
Hope Is Here! is designed for congregational, communal, or small-group use. To assist groups using the book, we've developed a free, downloadable congregational guide, which includes reflections on the lessons in the book; Scripture references from the Old and New Testaments and prayers, which can be used in study, devotion, or preaching opportunities; practical applications of the spiritual practices found in the book; and space to work together to create congregational commitments. Visit www.wjkbooks.com/HopeIsHere to download these resources.

Hope Is Here!

*Spiritual Practices for Pursuing
Justice and Beloved Community*

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Preface

My father was intrigued by a sermon that invited him to reconsider the conclusions of a favorite Scripture (1 Cor. 13). He said the preacher described current traumas, fears, and anxieties that pervaded the country and world. He then affirmed the apostle Paul's naming of faith, hope, and love as abiding virtues, but instead of agreeing with Paul about the superiority of love, the preacher proposed that for current times the "greatest of these is *hope*." The preacher's conclusion startled my father and me. I had never heard anyone elevate hope to such heights. The spotlight on hope captured my attention, and I have never withdrawn my gaze. My journey with hope began anew and with regard for its "greatness." Assessing whether hope or love is greater has never been my aim. Understanding the significance, power, and ways of hope, however, became a spiritual quest that has disclosed hope's presence for all the seasons of my life.

In conversations, community meetings, media interviews, and books, I am attuned to the various ways hope is the emotion that I hear spoken about most often. Hope is used to speak to all matters of desire, optimism, and need. Whether used in relation to personal crises, anguish about loved ones, wanted or unwanted job transitions, foreboding weather forecasts, fanatic devotion to sports teams, threats to the soul of the nation, or horrors from international conflicts, the word "hope" announces our hearts' yearnings.

Where Hope Abides

It may be that the only clue to the eternal available to us
is found in the tight circle of time and space
by which our little lives are grounded and defined.

—Howard Thurman, *With Head and Heart*

Something is loosed to change the shaken world,
And with it we must change!

—Stephen Vincent Benét, *A Child Is Born:
A Modern Drama of the Nativity*

Hope Is

Hope is here! With us now! Available for the transformations needed in the world and in our personal lives! Hope is not waiting for miracle medications or changes in political leadership. Its presence is not dependent upon eliminating racism or treaties ending conflicts. As poverty and injustice persist, hope remains. Hope refuses to abandon us, though despairing conditions prevail both externally and within our hearts. Hope abides with us and is active in our immediate realities—whatever they may be. Understanding this ever-present nature and transformative power of hope can relieve our feeling forlorn in troubling times. Hope is here to empower us to live life more fully.

Perceiving hope as always with us is neither Pollyannaish nor a rejection of living with painful outcomes. Hope does not rely on illusions about reality and our capacities. Hope is strong, persevering, and here for us *now*. If we embrace its true nature and purpose, we need not live with illusory understandings of hope. This chapter reveals hope's immediacy and transformative power, not just for our circumstances, but *for us!* Contrary to our understanding of hope only as an attitude (hopefulness) or as a source that lifts our spirits as we anticipate fulfillment of desires, hope often *disrupts* our desires. This difference is consequential.

Aligning our faith commitment with God's hope for us is essential to perceiving the immediacy of hope for personal transformation and for beloved community. Our faith journey requires compelling visions of beloved community that God dreams for us—visions that depict the essence and work of hope. Becoming a people of hope involves paying attention to the visions and the lens through which we perceive the visions. Our faith journey also involves opening our hearts to the spiritual practices that help forge our becoming. The chapter and its questions summon more than intriguing considerations about hope; they summon decisions for living as a testimony to hope.

"Hope" is one of the most treasured words to express the hunger of the heart. We hope that our health and the health of those we love are strong in sustaining us for the adventure of life. We hope our children will flourish. We hope to be successful in the work that gives us joy. We hope that compassion and justice prevail in our homeland and throughout the world. In these ways, hope is the heart's *desire*.

"Hope" is also used for what is thought to be a *trustworthy source* for a desired outcome: "Without question I place hope in our governmental institutions to withstand any assault on our democracy." "I know we will recover from the flood damage because I have hope in the goodness and responsiveness of people." In these examples, "hope" identifies sources that we believe have the power to answer perceived threats and devastating circumstances.

Even when the word "hope" is not used, it is implied when persons speak their *expectations* that a particular time and/or set of circumstances will birth new realities into their lives. This is captured in the religious proclamation of God's impending action in history: "When

the Messiah comes . . ." During the 1960s, I often heard social activists declare their anticipation that injustices would be reversed, "When the revolution comes . . ." When scientists lack explanations for the questions that arise from their experiments, many speak their hope that future scientific investigation will yield the breakthroughs that now elude their efforts. When needed social change seems destined to be deferred beyond our lifetime, persons will often say, "The next generation will bring new attitudes and energies to moving society in the right direction." Hope is envisioned in the tomorrows that hold the promise for what we so hunger to receive today.

Hope as desire, trustworthy sources for our desires, and anticipating a promising future are the most familiar ways we use the word. Using "hope" in these ways not only names what we want, how we feel, and what we believe; it also fashions our commitments of time, energy, and resources. As with many words, "hope" has various meanings for speaking our hearts. However, if we interpret hope *only* in terms of longing, conviction, and anticipation, we most likely end up knowing more about ourselves than we do about the fullness of hope. It's crucial that we discover a more expansive and sacred meaning of hope.

Likewise, although we often speak of "love" in terms of personal feelings, love is more than feelings of affection. Love compels caring, even when we do not feel affectionate toward another. When Jesus instructed, "Love your enemies" (Matt. 5:44), he called us to relate with love, even though we suffer our enemies' abuses. Also, we can experience love from others even when we do not feel loved. However intense our passion for someone or something, our feelings and behaviors do not exhaust the power and meaning of love. We must take care to avoid domesticating love and hope as only human emotions. *Love and hope are God's essential transformative forces for beloved community*. A community based on hope requires love, and a community based on love requires hope.

Perceiving hope as a *transformative force* is fundamental to perceiving "the greatness of hope" discussed in the preface. We do not experience hope because we have intensified our efforts to be optimistic or gathered more resources to address our problems. These initiatives may result in our *feeling hopeful*, but the purpose and work of hope are not obliged to conform to whatever we select to feel encouraged

about. We experience hope because *hope possesses us* on its terms. Grasping this meaning of hope is crucial to our journey in this and forthcoming chapters.

I proffer two approaches for opening minds and hearts to this understanding of hope as purposeful and immediate. (1) Relax and possibly release the effort to make hope captive to what you want it to be. The faith journey is taken to see even unexpected disclosures of God's love and ways. (2) Trust the spiritual practices to guide your ongoing formation for God's sake. The greatness of hope far exceeds our desires, trustworthy sources for our desires, and our anticipating a promising future. *Hope Is Here!* invites us to recognize and respond to hope as a force of God that enlivens us to life.

A Force of God That Enlivens Us to Life

God is not estranged from creation—including each one of us. Even indifference to God and corrupt behaviors do not cause God to abandon us. The prophet Jeremiah pleads, "Although our iniquities testify against us . . . [and] our rebellions indeed are many, and we have sinned against you. . . . Yet you, O LORD, are in the midst of us, and we are called by your name; do not forsake us" (Jer. 14:7, 9b). The apostle Paul writes to assure Christians in Rome that whatever their challenges, God sustains them. His confidence about God's everlasting love is expressed through his Christ-centered theology: "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 8:38–39).

Throughout the Christian Scriptures, God's covenantal relationship with humanity is sealed by God's love. God's judgments and blessings come from God's loving responsiveness.

Your steadfast love, O LORD, extends to the heavens,
your faithfulness to the clouds.

Your righteousness is like the mighty mountains;
your judgments are like the great deep;
you save humans and animals alike, O LORD.

How precious is your steadfast love, O God!

All people may take refuge in the shadow of your wings.
(Ps. 36:5–7)

Steadfast love is a sustaining and transforming force of God. Wherever God is, love is. Wherever God's love is, hope is. *Love and hope are inseparable forces of God.* Speak about one at any length, and your description will sound increasingly like the other. Beware of any situation where one of these forces is claimed to be operative without the other. Actions in such a situation may be done in the name of God, but they are not of God.

Beating a child to correct insolent behavior may be motivated by a parent's determination to prevent increasing acts of disrespect that will be ruinous for the child's future. However well intended is the punishment to preserve a bright future for the child, the beating will likely be experienced as a traumatizing and alienating act of dominance. Mass incarceration results from promises to the public that a less crime-ridden future will come when those convicted are held in jails and prisons. However, mass incarceration is a strategy that fails to consider how lengthy prison sentences, prison conditions, and the elimination of rehabilitation programs are damaging to the incarcerated, their families, their communities, and the larger society. Proposed tax cuts that leave families and corporations with more disposable income can appear to be policy that brings increased financial vitality to a community. However, when those same tax cuts jeopardize funding the social safety nets for people living in poverty, the whole proposal becomes cruelty. A vision of hope that excludes compassion for all involved is a charade. Any future worth anticipating as an expression of hope requires love.

With hope and love identified as forces of God, expect to hear, "But what if someone does not believe in God?" "Do atheists have hope?" "What about agnostics?" To be clear, the reality of hope is not dependent on believing in God. By analogy, the reality of gravity is not dependent upon believing in it. Some people base their understanding of hope on science or human ingenuity or moral rectitude. Their beliefs do not nullify the reality of God or the presence of hope as a force for their lives. Hope is an equal-opportunity force. The

challenge for each person is to discern hope correctly and to live with a vitality that feeds the hunger of the heart. My personal and ancestral testimony about hope is grounded in God.



Hope is purposeful. As a force of God, it enlivens us to life. Acting upon and within us, hope inspires us to imagine creatively, perceive reality anew, persevere in despair, risk with opportunities, and trust beyond our control. Hope exists with the purpose of expanding our awareness and hearts to experience God's abiding love through all creation—including ourselves. When catastrophes wreak havoc upon the land, hope works to cause us to lament and to repair the damage. When personal trauma feels like more than the human spirit can bear, hope works to strengthen resolve and to bring the desolate into the company of healing relationships. Even when the manifestation of hope we most desire does not occur, hope engages us to endure . . . or to marshal our strength to pursue creative next steps . . . or to understand ourselves and our challenges more clearly than before. *Hope emboldens us to give ourselves for a future worth anticipating.* More of ourselves is available to take the next step with an increased sense of capacity for what is daunting or promising or both.

Physical pain can literally stop us from taking “the next step.” Pain not only controls movement; pain also commands our full attention. What's wrong? What caused this? Was this a momentary hurt or a signal of more to come? Will the trouble heal itself, or do I need a medical examination? What medicine will address lingering discomfort? Should I seek something or someone to assure this will not happen again? Pain triggers anxiety and fear—emotions that construe hope as eliminating the pain.

Chronic pain is a whole other magnitude of severity. No timetable exists for pain relief. It can overwhelm our physical and emotional energy to endure and be available to what gives us joy. What troubles today is foreseen as the experience in all our tomorrows. Facing the dire outlook for the future, the pain of the present moment intensifies. Chronic pain not only consumes our energy; it alters our relationships with persons, our vocations, our dreams, and our sense of self. Hope's work in these varied experiences is to bring forth vitality

and joy to purposeful living. Its impact is personal and communal as it abides with sufferers, supporters, medical professionals, and those reticent to become involved. Hope persists to birth us anew.

Reynolds Price gives testimony to this in his memoir, *A Whole New Life*. His chronic pain began in his early fifties when he was already an acclaimed novelist, playwright, essayist, poet, and professor. A cancerous tumor in his spinal cord caused excruciating pain and treatments that resulted in the paralysis of his legs. The extent of his pain was so severe on one day, that when asked to indicate his pain level on a scale from one to ten (“ten being agony to the point of unconsciousness”), he responded “twelve.” Price remained in pain for the rest of his life and never walked again.

The memoir is uncompromising in portraying the shock of the life-changing assault on his body (both by the tumor and medical treatments), emotional distress, and the death of whom he had known himself to be. With his remarkable writing, we understand the horror of the long and traumatic struggle. After bearing witness to this struggle, he writes:

I think I can say that almost any degree of physical pain can be borne. And not only borne but literally displaced from the actual center of a human life and then ignored. I can make that claim because I'm convinced that all pain has one huge design on us—to rule our minds—and therefore that the secret of living with pain is wanting hard to throw it out of central control, then finding the sane means to work that steady mental combination of distancing and coexistence.¹

Pain continued to be felt. But pain was not in control of who he was and who he was becoming. Explaining how he endured and advanced not only to “a whole new life,” but also to “a better life,” he writes that among “the first props beneath my own collapse” was prayer.² Especially noted are prayers spoken from the depths of agony about what would come next, and the answer he received was “more.” In the depths, this is not the response one longs to hear. Price, however, received the answer as the assurance of God's presence and as the caring alert to prepare. Speaking gratitude for all

who sustained him through his ordeal, he includes, "The unseen hand of the source of all has never felt absent as long as a week."³

Forever in pain, forever a paraplegic, he speaks about being a more sensitive person to what most counts in life, to having "work sent by God" that has enabled him to be more productive and having more delight with friends and students. This is no glorification of pain. It is, rather, a testimony about what can be done with pain so that it does not capture one and prevent one from being enlivened to life. Excluding the four years of trial and error of his most intense suffering, he writes, "*I've yet to watch another life that seems to have brought more pleasure to its owner than mine has to me.*"⁴

Richard M. Cohen's *Strong at the Broken Places: Voices of Illness, a Chorus of Hope* pursues the meaning of hope for persons with chronic illness. Cohen's life struggles with multiple sclerosis and colon cancer explain his motivation for the book: "I had embarked on a journey to see chronic illness through lenses other than my own."⁵ Over a period of two years, he cultivated relationships with five persons, each with a life-changing illness: ALS (amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, also known as Lou Gehrig's disease); non-Hodgkin's lymphoma; Duchenne muscular dystrophy; Crohn's disease; and bipolar disorder. Their journeys are as varied as their diseases, backgrounds, personalities, and support systems. Still, common is their hunger to live with hope. Cohen makes clear that their hope is not expressed as anticipating a medical cure. They want to know themselves and to be known as more than their diseases. This involves living with a sense of purpose that makes a difference in their lives and the lives of others: experiencing loving relationships and community, having enjoyable moments, having a sense of agency about how to live.

Explicit references to God vary. As I said earlier, "the reality of hope is not dependent on believing in God. . . . Hope is an equal-opportunity force." While many may look inward or to relationships, the religious utilize prayer to announce to God, "I am here!" The announcing declares our readiness for God's enlivening power so that we can experience the fullness of life.

Reynolds Price and Richard Cohen bear testimony that even chronic illness and pain do not defeat the enlivening power of hope. Hope that is only "desire" does not survive unrelenting pain. Soon

or late, when the permanence of illness and pain is undeniable, hope based completely on emotions of desire or the eventual removal of pain will not prevail. However, the testimonies of Price and Cohen portray the greatness of hope as an enlivening force even when suffering continues. We are wise to remember their witness to the enduring power of hope when our own lives confront pain and suffering. Their examples can inspire and assure that even in affliction and tribulation, hope does not abandon us.



The personal examples for living creatively with pain and disease have implications for chronic communal anguish. We are more than our social illnesses, and it's essential that we do not concede our destinies to their damaging power. *Commitment to our God-given sense of purpose must be as relentless as the pain.* Joyful times can and must be experienced even as pain persists. We have agency in being enlivened to life.

Our communities suffer from systemic racism, environmental hazards, mass incarceration, deadly poverty, chemical addiction, domestic abuse, gun violence, and a legion of other ills. Some people feel the pain of these ills more than others. They struggle daily to breathe freely in suffocating circumstances. What feels unbearable today has no sign of diminishing in all their tomorrows. The intense pain is theirs; the deadly sicknesses affect *everyone*.

Even if the commitment to justice and beloved community is not the motivation of everyone, indifference to the crises of communal pain is unacceptable. People primarily motivated by self-interest ought to understand that the named diseases of society are malignant. They affect some directly and all indirectly. Unless we engage these ills, they will destroy lives, public institutions, and social ideals for generations.

As an allegory, imagine society as occupying a high-rise building. The basement and lower levels are where the poor and oppressed are confined to live by virtue of their limited resources and the long-standing codes of the building. The most affluent have penthouses on the top floors. Everyone else lives on the middle floors. When a fire starts in the basement and begins to move up one level after another, residents on the upper floors may be concerned, but the distance between them and the fire leads them to conclude that no crisis exists.

They return to whatever had their attention before the fire began. It's difficult for them to believe that what is happening to those near the ground could endanger their well-being. Their privilege has led them to assume that their building's state-of-the-art fire-extinguishing system, the history of firefighters rushing to their rescue, and the privileges that come with occupying the upper floors will protect them from the fire with which the less fortunate are contending.

You see where this is going. Just having sympathy for those on the lower levels will not be life-giving for anyone. Persons living on the upper levels who feel no sense of obligation to address the crises occurring to those living below them are naive and hard-hearted. Middle and upper tenants would be foolish to believe that the fire cannot reach them. Yet the world house burns as if no crisis exists. If you think this allegory oversimplifies social stratification and crises, I agree with you. But that does not make it inaccurate. Those above the lower levels may not have set the fire; previous generations may be responsible. Nevertheless, indifference allows the fire to rage.

Becoming a people for justice and beloved community involves becoming *engaged* in the healing process. Indifference is not a faithful option. Love and hope provide the strength and courage to be present to pain and to focus energies on the work God dreams for us. Pain will continue, but we will experience *a whole new life*.

Fulfilling God's dream for us is hope's purpose. The biblical narrative of God's dream for us can be interpreted as our becoming a people enlivened to God's will that love and justice prevail in us, in our relationships, and throughout creation. Hope empowers the realization of this dream. Hope is an unrelenting force that is not destroyed, even in the midst of pain, carnage, and defeat. As God persists, hope persists.

On the social level, the reality of hope as a purposeful force is evident in the speeches of Martin Luther King Jr. when he assured his listeners that though the civil rights struggle was protracted and difficult, the outcome of the struggle was certain. He often quoted theologian and social reformer Theodore Parker, who said, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." In other words, life-affirming energies are embedded in the very structure of existence. This conviction is heard from Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who, while living under the oppressive apartheid system of South Africa, declared, "Apartheid

is already dead." He described their current crisis as fueled by guardians of apartheid who failed to accept that they were frantically trying to sustain a system that had no future. Apartheid contradicted the creative energies of life that reflect God's will for humanity. In essence, the fate of apartheid was doomed before it was even established. Purposeful forces are at work in life to resist injustice and despair, and to empower compassion and creativity. Hope is such a force.

Becoming a People of Hope for Beloved Community

"Beloved community" is a term that characterizes God's dream for us. Martin Luther King Jr. used this term for casting his vision of community based on love, respect, justice, reconciliation, and non-violent protest. King was indebted to Josiah Royce (1855–1916), who coined the term "beloved community" to emphasize the fundamental role of community in shaping moral persons. Both Royce and King perceived community as the crucible for forming moral persons who contribute to the commonweal.

Biblical images symbolizing beloved community abound:

They shall beat their swords into plowshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation;
neither shall they learn war any more.
(Isa. 2:4)

The wolf shall live with the lamb;
the leopard shall lie down with the kid;
the calf and the lion will feed together,
and a little child shall lead them.
(Isa. 11:6)

Give justice to the weak and the orphan;
maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute.
Rescue the weak and the needy;
deliver them from the hand of the wicked.
(Ps. 82:3–4)

All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. (Acts 2:44–47)

The prophet Micah summarizes what God requires of us personally and collectively: “to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God” (Mic. 6:8). When asked about the greatest commandment, Jesus responds: “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’” (Matt. 22:37–39). Later, Jesus describes love as caring for those who are hungry and thirsty, strangers, naked, sick, and in prison (Matt. 25:31–46). These Scriptures inspire visions that animate our becoming a people for beloved community. Hope enlivened these faith ancestors to see the vision of community God dreams.

Martin Luther King Jr. cast a vision in his “I Have a Dream” speech at the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. In addition to inspiring King’s prophetic witness, this vision (“dream”) inspired and continues to inspire masses of people in the struggle for justice and equality. We not only have the images and testimonies of these ancestors; we also have the need and responsibility to cast our visions of beloved community that arise from perceiving God’s dream for *our* lives, visions of beloved community that depict the essence and work of hope. Without a compelling vision, our faith journey is prone to be consumed by myriad matters that continually clamor for our attention and time; or we wander indecisively among competing ideologies. Visions of beloved community inspire us to persist with a sacred purpose when present realities fail to reflect who God intends us to be for one another.

Coming to agreement about the work of hope and a vision of beloved community can be difficult. Each of us has lived with hope. Our individual understandings of the abiding presence of hope, however, are often at odds with one another. Even when persons

experience the same situations, they often have contrasting feelings and interpretations about what has occurred. A friend and I go to a movie. She leaves depressed because the heroic character is killed by repressive authorities. I leave inspired because of the resoluteness and courage of the hero. She experiences futility; I experience hope. Our life experiences shape *the interpretive lens* we wear in seeing reality.

Becoming a people of hope involves paying attention to the interpretive lens. We are wise to reflect on the experiences that have shaped our lens; and we need to discern when these experiences bring focus and when they distort. Reality is determined not only by what our eyes behold in the world, but also by the lens through which our hearts perceive.

I offer a sketch of my interpretive lens. I’ve grown up as a Black male in the United States. My parents and sister created a home with abundant love, laughter, affirmation, and all that could be desired from a nurturing family. My local Methodist church was my second family. When I thought about misbehaving, I worried about disappointing those at the church as much as I did my parents. Worship services, especially the music, thrilled and transported my spirit to timeless realms that assured me for all time.

At age five I had already experienced discrimination in a downtown department store that refused lunch-counter food service to African Americans—an incident that pained my mother as she explained why we could not eat there. As a five-year old I watched presidential conventions and had a fervent desire for my candidate, Adlai Stevenson, to win, because he had expressed a stronger commitment to civil rights for Black people. When I was eight years old, I saw, and can still see, the monstrous face of Emmett Till in *Jet Magazine* after he had been brutalized, murdered, and drowned by White racists in Money, Mississippi. The message was sent about what would occur to even a child if White people felt insulted. In school I had many classroom drills on what we should do in case of a nuclear attack. As a teenager waiting on a bus, I suffered the humiliation of having the police require me to face and lean against a wall with my hands raised as they searched me and questioned me because I “looked like someone who was reported to them.” At age seventy-one, while walking near the hotel where I stayed as a guest

university lecturer, I was stopped and questioned by a police officer because a nearby bank was uncomfortable with my walking near it.

I've worked as a community organizer to empower welfare recipients to receive their benefits. While I was doing this work, I had death threats and my car was firebombed. Courageous activists have fueled my passion for justice. My teachers and students have taught me lessons and questions to be lived beyond the classroom. Friends and family members have been constant in their outpouring of love. Friends and family members have been killed by gun violence. Wave after wave of national crises have landed on my heart—the civil rights struggle and the assassinations of its leaders, the Vietnam war, women denied equal rights and pay, the United States government's reticence to condemn apartheid in South Africa, mass incarceration, September 11, the defamation of Jews and Muslims, discrimination and violence against persons because of their sexual orientation, the demonization of immigrants and refugees, a pandemic, and an insurrection targeting the US Capitol. This is but a thumbnail sketch of formative experiences that have shaped the interpretive lens through which I see reality.

In addition, my life journey with hope also includes journeying with formative ancestors. Ancestors in Africa. Ancestors in slavery. Ancestors who gave everything in the fight for freedom. Ancestors who bore witness to hope amid despairing realities. Their story is my story. They are in my "cloud of witnesses"; their lives bear testimony to hope as a force of God that enlivens us to life. Their lives instruct me on becoming a person for justice and beloved community.

What seminal life experiences have informed your outlook on hope and beloved community? How do they shape your lens? How do you interpret the work of hope in your life? Avoid selecting only experiences of relief and joy. Identify times when the cry for healing seemed unheard or ignored or muffled. Who are formative ancestors for you and for your understanding of hope?

Hope and Hopefulness

The difference between hope and hopefulness is consequential. As I previously stated, the word "hope" is used frequently to express "desire, to name trustworthy sources for our desires, and anticipating

a promising future." These understandings of hope are appealing, because the fulfillment of our desires could result in so much good. We desire healing, peace, acceptance, and other outcomes that bring us joy. To hope is to believe in the fulfillment of the heart's longings. *We often experience a reassuring agreement between our desires and hope's mission to enliven us to life.* Often, but not always. We are prone to be hopeful (i.e., to desire and expect) about much that is not worthy of us. Choose any of the "deadly sins." People long to make headlines with greed, wrath, envy, or lust. We are capable of desiring to be lost or dead to the moral world. With zeal we calculate for our "advantage," regardless of the cost to our spirits or the community.

For most of us, while our desires are not so blatantly corrupt, they are frequently captive to self-interest. My desires are strongest for my ambitions, my career, my family, my friends, my people. This concern for one's own is natural and often positive. It reflects the heart's commitment to vocation and intimate relationships—a commitment that contributes to the creative impulse of life. However, I must always be careful not to assume that what I want, as noble and laudable as it may be, is what God wants. God's heart embraces much that I fear, hate, ignore, and reject. This challenges the presumption that my desires are what God desires for the work of hope.

Although we are likely to continue using the word "hope" as an expression of our desires, hope itself is more than personal desire. Otherwise, we misunderstand the very essence of hope as God's enlivening force for all. God desires to save the world—the very world with needs that can intimidate our feelings of hopefulness. So many interests in this world compete with our self-interest. We can find ourselves adamant about our desires and less responsive to God's desires. We wonder if God's passion for the world takes into account our fragility and our dreams. Our hopefulness may be at odds with hope as a force of God. The problem is not with God, or even the desires of others we deem threatening. The problem is with us. We need our desiring to be made right. This too is the work of hope. Rather than being a servant to our desires, the force of hope tutors our desiring. Rather than fulfilling our wishes, hope makes demands of us. Rather than having what we desire brought

to us, hope takes us to where we might come alive. Hope enlivens us through experiences that tutor our hopefulness.

Being hopeful is a hunger of the heart. We yearn for the next moment or coming years to free us from oppression. We long for possibilities that transform anguish to joy, war to peace, injury to healing, pain to comfort, hatred to love, injustice and alienation to beloved community. Psalm 40 epitomizes this personal “cry” for deliverance from deadly existence:

I waited patiently for the LORD;
 he inclined to me and heard my cry.
 He drew me up from the desolate pit,
 out of the miry bog,
 and set my feet upon a rock,
 making my steps secure.
 He put a new song in my mouth,
 a song of praise to our God.

(Ps. 40:1-3)

Here waiting refers to the time between experiences of desolation and rescue; it is not a theological assertion of God’s absence. The psalmist is able to wait patiently, with the emotion of hopefulness, because of the assurance that God can be trusted to be present. The Negro spiritual “Hold On (Just a Little While Longer),” sung in the desolate circumstances of slavery, testifies about the power of waiting for a hopeful outcome. The title is also the song’s constant refrain. Two verses change “hold on” to “pray on” and then “sing on.” Waiting is active. There are empowering ways to wait. Each verse concludes with the sung assurance that “everything will be alright.”

Again, the distinction between hope and hopefulness is consequential. Hope is always present, because God is always present. Hope is with us, even when we do not feel hopeful. It’s crucial to know how to live creatively, how to live as people for beloved community, even when we do not feel hopeful. Restoring our hearts in the assurance that hope is here, despite travails, can be comforting and energizing. We are not abandoned. We are not bereft of enlivening possibility.

Those whose lives witness to the power of hope demonstrate that the human spirit can endure the most horrific circumstances of life . . . except possibly the protracted feeling of utter abandonment.

Unrelenting pain, imprisonment, slavery, the traumas of war, depression, betrayal, and deep grief shake the foundations of our very being. The resulting despair may be not only a first reaction but also a final one. Death may be chosen over the will to live. Still, the record of history is replete with the testimonies of persons who came to a greater embrace of life despite their horrific experiences. They connected with a force within and external to themselves that sustained them, even when they were not hopeful. Feeling alone, isolated, overwhelmed, depleted? Yes. But also sensing, perhaps below conscious awareness, that they were not *utterly* abandoned. Hope can sustain even when one does not feel hopeful.

Reassurance and sustenance come from knowing *hope is here*. In addition, especially in circumstances of distress, the hunger of the heart for hopefulness must be fed. Faithful hopefulness is based on hope’s mission to engage us with life so that we become *our true selves—the selves that God created us to be*. Our pursuit of joy must not be confined to a “safe” harbor constructed by anxieties, fears, and prejudices. The power of hope launches us beyond imprisoning realities and frees our senses to be enlivened by what we experience. Hopefulness occurs on this journey. Selves become openhearted to sorrow and care. Selves work through the conflicts and confusion entailed in living creatively with others. This book focuses on opportunities and practices for us to be enlivened by hope, to experience hopefulness, and to live as a people for justice and beloved community.

“I Will Sing a New Song”

Howard Thurman’s meditation “I Will Sing a New Song” builds on the Psalm 40 phrase “He [God] put a new song in my mouth,” which describes the creative response persons “must” make when previous understandings and efforts have proven deficient. In part it reads:

I will sing a new song,
 I must learn the new song for the new needs.

I must fashion new words born of all the new growth
of my life—of my mind—of my spirit.
I must prepare for new melodies that have
never been mine before,
That all that is within me may lift my voice unto God.⁶

The meditation names a faithful response to hope—a response that births faithful hopefulness. Singing a new song is both a means to and a sign of personal transformation. Transformation to God-centered hopefulness and beloved community is hope’s enlivening purpose.

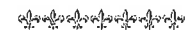
An African adage declares, “Before the spirit can descend, a song must be sung.” The power of song is professed as a means to be alive to the experience and purposes of the Divine. Whether we are alone, gathered in worship, or on a protest march, singing transforms and readies us to experience the enlivening spirit of God. Gloomy moods are brightened. Familiar songs become *new songs* when we sing with others to overcome injustice.

Even singing the “blues” as musical genre can be a means for affirming one’s capacity to persevere. Heartbreaking loss? Yes. Denied every effort to work? Yes. Soul-crushing imprisonment? Yes. Yet in all this, one’s voice is not muted. A person can sing. Singing itself becomes the bulwark against despair. In the song “Stormy Blues,” Billie Holiday declares being so familiar with bad times that bad times are inconsequential. B. B. King brings forth laughter when he sings, “Nobody loves me but my mother, and she could be jivin’ too.” The singers are in a bad state of feeling and mind. Still, they are sustained and they endure by singing about their condition.

In *The Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death*, Howard Thurman writes that enslaved African Americans created songs that professed hope in God and that enabled them to live with hopefulness despite the horrors of slavery. Thurman concludes that the singing of these songs is a profound demonstration of the human capacity to trust in God’s prevailing love and comforting assurance. He assesses these captive singers to be among “the great religious thinkers of the human race. They made a worthless life, the life of chattel property, a mere thing, a body, *worth living!*”⁷

Singing that enlivens our spirits to endure, persist, rest assured, and rejoice is a spiritual practice for hopefulness and becoming a people for justice and beloved community. What songs do you sing through joyful and troubling times? The question is not asking, “Can you carry a tune?” but “Do you have a tune that carries you?” Hope feeds our insatiable hunger to sing a new song!

Singing, in addition to being a literal spiritual practice, has figurative significance. Singing can also refer to how the body is being given to harmonizing with what is vital in life. Like music, life is lived with a sense of tempos, tonalities, rhythms, and improvisations. Every day we compose our lives by how we live. Moods of happiness and despair, eagerness and boredom, love and indifference, courage and fear, celebration and grief inform how our whole bodies voice our dedication to “the art of living.” Singing a new song is not just about the song. Primarily, the singing expresses that *we are becoming new!*



Our becoming new may be experienced as hope coming forth from within us and/or coming to us from without. However, sustaining our hope-inspired formation, which includes our hopefulness, relies upon giving ourselves to practices (commonly called “disciplines” in the Christian spirituality literature) that align us with God’s yearnings for us and the world. We have responsibility for our formation. And we have *response ability* for our formation. There are actions (practices/disciplines) we can take for our becoming a people of hope.

The necessity of personal action is evident in the Thurman meditation I quoted. He says, “I must learn the new song. . . . I must fashion new words. . . . I must prepare for new melodies.” Practices help forge our becoming. Commitment to becoming a people for justice and beloved community involves being a people formed by the practices of hope.

The practices are experiences that reveal. They engage us with ourselves and with others beyond what we have known. The meaning of living with hope is deepened. Our hopefulness is nourished. We bring more wisdom to discerning among the paths forward. We live each day with greater assurance about “things we can do” to live fully.

Throughout history, spiritual practices have been deemed essential to spiritual formation and guidance. The number of ascetic practices is legion; fasting, self-imposed poverty, flagellation, wearing a hairshirt, and becoming a hermit are just a few examples. Even more numerous are the spiritual practices not based on experiencing severe physical and emotional pain; among the list of these types of practices are hospitality, meditation, giving alms, study, journaling, receiving spiritual direction, and worship. The five spiritual practices I identify in chapters 3–7 are not in the ascetic category. Still, their formative impact can lead to singing a new song that has been learned from welcomed and disruptive experiences of hope.

The spiritual practices are *contemplative praying, prophetic remembering, crossing identity boundaries, transforming conflict, and celebrating community*. Each of the five practices is available to us. We need not travel to a far country or encounter a spiritual mediator to be practitioners. The practices are also within our “response ability” to enact them in our lives. Each spiritual practice empowers personal and collective transformation for beloved community. The deepest understanding of the practices comes from experiencing their interrelatedness. *Hope is here in the spiritual practices!*

Questions for the Quest

“Journey” is frequently used to describe how one is living the spiritual life. It evokes images of movement, seeking, engaging new realities and new meanings, and risk. The journey is a quest. A quest inspired by hope. A quest to feed the spirit’s hunger for fulfillment. A quest, whether or not we are aware of it, to give ourselves to God’s dream of beloved community.

A journey’s realities and our feelings about these realities are known and not known. Reliable maps? Maybe. Trustworthy testimony from previous travelers? Maybe. Support from others? Maybe. A strong desire to have a successful journey? Yes. Certainty that it will match our desire? No. Will I be safe? Maybe. Will I be the same at journey’s end? No. Is there an end to the journey? Begin and see.

The questions evoke more questions. Even answers evoke more questions. Questions are not our nemesis. Certainty may be our

downfall, but not questions. With questions we quest with a searching heart and a humility that are crucial to being alive to wisdom and confusion. The work of hope is accomplished with our embrace of the questions that inform and form us. I have previously written:

In his “Introduction” to Pablo Neruda’s *Book of Questions*, William O’Daly writes that “our greatest act of faith” may be “living in a state of visionary surrender to the elemental questions, free of the quiet desperation of clinging too tightly to answers.”⁸

Questions create a space-in-time for reflection. A question causes us to ponder all that informs the reason for the question. And when we confront something more significant than a rhetorical question, a question can cause us to pause and consider and reconsider a response—perhaps for the rest of our lives. Questions deepen our spirits to address the deep hunger.⁹

Questions are pivotal in Jesus’ life and in our understanding him. When John the Baptist is on death row and is desperate to know if immediate hope is near for God’s transforming movement, he tells his disciples to go to Jesus with the question, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to expect someone else?” (Luke 7:19). Jesus is curious if his disciples, those closest to him, truly understand who he is, so he asks, “But who do you say that I am?” (Luke 9:20). A rich ruler is eager to know if his behavior is sufficient to receive an eternal reward, so he asks Jesus, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” (Luke 18:18). Dying on the cross, Jesus utters a question that comes from unimaginable suffering and an anguished heart: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mark 15:34). Questions abound on Jesus’ spiritual journey. Disciples of Jesus are therefore wise to recognize the significance of questions in being on the quest with Jesus.

This book honors the role of questions for questing. In addition to questions asked throughout each chapter, a “Questing with Questions” section concludes each chapter. As an individual or in a study group, identify the questions that most capture your urge to reflect. Consider writing the thoughts and feelings that emerge—thoughts and feelings about the questions and/or your effort to respond to

them. Linger with what you have written. Returning in days, months, or years to what you have written may be a time of reaffirming what stirred in you at the time of your first writing, or you may be surprised by how your reflections have changed. This can be a process where you encounter yourself as a mentor on the quest. *Hope is here in the questions!*

The immediacy of hope comes with the immediacy of a loving God. What a comforting assurance for living through life's personal and social vagaries. Whenever you declare, "I am here," you can give yourself to discerning how hope is here to tutor your hopefulness, enliven you through all circumstances, and prepare you to be a person for beloved community, as you sing a new song, are formed by spiritual practices, and quest with revealing questions.

Questing with Questions

1. How is hope endeavoring to enliven you to life?
2. Identify an event or period when you felt that you were experiencing beloved community. As you reflect upon it, what evoked the feeling of being in beloved community?
3. When have you been inspired to sing a new song? What occurred? How would you describe your new song? How have you sustained such singing? If you have not continued to sing it, why not?
4. What question(s) asked in the chapter connect with your questing heart? Reflect on why you have chosen the question(s).
5. What are your questions from reading this chapter?

Hope's Work and Its Witnesses

The power of testimony is to give voice to the faith that lets people run on to see what the end's gonna be. Stories like these, told in the context of oppression, are what the theologian Leonardo Boff calls "testimonies charged with hope."

—Thomas Hoyt Jr., "Testimony"

Never Underestimate the Power of a Story

—Cynthia Langston Kirk, artist

Invitations

Invitations are sometimes life changing. Someone you meet at a party becomes a lifelong companion. A parent says, "Let's go outside," and on your first night in a remote area the two of you look up to see stars as you've never seen them before; and your whole perspective about the universe and your place in it changes. You go to the worship service as a polite gesture to your friend's request, but amid a jubilant congregation inspired by the music and preaching, an ecstatic feeling overtakes you and continues to open your heart to the More. The notice of the protest meeting posted on the community bulletin board causes you to attend the meeting out of curiosity; that is the beginning of your decades-long activism for environmental justice. Invitations are sometimes life changing.