

# Episcopal Divinity School

*Buenos días. Buenos días.*

Usually at gatherings like this, you want someone to come up and basically say something very motivational—something like, "If the mind can conceive it, and the heart can believe it, then we can achieve it." Unfortunately, you invited me. So, I come not bringing hope, but rather I'm going to ask you to *embrace hopelessness*.

The reason being is that the moral arc of the universe is broken. One of my philosophical mentors, Miguel de Unamuno, wrote in 1913: "*Dios no os da paz y sí de gloria.*" For those of you who have yet to learn the language of the angels, let me translate that for you: "May God deny us peace so that God can give us glory."

Amen.

See, anyone can get a job within ministry where they can become the custodians of the status quo and live a life of peace. The chair of my dissertation committee, John Raines, would always say that the classroom is correctly named: it is a room where you learn your class—and what class you belong to.

Therefore, our education system has been designed to teach us where we belong. But if your vocation means more than a job, then you cannot have peace. We get this from the biblical text, where those who proclaim liberation, like Isaiah, were sawn in half, or Jeremiah was stoned—and not the fun way—and Daniel was thrown into the lions' den, Jesus was crucified, and James was beheaded. So, if you want peace, if you want everyone to praise you for what you are doing, then maybe you're doing something wrong. You can achieve peace if you decide to speak truth to power. I say that because power already knows the truth, and they could care less what you say.

The difficult thing is to speak truth to the powerless. All too often, our minds and our consciousness need to be raised. The job is to convince those who have been told that they are objects of their subjectivity, those who have been told they were non-human, of their humanity. Such a ministry can be revolutionary.

To achieve peace is to preach a Eurocentric Christianity that says nothing about placing children in cages, or a neoliberal economic policy designed to rob the Global South of its natural resources and its cheap labor, or that says nothing about certain lives not mattering. As I'm reminded by James Cone,

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he would say that such a Christianity that says nothing about Jim Crow is satanic. So, to achieve glory, I ask you to *embrace Saturday*, where my people live in hopelessness—where my salvation and that of my people depend on the rejection of Eurocentric Christianity.

Let me be clear: all enlightened Eurocentric philosophical and theological thought is detrimental to communities of color and detrimental to the Global South. You see, when the French in their revolution were crying out, "*Liberté, égalité, fraternité*," it was never meant for the people they colonized in Vietnam, Haiti, or Algiers. Liberation and that slogan were only for white French people—specifically, white French men.

Eurocentric philosophy and theology have been constructed to exclude us from this beautiful rhetoric about liberation. Instead, they are designed to justify our oppression, to spiritualize our oppression. How white people read their Bible is damning to those who live on the margins of whiteness. Employing Eurocentric philosophical thinkers in our own arguments for liberation only allows us to contribute to our own oppression. Defining reality through a Eurocentric worldview is to use their language and their thoughts to reinforce the oppression in which we live.

As a side note, just to be clear that we're on the same page: when I say "white," I'm talking about ontological whiteness, where many people of color are very white, and they walk around with names like Marco (Rubio) and Clarence (Thomas). Before confronting white theology, I think those of us on the margins need to confront ourselves and how our minds have been so colonized.

I remember when I was a young, hot Latino man. I had this hot, red Capri, and I was driving from Miami to New York. When I got to New Jersey, I got stopped by the highway patrol. I was asked, "Can I please search your vehicle?" Of course, they had a gun and I didn't, so I said, "Yeah, sure, go right ahead."

As they were searching my car, I asked the officer, "What are you looking for?"

He said, "Well, young Latino men with Dade County and Miami license plates are usually trafficking cocaine from Miami to New York." He didn't use the word "hot," but that's what he meant. He didn't find anything, and he let me go with a ticket.

Now, as I was driving away, you would think I would be indignant about the racial profiling I had just gone through. But instead, what went through my mind was, "Thank God the cops are doing their jobs

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and keeping us safe." You see, my mind was so colonized that I was seeing myself, interpreting myself, and defining myself through the eyes of my oppressor.

So, the first act of liberation has to be the decolonizing of my mind—to see myself through my own eyes. When you have a colonized mind, using the tools of the colonizers to philosophically justify your oppression contributes to your self-discipline. To learn ethics, to learn history, and to learn theology from those who profit from my marginalization is blasphemous. We embrace a Eurocentric faith concept like “hope” that pacifies us in the midst of our oppression, leading to spiritual liberation rather than physical liberation, and leading us to believe in the riches of the hereafter rather than those of the here and now. Such a colonized mind makes God vomit.

My intellectual mentor, José Martí, once said, *"El vino de plátano, y si sale agrio, ¡es nuestro vino!"* Again, for those who have yet to learn the language of the angels: "We shall make our wine out of plantains, and even if it comes out sour, it's our wine." The first step of liberation is the decolonizing of our minds and making our wine, our philosophy, our theology, and our way of thinking out of the roots of our own cultures—to contextualize this in our own culture among our own people. If the wider community demonizes us for doing this, then we're doing something right. But if they praise us, we should be very wary.

So, what would a social ethics look like from the perspective of the disenfranchised in an era where the arc of the moral universe is broken?

I once took a group of students to Cuernavaca, Mexico. The purpose of that class was to connect the riches of North America with the poverty of Latin America to see if a link existed. One of the things we did was visit La Estación, a squatter village surrounding the railroad station where people literally built huts out of discarded material to live in.

At the end of the day, we had to debrief, bring everybody along, and make sure everybody was emotionally okay—you know, take care of white fragility. We all got around and started talking about what people saw. One particular student said, "You know, these people live so horribly, but when I looked into the eyes of the little girl, I saw hope in her eyes."

At that moment, I had an epistemological meltdown. My response was, "I'm not sure what you saw in her eyes, but in about another ten years, she's going to be turning tricks to put food on the table, or at

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best, be stuck in an abusive marriage. She will live in poverty her whole life, as will her children and her children's children. The only reason you want to place hope upon her is so that you don't have to do anything about it, because it's in God's hands."

Hope becomes a middle-class privilege that excuses us from doing the work of God. Now, hear me clearly: if hope is a noun, then it is a possession that I can commodify and have for my own benefit. But if hope is a verb, then it's something I must do for others to have, even while I am being led to my crucifixion.

When you are hopeless, coming along and saying, "All things work together for good to those who are called according to God's purpose," sounds trite and uncaring. Again, I'm making my *vino* out of my own cultural *plátanos*, because in Spanish, hope is *esperanza*, which comes from the root word *esperar*, which means "to wait." So when I say hope, I am saying wait. I'm not sure what we're waiting for, and that waiting could last over 400 years before Moses comes along.

If you've heard this story, raise your hand: There was a little girl at the beach one day after a storm, and the beach was full of starfish. The girl was throwing the starfish back into the ocean. Have you heard this? Okay. As she's throwing them back, there's this grumpy old man who sees her and says, "You can't save them all." She picks one up, says, "But I'll make a difference to this one," and throws it in. And the congregation goes, "Aww."

I'm the grumpy old man.

What I realize is that if we can reduce hope to the individual—again, this Eurocentric, individualistic concept—if we can reduce hope to the individual, then I can ignore all the thousands of other starfish on the beach that are dying.

When I came to this country, we lived in the tenement buildings of Hell's Kitchen. This was back when Hell's Kitchen was really Hell's Kitchen, not the trendy neighborhood it is now. The tenement building had one bathroom per floor to be shared, and it was rat- and roach-infested. I made it out of Hell's Kitchen. I am now a professor, I have middle-class privilege, and you can put me on a pedestal and say, "See? He made it. One made it, yay."

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But I cannot forget the hundreds of others from my neighborhood who are six feet under and never made it out. It's not because I was holier—God knows that—and it's not because I was more Christian. I just got lucky, and they did not. I cannot ignore all the other starfish because their rotting flesh is filling my nostrils to the point that I have to yell out, "I cannot breathe."

My audience may not be you, and that's okay. When I was writing the book [\*Embracing Hopelessness\*](#), my teaching assistant (TA) at the time was a former gang member. He had tattoos everywhere, even on his eyelids. He was arrested just because of the way he looked. He didn't do anything, but he was a Latino with a lot of gang tattoos, so they arrested him and he spent six months in jail. He asked if he could take my manuscript—it wasn't published yet—with him so he could finish reading it in jail. I said, "Sure."

He told me when he got out that he gathered other gang members and they did a book study on my manuscript. He said, "You know, when we got to the hopelessness stuff, they got it. That wasn't an issue. They were there." That's my audience. If you have hope, all power to you. I'm not here to take it away. I'm speaking to those who don't have hope, to say it's okay and to provide an ethical way forward, which we'll get to in a few seconds.

I say this because every once in a while, I walk the migrant trails between the U.S. and Mexico to meet people and give them water, food, and medicine if they're in need. I remember one day I was walking and there was this guy who had begun the journey. You begin the journey from Mexico with two jugs of water to cross a desert. He said early on, he tripped and fell, the jugs of water broke, and he was lost without water. But the Virgin Mary appeared to him and led him to my camp, where we found water.

My immediate thought was, "Well, where the hell was the Virgin Mary when four out of every five people died?"

But no, I didn't say that; I'm not that cruel. My response was, "*Gloria a la Virgen María*. Hallelujah. Praise Jesus. I'm so glad that she led you to water." I celebrated his hope, even though inside I was thinking, "Where the hell is the Virgin Mary when every four days, five Brown bodies die in the desert?"

He's not my audience. My audience consists of those who die in the desert. That's my audience, and that's who I am speaking to. So if you have hope, hallelujah, power to you. If you don't have hope, let's talk about what we can do.

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Of course, I have to mention the prophet of hope, Jürgen Moltmann, who relies on Hegel and tells us that we can have hope because God operates outside of history. Because God makes promises, we can rely on those promises and have that hope. However, when I think of who God makes promises to the Jews, God doesn't always keep God's promises. Primo Levi, who was in Auschwitz, once said, "There is no God, only Auschwitz." What do you do when God does not show up?

The idea is that at the end of history, I'm supposed to look back and say, "Oh, I see what God was doing all along." But I'm sorry, I can't justify Crusades, genocides, and slavery. I don't see that yet. If the arc of the moral universe is long, and if it's going to bend toward justice, then we're the ones who have to do the bending. We're the ones who have to do the bending.

The way I understand history—and I have to confess, I've been corrupted by Foucault and Walter Benjamin—is through a specific lens.

Have you ever noticed that every once in a while, Jesus appears in a tortilla? Yeah? Korean scientists hooked people up to brainwave monitors and showed them static images, like when wood has weird patterns on it. They discovered that when we see that chaos, our minds are geared to try to find order in the disorder. One of the easiest ways to find order is to find something familiar, like a face.

For me, history is disorder. There is no salvation history. By salvation history, I'm not talking about a theological concept; I'm talking about a Hegelian concept—that history has a telos moving in an upward direction toward some finality. Capitalism is a salvation history: with the passage of time, the rising tide will raise all boats. Marxism is a salvation history: we will one day get to the utopia where the state will wither away. And of course, Christianity is a salvation history.

For me, history has no rhyme or reason. History is just me taking past events that I can string together in such a way that justifies my presence and gives me the argument for what I want my future to be. If history has no rhyme or reason, how then can we have any type of understanding of how this is all going to end?

That ambiguity, I know, is scary. But then again, Ecclesiastes reminds us: "'Vanity of vanities,' says the Teacher, 'absolute futility. Everything is meaningless'" (Ecclesiastes 1:2). What I'm trying to do is embrace Saturday because if I do that, I begin to realize that hope domesticates.

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When I visited Auschwitz, they had a sign over the gates that said, "Work will set you free." The idea was, if I saw that, I would have hope that if I kept my head down, did my work, and didn't make eye contact, I might survive this hellhole. But they didn't. It was a mass killing camp.

*Hope domesticates us.* My pushing for hopelessness is because I realize that once I have nothing to lose, I become the most dangerous. If my people can get to the point where they have nothing to lose, then we can become more radical in our praxis.

I gave this talk at the anniversary of [No More Deaths](#), the sanctuary movement that began in the '80s, and [Borderlinks](#); they were having a joint celebration. John Fife, who is one of the leaders of the original sanctuary movement and a convicted felon for his work, said that after my talk, he realized that instead of trying to fix the immigration crisis, once he realized it was hopeless, they started taking a lot more radical actions. That's where I want to get us to: radical actions.

So where is God in all this? Where is God during lamentation? Sometimes God is absent. Even Jesus cried, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" As good theologians, we say things like, "Well, you know, Jesus was carrying all the sins of the world, and God is so fragile He could not look upon sin, so Jesus felt that separation." Really? God is so fragile He can't look at sin? Then God could never look at me. No, Jesus felt the abandonment of God, and it's okay to have that emotion.

Sometimes God can be a little sadistic. Have you read the Book of Job? Seriously. God is gambling with Satan, and they say, "I bet you I could make that person curse you."

"Yeah, I'll take that bet."

Then, for about 42 chapters, you're trying to figure out why, and at the end, what does God say? "I'm God. How dare you even question me? I do whatever the hell I want." That's not very pastoral.

Our Jewish siblings understand that sometimes God has a dark side. Isaiah says, "I form the light, and create darkness: I make peace, and create evil: I the Lord do all these things." God brings good and evil? Or better yet, God sends an evil spirit unto Saul. Wait a minute, I thought Satan did that. God sends evil spirits?

Now, I don't understand any of that. I'm not a biblical theologian, so I'll let you all worry about that. I'm just saying that sometimes we put God in such a small box where we do not really read the

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scriptures to find the complexity and the inconsistencies of this deity that we follow. That is what makes the biblical text so powerful to me.

I wrote a trilogy called [\*Badass Christianity\*](#), and it's an attempt to understand what to do in the midst of hopelessness, because hopelessness rejects quick and easy fixes. Just to be clear, hopelessness is not despair. Moltmann says, "Hopelessness is despair," but Moltmann got it wrong. Despair means I curl up into a fetal position and gnash my teeth because there's nothing to do. Hopelessness is desperation.

When people pick up two jugs of water to walk across a desert, it is not out of despair; it's out of *desperation*. Because if they stay, they die. If they die crossing the desert, at least they were trying. Some may make it, and many do not. This hopelessness is an embracement of the desperation that propels me toward praxis.

Unamuno, whom I quoted earlier, tells me it really doesn't matter if there's a God or not; what's important is to believe that there is a God. What he says is brilliant: "You cannot prove to me there's a God, and you cannot prove to me that there is not a God. I have to choose to believe, and that choice to believe is what we call faith." Once you can prove there's a God, it's no longer faith; it's science.

So, I choose to believe in the God that may or may not be there. If God is there, great—I've already picked out my mansion for when I get to heaven. That's not a problem. But if I'm wrong, who cares? I'll be dead; I won't know. I choose to believe in this God, and more importantly than believing in this God, I believe in the character of the God whom I choose to believe in.

I don't seek answers that lead me to correct doctrines. When we get to heaven, we're going to find out we were all wrong anyway. I seek to understand why we suffer, and in the midst of that suffering, what becomes the correct action—the correct praxis—to employ, fully aware that the injustice I am seeking to fight will continue long after I am dead and gone.

I fight for justice not because I'm going to win. I'm not gonna win. That's not why I fight for justice. I've been working on immigration issues now for over 20 years, and it is worse now than it was then. I'm dreaming of the good old days when it was just a milder form of oppression. I'm not going to win; it's going to get worse. I do not fight for justice because I'm going to get an extra ruby in my crown when I get to heaven. I fight for justice because it defines the faith I have chosen to believe in. More importantly, it defines my humanity.

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So, I need to move into what that praxis needs to be. Praxis. We have developed a structure where I have to go to the police department to get a permit from the police department to protest the police department for police brutality. We have domesticated protest. This is the only country where you can *drive* to a *march*. Think about that.

What I have been calling for is what I call an ethics *para joder*. For those of you who don't know Spanish, this time I'm glad, because *joder* is a word you never use in polite conversation. It is equivalent to a certain English word that begins with 'F' and ends with 'K' and is four letters long. It is an ethics that screws with the system. It is an ethics that screws with the structures and the system. It is an ethics that overturns the tables.

I'm getting this not because I sat in my ivory tower and came up with it; this is what oppressed people have always done. I'm thinking of the Young Lords in New York back in the '60s, during my time. They gathered all the garbage in the streets of Spanish Harlem, put it on the corner, called the sanitation department, and said, "Hey, we cleaned up our neighborhood. Please come pick up the garbage." The sanitation department laughed and hung up on them.

So, they took those same garbage bags, went to Third Avenue, built a wall, and set it on fire. The cops came, beat them up, and threw them in jail. But *The New York Times* also showed up and started doing stories on the sanitation department. Now, they pick up garbage in Spanish Harlem twice a week. By screwing with the system and holding the government responsible to their own rhetoric, they were able to bring about change.

The other thing they did, which I love, was go to the church, *La Primera Iglesia Metodista* in Spanish Harlem. They asked, "We would like to use the kitchen to provide breakfast for our kids going to school. We want to have a clothes closet. We want to have attorneys here to help our people with their legal cases."

The pastor said, "Ah, you bunch of commies, get out of here."

So they showed up the next Sunday, picked up the pastor, threw him out of the church, and nailed a sign to the wall: "The People's Church." For three weeks, they did all those things, and the church was packed every day. In other words, they held the church responsible to the rhetoric that it proclaimed.

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This ethics *para joder* is to hold those in power to their own rhetoric. Screwing with the system, like I said, is not something I invented; communities of color have always done this. In the Black community, you have Br'er Bear and Br'er Rabbit as tricksters. Mexicans have Cantinflas. Cubans have Pepito. Puerto Ricans have Juan Bobo. Indigenous people have Spider (Iktómi) and Coyote. Oppressed people have always looked to their tricksters as being liberative. This ethics *para joder* is a trickster's ethics that realizes that fighting head-on could get us killed. But if we are wise as serpents and gentle as doves, we might actually survive and still fight for justice.

I get this because I am a child of Eleguá. For those of you who are not familiar, Eleguá comes from the Afro-Cuban religious tradition based on the Yoruba people of Africa. Eleguá is the ultimate trickster, and as a child of Eleguá—going back to my own roots, making my wine out of my own plantains—my ethics has to include Eleguá. This is an ethics that attempts to hold systems responsible.

I know that in the Black community during the Civil Rights Movement, they talked about civil disobedience; the laws were bad, and you wanted to change them. In the Latino immigration community, we talk about civil initiative. That is to say, the laws are good; we signed treaties saying we will take care of people looking for asylum. It is the government that is in civil disobedience. It is the government that is breaking the law, so we act in civil initiative to hold the government responsible to its own laws and the treaties it signed. This is what this ethics *para joder* is: holding people accountable to their rhetoric by playing the trickster.

The social ethic that I am engaged in is a nonviolent ethic that teaches me how to lie so I can discover what is truth; that teaches me how to cheat to level the playing field; that teaches me how to steal so I can feed those whose bodies have been stolen; that teaches me how to joke so I can deliver serious facts; and that teaches me how to disrupt and deceive so I can usher in liberation.

*Gracias.*