

PRACTICING HOPE AMID TRYING TIMES

Psalm 27

How do we practice hope amid trying times? My primary area of research over many years has been hope in contexts of suffering. Most recently I have been considering hope in relation to climate crisis. So, today drawing from the Psalm, I will share some practices of hope for the living of these days.

We are living in trying times, aren't we? Some call it a time of "polycrisis" – many different crises all at once. I don't need to name them all as they are omnipresent. Turning on the news at any time of the day or night can trigger a sense of fear, overwhelm and helplessness. Some commentators argue that the news cycle, itself, is caught up in a "feardemic" focusing primarily on the many fearful and threatening dimensions of life these days.

Stories that trigger fear in humans, can be addictive because they release stress hormones – adrenaline and cortisol – that, interestingly, can keep us hooked on the news cycle and bad news stories. It is like our bodies crave a hit of these stress hormones. But when they are released over the long term, they can lead to depression and despair. It is a nasty cycle that can spiral downwards turning us away from love, life and hope.

Our context of threat and fear is not unlike the context of the Psalm we read today, and not unlike the context when Jesus lived – times of overwhelming threat when the future appeared as a dark hole toward which there was uncertainty and lack of vision.

In the Psalm we read today, we hear the speaker struggling with their fear and reaching for hope in the face of cataclysmic events. Through the words, the Psalmist reaches for trust amidst fear, expresses their lament and anguish, calls for God's care and wrestles out their hope which is professed in positive terms in the final lines– "Wait for God; be strong and let your heart take courage, wait for God."

In Hebrew, the words for "waiting" and "hoping" are the same. This hoping/waiting of Hebrew is not a passive/distracted kind of waiting - like waiting in the dentist's office or in queue for a train. No, this is waiting/hoping that is awake, attentive, in constant dialogue with God and life, and manifested ultimately in a posture of trust, of courage, presence and perseverance in spite of all the trials.

Biblical hope, as we see in this Psalm and elsewhere is not pie-in the-sky kind of hope. It is not focussed on some idealized future. No. Biblical hope seeks to serve life and love no matter the

outcome, no matter what the future holds. It is honest about how bad the bad news is in the world, honest about the fears, the sense of threat humans can carry, and all the negating realities of life. And, in spite of all this, Biblical hope perseveres in a spirit of trust and courage to honour life in all its messy goodness.

Today, drawing on scriptural witness and other sources, I would like to look at some practices toward hope, that can support us for the living of these days.

So, what can hope look like in the context of our overwhelming times – between the climate crisis and the disruption of the nations?

The first 3 practices of hope I cluster under the heading “daily practices of attention and presence.” These are practices of hope forged each day. They focus on the generosity of the present moment and connect us with the Earth and each other as our home. I have gathered all the practices from Christian practices and the work of environmental activists and leaders who have given their lives to environmental justice – especially, Zoologist Jane Goodall and Indigenous biologist Robin Wall Kimmerer.

1. Daily Practice of hope = **Gratitude**

I invite us now to engage in our own practice of gratitude - to bring to mind people/experiences/ places/ creatures for which you feel grateful..... Notice the ways your body/soul swell as you image that for which you are grateful.

Gratitude feeds hope. Gratitude is a core of Christian spiritual practice. Gratitude is ultimately a response to grace for the gift of life not of our making, given freely each breath, each moment, each day. Gratitude fosters a sense of sacred abundance rather than depletion/threat. It undermines the greed that drives consumption and the wounding of the Earth and each other

Many of my students have shared that they have a gratitude journal that they write in daily that helps position them in a posture of receptivity to receive the sacred gifts given each day

How might we carve out intentional space each day for practicing gratitude?

2. Daily Practice of hope = **experiences of Awe, Reverence and Love**

Christian traditions of practice and leaders in climate justice movements agree on the importance of carving out space each day to experience awe, reverence and love before the beauty of creation. I invite you now to bring to mind a place in nature that is sacred to you..... Notice how your heart, body, mind, soul is fed by this memory/image.

Research shows that human bodies are hard-wired to delight in the Earth. When humans spend time in forests or by bodies of water (etc.) healing happens. And when we smell soil,

oxytocin, the love hormone, is released. This is the same hormone released when a parent embraces their child.

Experiences of awe, reverence and love in creation feed hope because they invite us to experience ourselves, not as the center and focus, but part of a much larger community of creation with other humans and many other species and processes.

16th c European Reformer John Calvin used the metaphor of “the mirror” to describe God’s call to humans. He said God calls humans to “mirror” or reflect back the divine love imbued through creation. Our experiences of awe, reverence and love reflect back the beauty of God’s love as it exists each day and everywhere

Even as human animals continue destructive ways, Earth seeks restoration, always leaning toward life and beauty – green shoots spring forth after devastating fires, flowers emerge from winter soil, robins lay bright blue eggs, otters play and frolic...

How might we carve out intentional space each day to be fed by the beauty of creation and each other?

3. Daily practice of hope = **learning from the Earth**

Wise climate leaders, describe how important it is to learn from the earth – to learn about what it means to be Earth creatures and to live as part of the larger community of creation. I invite you to consider moments when you have learned from the Earth and its creatures - something about God, something about yourself, something about life and hope.

Kimmerer invites humans to learn from our “older siblings in creation” – other creatures and processes who have adapted over millennia, having lived upon the Earth far longer than humans. They have much to teach us about being human. Job 12:7-8 is explicit about this, voicing the ways animals can teach humans about life and God:

“But ask the animals and they will tell you;
the birds of the air, and they will tell you;
ask the plants of the Earth, and they will teach you,
and the fish of the sea will declare to you...”

Jane Goodall describes how she learns from the earth each day, especially lessons in resilience, community, and hope. She recalls specific trees from which she has learned so much. For example, the Survivor trees in Nagasaki, Japan which were almost destroyed in the atomic bomb in 1945. However, with care and attention, they have grown through the trauma and healed their way back to life. Now the trees, while still carrying the scars of their trauma,

abound with leafy green. An image of hope right before our eyes. The Earth and its species and processes have much to teach humans if we have eyes to see and ears to hear.

How might we turn to the Earth daily to teach us about God, about ourselves, about resilience, and the call to life and to hope?

4. Another important practice of hope for difficult times is the capacity to lament and mourn our losses.

This is not normally a daily practice, but it is important nonetheless. Lament and mourning support us to be honest about what is and enable us to honour the gifts of life and love even in absence.

Throughout the Psalms, throughout many books of the Bible and in the stories of Jesus in the Gospels, we read passages of lament and mourning over loss. Jesus is portrayed lamenting over Jerusalem. He laments what could have been if love had been the way. His lament reflects his love and is part of his process of accepting what is and acknowledging his grief.

Wise climate leaders also identify mourning and lament as important practices of hope for times such as ours. Grief can feel overwhelming, and we often fear it. But when we are loving God's world, we cannot but experience sadness for the losses endured – losses of species, and habitats, loss of a vision for the future, and so on

Jane Goodall tells the story of eco-grief researcher Ashlee Cunsolo who was working among the Inuit of northern Labrador. She was interviewing the people there regarding their losses with the receding ice and the changes of their way of life that came with this. After hearing and transcribing many stories, she came to the point where she just couldn't write anymore. She would sit at her computer and suddenly her hands and arms would ache making her unable to write.

Cunsolo recalls visiting an Inuit elder for advice. He told her that she could not write because all the grief and pain was stuck in her body. He directed her to go into the forest to seek healing. After spending time in the forest speaking and weeping out her sadness and grief, confessing her complicity in the systems of violence harming nature and plunging her arms into the cold river, she describes that space had opened up in her. She was released from the grief her body had carried and again she was able her to express her love and care through her research and writing, without pain.

Like the Psalmist, like Jesus, like Ashlee Cunsolo, we too are invited to acknowledge our losses and grief through practices of lament. Such practices, especially when shared in community, are practices hope as they express love, honour the precious gift of life even in its absence, and open up space in our souls for life and love to grow again.

Where Love is, G-d is also (see 1 John 4:16)

5. Finally, **Engaged Actions that re-connect us to Life** are important practices of hope for today

Action with and for Earth, actions for life, especially when done in community, feed hope. Such actions are not only about resisting and challenging systems that oppress and divide through advocacy and the like. Actions that feed hope re-connect humans with each other and with the Earth with a sense of belonging and home. Shared actions toward life embody Jesus' call to love each other, to love the world and seek its flourishing.

There are many actions here at AHPC that embody hope through justice and compassion. Sponsoring refugees fleeing violence; seeking to build a community of welcome and love across differences, refusing to let differences divide us; seeking dialogue and learning with Indigenous communities; being loud and proud for 2SLGBTQI+ inclusion and justice... to name a few. These may seem small in the grand scheme of things. However, when our actions embody love and lean toward life, they matter absolutely.

In a recent discussion between a theologian and biologist, the theologian described how hope for these times needs to happen on the fringes of power, locally and in community through meaningful collaborations that feed life and love. Such actions on the fringes, he said, lean toward transformation, no matter how small. In response to the theologian, the biologist spoke up saying this is the same with the evolution of species through the millennia. It is by change happening on the fringes that transformation begins.

I invite us to consider intentional ways we, as church, as community, as families and neighbours, can continue to practice hope through engaged action with each other and the Earth.

Today, we celebrate together Nowruz -Persian new year - honouring the promise of new life with the coming of spring. May we embrace this time of celebration as a practice of hope – receiving the many gifts given even here, even now.

In this time of “feardemic,” when life can feel overwhelming and fearful, resilient down-to-earth hope has never been more important.

Whatever the future may hold, as followers of Jesus whose death opened up new life, may we trust and take courage in these dark times. May we together embody the hope that can set us free,

God being our helper. Amen