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Julia Bratu

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East End Baptist Church

by Julia Bratu

Background info: Because I totally didn't realize how close the end of the semester was, and I had to stay longer than expected over break due to poor health, I ended up having to visit someplace in Roanoke for my last field trip. Originally, I had wanted to visit the Friends of Richmond - but since I wasn't able to be in Richmond this past weekend I decided to make a visit with a branch of Christianity that has always had a negative stigma in my relatively nonreligious lifestyle; a Baptist Church. Unexpectedly, I ended up having a very pleasant experience with this small church.

East End Baptist church is in a humble building at the edge of a small neighborhood about at the edge of Vinton. I visited on November 29th, 2015. It is located at 1030 Mecca St NE, Roanoke, VA 24012 in a brick building with a white roof on top. I barely would have recognized it as a church had there not been a cross on the outside at the very top of the roof. The service started at 11 AM, presided by Pastor Troy J. Mueller, a man who appeared to be middle age wearing a fitted suit and what I must say was a pretty stylish purple tie.

I entered the building through a side door and was immediately greeted by a group of people handing out booklets that outlined church announcements and the service for the day. The booklet featured a picture of a lit purple candle and the word 'Hope,' with Lamentations 3:26 written below [It is good that man should

both hope and quietly wait for the salutation of the lord]. On the back, there was a helpful explanation of the meaning of advent, which the church was just beginning to celebrate this past Sunday.

Once I entered the main room, there was a brown strip of carpet leading up to the podium in between wooden pews, over tile. In front of the podium, there was a table still adorned with some harvest decorations (pumpkins and leaves) that read 'in remembrance of me', and a small table next to that with three purple candles, one pink, and one large white candle in the middle. To the right, there was a piano and a spot for a band (although only the piano was played that day) and some chairs in the back for a choir.

All of the people there were primarily older and white with their children, aside from one woman with blue hair and her own baby talking congenially with the others. A few people smiled very friendly and introduced themselves to me, since I was easily noticed. There were only about 30 people there and it seemed like a tight knit community, so it's hard to miss a newcomer wearing a bright pink shirt with silver hair. Despite the friendly atmosphere, the room was lined with large windows that had their shutters down - this made the room seem slightly drearier than it actually was.

Once the service began the piano played and

the choir of about 10 people came out from the back. It was primarily older females, but there were two men sitting in the back. The pastor arrived at the podium and began announcements first. He was fairly charismatic, with an air to him that definitely made you feel like whatever he had to say, it was going to be important and kind. One of the first announcements was about the budget and financial committee, which immediately let me on to the fact that this community was very open and honest with each other. The opening was very casual and friendly, as after the announcements and the first song everyone immediately stood up and greeted each other. This took me off guard, as I watched people cross the room to say hello to their fellow members and also to come say hello to me. Everyone was delighted to see me and treated me as if they had known me for a long time, although I was new to them. It made me feel very safe in this church.

After everyone sat down again, a group of women made a speech about the importance of advent. As I said before, I've never been very religious so I learned a lot from this experience. I'm glad that I ended up having to come on this particular Sunday. They explained the symbolism in the lighting of the advent wreath on the small table and made it easy to understand. The evergreen leaves symbolize God's love, and in the form of a round wreath reminds Christians that it is eternal. The lighting of each candle shows the light that Jesus Christ brought to a dark world, with the purple ones symbolizing royalty and that Christ is king, and the pink one representing rejoicing in the coming of Jesus. It marks the halfway point of advent, being lit on the third Sunday. The white and fifth candle is lit in this church on December 23rd, representing the coming of

Christ. It was all very much a learning experience for me, and I continued to ponder this as they lit the first purple candle.

The congregation seemed fairly reserved, but they once again exuded an air of friendliness and openness. My mind faded for a moment each time we stood to sing a song (I didn't feel comfortable singing along) and I finally noticed a cross at the very back of the room. It was so simple I almost missed it, but I found that fact to also be quite charming.

The sermon on that day was about hope, where the pastor explained the difference between 'worldly' hope and 'biblical' hope. The way that he explained it was that worldly hope has no real basis or foundation and that it only stands for wishful thinking, where biblical hope is more like faith directed in the future. He felt that those who have no belief in God also lead very sad lives because they have nothing to have faith in and continue giving them hope. While I don't necessarily agree with this point of view I did like the fact that he described the hope he was referring to as 'faith' directed.

It spoke to me on a different level that another may not have been able to reach. The readings that he used to emphasize this were Romans 15:13, where Abraham hoped that god would follow through on his promise to give him a son (he had faith that God would), and Genesis 3:15 that tied the sermon into Christmas. The reason why, was that it showed that Christ himself was hope. Essentially in Genesis 3:15 God is laying down some seriously sick burns at Satan (because in my experience everyone is incredibly sassy and full of shade in the bible) and foreshadows the coming of a savior. A lot of the sermon did go over my head because

I wasn't able to connect very well with the idea that hope is exclusively useful to those with religion, but the pastor drove his point very well.

There isn't very much symbolism to explain for this service, because it was so casually conducted. It was far less structured than my last field trip, which I honestly enjoyed. It made me feel like I fit in more and a lot less like I had no idea what I was doing. About 40 minutes of the hour long service was the sermon, and right after was the ending prayer. Everyone stood up to talk after the service ended, and a few people told me how glad they were that I came right before I left myself. Overall, I enjoyed the casual atmosphere and am glad to have gone this past Sunday because now I know what on earth people are talking about when they mention symbolism featured in advent. East End Baptist church was fairly small, but it did have a lot of heart. •

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