used not as a description of intellectual capability or philosophical belief but as a moral category.

In the preaching companion "Feasting on the Word," Alyce McKenzie writes that the author of psalm 14 is calling fools not those who "refute God's existence," but who "dismiss God's relevance." They are "practical atheists" who seek no accountability from their community or from their Creator God. God might exist, but it doesn't really matter to these "fools" the psalmist considers. And the hard truth is that sometimes I am a fool in this sense. I find comfort in my racial, class and educational privilege so that the problems of the world do not touch me as much. I rely on my own self and my own understanding when I consider how to fix the world's problems: some good logic and sound ethics should do the trick, is God even around? I choose not to trust and not to hope in God sometimes, when the hurt and brokenness and pain in the world get to be too much. The "practical atheist" in me is like

someone meeting their friends at a party. “Oh, Jehovah’s not here yet? Ok, I’ll just chill on my own and take care of this myself.”

This summer we have been looking to Barbara Gibson’s reimagining of the psalms. And instead of talking about “fools,” she pushes us to think about “cynics.” Even though I just grudgingly admitted to being a “fool,” in the Biblical sense here, Barbara really challenges me with her “the cynical people say there is no truth.” Woah. How am I supposed to react to that? She’s talking about *me*.

The sometimes-raunchy, most-times hilarious website UrbanDictionary defines a cynic as “someone who always expects the worst and most selfish motives out of everyone and everything. Otherwise known as experienced.” Case in point. The musical group Nana Grizol’s song “Cynicism” contains these poignant words that deliver their own definition: “Cynicism isn’t wisdom, it’s a lazy way to say that you’ve been burned.” Stephen Colbert adds these words: “Cynicism masquerades as wisdom, but it is the farthest thing from it. Because cynics don’t learn anything. Because cynicism is a self-imposed blindness, a rejection of the world because we are afraid it will hurt us or disappoint us. Cynics always say no.”

In these challenging times, as we may be tempted to be a “practical atheist” and deny God’s relevance to our political and personal situations, we may be tempted to be “lost in our own confusion” and “see no reason to feel hope,” as Barbara put it. If we can be honest together, we must acknowledge that the “fools who live without accountability” and “cynics who say there is no truth,” the modern day versions of those empire-abetting Mesopotamian governors who exploit the peasant class, are also sitting in churches.

Sometimes I think of that old Pogo cartoon that says, “I have seen the enemy and the enemy is us.”

But Psalm 14 does not leave us there, sitting in our grief and confusion and guilt as we realize that perhaps we are the ones who act the fool or play the cynic at different points of our lives. The psalm carries an exhortation to all of us, inviting us to consider the harm that we perpetrate and perpetuate, challenging us to transform our behaviors, to stop exploiting and devouring those whom we see as less-than us. We need not live this way.

Stephen Colbert named that cynics often say “no,” and we see that in the Scripture’s beginning lines: “fools say there is no God,” “cynics say there is no truth.” But then Colbert continues his quote, offering this challenge to cynicism: “But saying “yes” begins things. Saying “yes” is how things grow. Saying “yes” leads to knowledge. So, for as long as you have the strength to, say “yes.””

This is what the author of psalm 14 is talking about. When we give up our cynicism, we find that we are embedded in an interlocking community of all creation. Fighting cynicism means accepting accountability. It means embracing the idea that situations of injustice can change and that we can positively participate in that change. Resisting cynicism means resisting the powers that lull us to complacency, telling us that we have no need of God, no need of accountability, no need of anyone and anything outside ourselves. We find that we belong to each other. That our salvation is bound up in each other. That our lives depend on each other.

A few weeks ago, Tim called us to consider the topic of belonging, a difficult concept. And here, in the midst of Psalm 14, it resurfaces, as the psalmist laments the lack of belonging in their community that has been

perpetuated by injustice. Belonging also pervades as we notice the end of the psalm where the psalmist calls forth deliverance and salvation for their community. Salvation is a communal activity, it has not been distilled into the simple individualistic “I’m going to heaven” or “Jesus died for MY sins” that many of us are familiar with. No, at the close of the psalm, the writer, refers to all of the house of Jacob, the whole community of Israel, who will be delivered. Even the fools and cynics were included, because, according to Pogo, “they is us.” As Barbara Gibson writes, “too many people find no meaning in life. They have closed their hearts to the mystery. Don’t they know the bread of life is baked for them too, not just the earthly bread? All they have to do is ask.”

And ask we must. Those among us who have hardened our hearts to the mystery of belonging, who have found ourselves complacent in our positions near the top of the food chain, who have unquestioningly relied on our own reason and strength. We must ask for the bread of life to be shared, for the cup of hope to be passed to us as we engage in truly belonging to each other. Many in our midst have been participating in the conversations on race with Rev. Doug Avilesbernal, our Executive Minister for the Evergreen Region of American Baptists. Throughout the past three Wednesdays, the groups that have gathered have considered the various privileges we carry with us, particularly the racial privilege that many of us have by virtue of nothing but birth. These weeks have led us through individual and communal defensiveness, pain, frustration, confusion, self-reflection and careful consideration of where we go from here. These weeks have shown us the hard beauty that comes with throwing aside our foolish lack of accountability and tossing off the binds of cynical complacency, as we learn how to love all people better.

And so for as long as we have the strength, will we say “yes”? To growing? To seeking truth? To hoping when hope seems hopeless? It is entirely too easy for good, kind, justice-seeking Christians to be cynical right now. There are so many things to say “no” to, so many places in our world where wisdom and life experience and kindness and hope seem just not good enough anymore.

The quote at the top of your bulletin is one that I have loved for a long time. “Hope is the bird that feels the light and sings while the dawn is still dark.” And I ask you, friends, where is hope to be found, when even Good Christians Like Us are caught up in examining and undoing our privilege and divesting from the ways we exploit “the least of these”? Good Christians like us...well, according to Barbara Gibson, we must seek to tell the truth. Not the cynical truth. The real truth. That life is hard. Injustice is still rearing its head. And yet, we must affirm that God is real and present with us. We must embrace the mystery of loving and living that calls us to resist powers that separate the strong from the weak. Resist the temptation to greed that separates the rich from the poor. Resist the pull of scarcity and fear that leads us to horde and put up fences and hide from our neighbors. Because Jesus did not call us to do what is easy. He called us to do what is right. He invited us to participate in our salvation by asking these questions, undoing privileges, engaging in brave conversations, asserting our common humanity: fools, cynics, good Christians like us alike. He asked us to demonstrate hope by recognizing God’s presence with us in the midst of injustice. God is as near to us as our bodies, Barbara Gibson reminds us.

It may be dark. It may be scary. It may be divisive. People may be dying. So, friends, hear the Good News: here we are, fools and cynics and good

Fools, Cynics, and Good Christians Like Us
Anita Peebles, July 29, 2018

Christians with the work cut out for us. We are the birds awakening in the middle of the night so that we might call out to our God, call out for all to hear that hope is not hopeless, that the light is yet coming! The light is on its way, even now! So let us embrace the mystery of how we belong to each other as witnesses to the image of the Divine in each of us. Let us lean into the hope we find in God's constant unfailing presence, "in spite of our cynicism and fear," Barbara writes. And I'd add, "in spite of our foolishness." Though the night is still very dark, the dawn is breaking.

May it ever be so.

Benediction:

Katie Van Koevering is preparing to move to New York in a couple weeks, and we wanted to honor her by sharing a benediction that she offered at the conclusion of Youth Sunday on June 6, 2010.

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All of us have been blessed in this church. But I think we have been blessed most of all. Blessed by you. You have helped us grow and supported us in this community since before most of us can remember. And this week, we want to turn those blessings back to you. We want to give you a piece of what you have given us.

May your bake sales be prosperous.

May your youth rooms be redone.

May your ideas be listened to.

May your gym always be open.

May your music class be ever changing.

May your paint stay more or less on your paper.

May your mistakes be endearing.

May you be cherished.

May you be kept safe.

May your faith be strong.

May your church be supportive.

May your path in this world be smooth.

Amen.