

Hello everyone. It's a real privilege to join you today.

After the presidential election when Dan Misleh invited me to speak with you, he wrote: "We are in dire need of messaging around hope ... So many in the faith community feel distraught as we see giant steps backward for our creation care efforts. ... We need to lift our spirits by focusing on how hope can motivate us into climate action."

Let me say that I share these feelings. There are moments when I feel close to despair, knowing the harm that will be done to the whole community of life on Earth, including humans, under this administration. Last year was the hottest year on record. Unchecked global warming threatens the whole human family and all other species. Yet this administration has already pulled the U.S. out of the Paris Climate Agreement and promotes drilling for oil and gas for power and profit.

It's sickening, heartbreaking. What does hope mean in the face of this destruction? Let me offer you three thoughts: one about hope in basic human terms, one from a faith perspective, and one that envisions where both together can lead us.

1. Hope is a muscle of resistance.

Let me put this distraught feeling in context. Our American culture rewards success. Many of us engage in a good project with the expectation that given

enough elbow grease and money and time, our efforts will produce good fruits. Many of us don't have a great deal of experience with being thwarted. The spotlight is on success. It's the air we breathe.

But think back to other struggles. Remember in the history of our country the struggle to abolish slavery, then the civil rights movement to stop lynching and the Jim Crow laws, and to this very day efforts to turn around violent racist acts. Individual persons and organized groups have met setback after setback. What keeps the effort going? A deep sense of what is right and true, regardless of what the dominant culture says, which translates into strong love that cherishes the dignity of every human person regardless of skin color, which translates into action on behalf of justice in the face of opposition. The freedom song sang, "We shall overcome, some day." But those who sang it knew that if we don't press on now, then we shall overcome ... never.

In a culture that glorifies success, this kind of resistance is countercultural. Barbara Ehrenreich, the columnist and author of "Nickel and Dimed," put it this way: "The idea is not that we will win in our own lifetimes, and that's the measure of us, but that we will die trying." [pause / repeat]. The measure of our courage is the measure of our willingness to embrace disappointment, acknowledge the wounds it causes, and rather than retreat from further participation, keep on insisting on what is good and possible for the world. In other words, hope.

Here is another example. When apartheid was the law of the land in South Africa, Nelson Mandela, a Black leader, was jailed for decades for advocating equality between all races. In 1987 when I taught there, resistance was boiling over. The government had declared a state of emergency, stationing troops and tanks at major intersections, and detaining thousands (including priests for giving homilies against apartheid). In this tense situation, one day in Cape Town I spotted an amazing graffiti. On a pale wall, someone had used thick black paint to write the words: “Hang Mandela.” And someone else had come along with a little pencil, and in between those two words had written the word “on”: Hang on, Mandela. ON! What an imaginative act of hope.

We need to be brutally realistic when facing the damage this incoming administration will do the environment, to climate, to all living species struggling to survive on a heating planet. There will be terrible losses. In the face of this we , because we love the Earth, we need to exercise hope, the muscle of resistance, which may have grown a little flabby. Obviously, this is far from simple optimism, thinking that everything will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense to do, regardless of how it turns out.

To round out this first point, consider the wise words of Václav Havel, former president of Czechoslovakia who was earlier imprisoned for opposition to the Communist-led, authoritarian state. He mused: “Hope is an orientation of the

spirit and orientation of the heart; it transcends the world that is immediately experienced and is anchored somewhere beyond its horizons. Hope, in this deep and powerful sense, is not the same as joy that things are going well, or willingness to invest in enterprises that are obviously heading for success, but rather an ability to work for something because it is good, not just because it stands a chance to succeed.” ON, indeed!

2. In a faith community, we hope because we trust that despite the odds the living God is with us and is faithful.

We live in an evolving world that is not yet finished. Suffering, struggle and death are everywhere, as indeed also are beauty, goodness and new life. Believers in the living God are not excused from this ongoing conflictual condition. For some strange reason, some of us tend to forget this, approaching God with the expectation that if we are good all troubles will magically be taken away.

To the contrary, let us dwell for a moment on the biblical story of the burning bush, which I think is pivotal for the meaning of hope. When the story opens the Hebrew people are enslaved in Egypt. In exile in the desert Moses encounters the Holy One in a fiery bush. He hears the divine voice say that God sees the misery of the people, hears their cries, knows what they are suffering, and therefore has come to deliver them by sending Moses to tell Pharaoh, Let my people go. The voice from the fiery bush then reveals the divine name YHWH,

which traditionally was translated “I am who I am.” More recent biblical scholars translate this name: “I will be with you” - a relational, intersubjective meaning. God will accompany Moses and walk with the people in the struggle to be free.

The exchange at the burning bush sears into consciousness a truth that is always and everywhere the case. The Creator Spirit is present amidst suffering with the intent to heal, redeem and liberate. Write this truth large across the struggles of all human beings. And because God is faithful to all of beloved creation, write it large across the community of life on Earth. In creating the world God is present here and now to each creature, loving it into existence and promising its future. When trouble comes, the Creator does not turn tail and flee. Ever faithful, the living God does not abandon the beloved creatures but is present despite the suffering, in fact in the midst of suffering, calling us to the future with the promise of something more.

Widening our scope to survey the whole Bible, it’s extraordinary how many groups of people, leaders, prophets, poor individuals cry out in distress. A multitude of psalms carry the laments of people in trouble, run ragged by their enemies, out of resources, crying out for help. Being a believer in God does not remove us from the conflictual world. But it does give us a resource: the grace of a basic trust that the great Creator God who made heaven and earth is an infinite ocean of Love who is with us in the midst of disaster to help and save.

The New Testament calls this basic trust in God ‘hope’ and likens it to an anchor, “a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul” (Heb 6:19). Picture how an anchor holds a boat in place despite stormy winds and waves that rock and swing it around. The anchor of an abiding trust in God holds us steady through life’s storms. Having hope at this perilous moment in our nation’s history means anchoring our life, our heart, our actions, in the living God who is with us. Far from naive optimism or wishful thinking on the one hand, or despair on the other, it grounds us in divine faithfulness, letting this anchor keep us steady as we press on, regardless.

Only a month ago we celebrated Christmas. It is a wondrous story, the Messiah born in a stable, honored by angels, shepherds, and magi following a star. In Matthew’s gospel, though, the birth story ends in a terrifying way. The new parents with their baby flee as refugees to a foreign land to escape the jealousy of a murderous king, while all the little two-year old boys left behind are murdered. Needless to say this does not get enacted in most Christmas pageants. But note how there is conflict, suffering, even disaster, from the beginning of Jesus’ story.

The story ends in conflict too, on a cross, Jesus dying in agony with a terrifying cry: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mk 15:34). But the story doesn’t end there. In death Jesus dies not into nothingness but into the embrace of the living God who, in a new act of creation, gifts him with new life.

He is risen! The resurrection of the Crucified is God's surprising, compassionate act of fidelity as promise for all the world.

Yes, things fall apart. But "I will be with you" is the proper name of the Creator of heaven and earth. And so we hope, with the gospel at high noon on Christmas day which proclaims, the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it (Jn 1:5).

3. Where both together lead us: to hope which is generative

In our day, we need to be prepared for a long and challenging struggle against harmful ecological moves initiated by this new administration. How we choose to respond will determine our own lives and something of the future of the world itself. Total discouragement will destroy our capacity to do anything. But exercising the hopeful muscle of resistance, grounded by the anchor of trust in God who loves the Earth and is walking with us, will generate tough, loving actions that have at least the possibility of sending this spinning world in even a slightly different direction.

A beautiful image in a poem by Marge Piercy\* captures the dynamism of our undertaking. She writes:

We must shine  
with hope, stained glass windows that shape  
light into icons, glow like lanterns

borne before a procession. Who can bear hope

back into the world but us ....

Note that this is more than an individual calling. Collectively our light can shape icons that comfort and protect. In solidarity with other civic and religious groups, supporting each other, and loving the natural world, the Catholic Climate Covenant can shine like a glowing lantern, processing into the darkness.

To conclude: do not stop loving. As good human beings, exercise hope, that muscle of resistance. As believers in God, Creator of heaven and earth who walks with people in trouble, act responsibly for ecojustice in the midst of the mess.

Thereby we actively participate in God's redemptive work in the world. Let the apostle Paul have the last word: "Hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit given to us" (Rom 5:5).

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\*Marge Piercy, an excerpt from a longer poem 'Stone, Paper, Knife' which appears in her collection also called 'Stone, Paper, Knife' (Pandora Press, 1983).