

Looking
for
GOD
in Messy
Places

A Book about Hope

How to find it. Practice it. Grow in it.

JAKE OWENSBY

Praise for *Looking for God in Messy Places*

“This is beautiful and brilliant stuff, profound and plain, incredibly human, wise and charming. I trusted and enjoyed every word.”

—**Anne Lamott**, *New York Times* best-selling author

“For any who feel frustrated and world-weary, and who want more than just wishful thinking or superficial spirituality, this book is for you! In these pages, my friend Jake Owensby poignantly shows how LOVE is what can truly give us hope to carry on: real love, God’s love for us, our love for each other, right here, right now, in all the struggles of this messy life. And God knows, we need this book NOW!”

—**Bishop Michael Curry**, Presiding Bishop of The Episcopal Church and author of *Love is the Way: Holding on to Hope in Troubling Times*

“Jake Owensby doesn’t hide from the messiness of life. He invites us to live with our eyes wide open, finding God in beauty and pain, wonder and sorrow, clarity and mystery. This is a book to heal broken hearts and restore weary souls.”

—**Brian D. McLaren**, author of *Faith After Doubt*

“For any of us who has struggled to hope in these dark days, Jake Owensby illuminates the most important theological truth I know: If God is truly a God who loves, then help is always on the way, and hope is never in vain.”

—**Greg Garrett**, author of *A Long, Long Way: Hollywood’s Unfinished Journey from Racism to Redemption*, and (with Rowan Williams) *In Conversation: Rowan Williams and Greg Garrett*

“I read a lot of books that leave me feeling smarter, funnier, or more entertained. When I put down Jake Owensby’s *Looking for God in Messy Places*, I had grown wiser. In these times when we could easily despair, Owensby digs deep into his life and the human experience in order to unearth a solid hope, rooted and grounded in faith.”

—**Rev. Carol Howard Merritt**, Senior Pastor of Bedford Presbyterian Church and author of *Healing Spiritual Wounds*

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Abingdon Press | Nashville

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A BOOK ABOUT HOPE: HOW TO FIND IT. PRACTICE IT. GROW IN IT.

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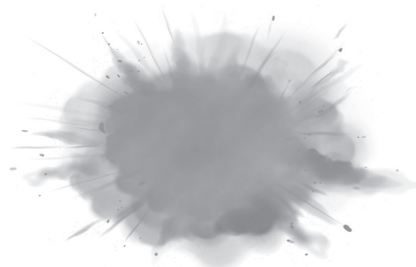
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INTRODUCTION

If love is greater than hope, as Paul says it is, this may be true in part because love is prior to hope, a condition of it.

—Marilynne Robinson, *What Are We Doing Here? Essays*

These days Anne Lamott may be an accomplished skier, but a few years ago she would warm up with the beginners for a while and then stick with the easiest intermediate slope. Once, after several goes on her usual course, she hopped on the chairlift for yet another run and grew momentarily confused. The jump-off looked unfamiliar, and before she realized that it was indeed the correct one, Anne found herself five or so feet above the ground, heading toward a more difficult trail. She dove from the moving chair. Not with a confident, James Bond–like leap. It was more of a tumble that ended with a crash landing. Most of her fellow skiers pretended not to have seen what happened. She waved off the few sympathetic witnesses who offered to help, acting as if this is just the sort of quirky thing she does. And then the nausea hit. On the verge of passing out, she asked Jesus for help. She writes,

I don't know how long I stood there with my hand clamped to my mouth, only my poles and a frayed, consignment-store faith to support me. All I knew was that help is always on the way, a hundred percent of the time. . . . I know that when I call out,

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God will be near, and hear, and help eventually. Of course, it is the “eventually” that throws one into despair.¹

This is a book for those of us who are feeling the weight of that “eventually.” For those whose struggles have been long and for those who are growing weary from heavy burdens. For those facing an unforeseen crisis or for those enduring a slow personal train wreck. For those whose throats have grown raw from crying for justice and for those whose wounds have gone unhealed. This is a book about hope, and I have written it especially for those who refuse to yield to discouragement and despair.

I follow Jesus, so anything I say about hope ends up pointing in his direction in some unexpected ways. So let me admit from the start that many of the typical reasons Christians give for having hope don't work for me—something we will be exploring throughout this book. Some of us derive our hope from the doctrines of the Resurrection and the Second Coming. In the next life, we will be free from the sorrow, pain, and strife of this one. We will be reunited with those we love and reconciled to everyone. God will set all things right. The wolf will lie down with the lamb. There will be perfect justice and perpetual peace. I believe in life after life—in the resurrection of the body, and I believe that God is at work restoring the entire creation to a wholeness that exceeds even my wildest imaginings. Yet, my assent to these doctrines is not what gives me hope.

Hope is something more, something deeper and more abiding. Hope is what keeps us going when the odds just don't seem to be in our favor. The setbacks are piling up, but still we get out of bed morning after morning. That's hope. We keep swimming even though the tide is against us. Hope tells us, “It's worth it.” Doctrines don't do this, at least not for me. But God does, and I don't mean my *idea* of God. I mean my awareness of God at work in all the messy places of my life, my awareness of God raising me to a new life through forgiveness and self-acceptance, my awareness of God mending relationships, changing hearts, and healing wounds. This is God's love made real in the particulars of my life. My experience of the

relentless power of God's love in these ways gives me the sense that this life—the one I am actually living in all its sweetness and frustration, joy and pain—is worth living.

Hope is knowing in your gut, in the center of your being, that your life is worth living even when you have grown bone weary with struggle, sorrow, anxiety, and grief. You have felt the weight of that “eventually” while waiting on God's promises. You have had what I call an “Ecclesiastes Moment.”

The author of Ecclesiastes wrote, “I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had spent in doing it, and again, all was vanity and a chasing after wind” (Ecclesiastes 2:11). In other words, life is pointless. A chasing after wind. We all wind up in the same place: six feet under. This is what I mean by an Ecclesiastes Moment: being drawn up short by the soul-numbing thought that maybe all your sweat, tender devotion, giddy joy, and costly sacrifice amount in the end to nothing.

Some might respond quickly to this by saying, “This life is all about getting into heaven in the next life. What happens here on planet Earth is not supposed to give you hope. Of course we die. But if you believe in Jesus, you'll go to heaven.” While I, too, put my trust in the resurrection, I do not think that anticipating a continued existence in the hereafter makes my life worth living *now*. For that matter, I think that such an understanding of eternal life is not found in the Scriptures.

Though the point of the resurrection is often considered to be getting into the Good Place, where we will enjoy doing fun things and being with beloved people forever, Scripture teaches us that the resurrection is about being transformed by an intimate union with God. To use Paul's language, our relationship with God in Christ makes us a “new creation” (2 Corinthians 5:17). While our relationship with Christ stretches beyond the grave into eternity, it begins in all the ordinary days, embarrassing spectacles, tight spots, dark corners, and tender moments that are our life on planet Earth. Dying and rising—growing from a bundle of divinely-given

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potential, toxic family hangovers, and ill-fitting cultural hand-me-downs toward our true self—takes place right now in Christ. Our hope does not rest on the anticipation of the next life. Instead, our assurance that this life is worth living comes from noticing that God keeps showing up in the midst of it. Responding to God’s loving presence in the here and now stretches us toward the persons we are meant to be. Being loved and giving love empower us to endure hardship, to overcome adversity, and to resist injustice.

My central premise in this book is that hope comes from our awareness of God’s love for us and our response to that love as we extend it to each other in the present, especially in life’s chaotic, puzzling, exhausting, and heartrending places. God is present even when we feel shattered or soul-weary. When we struggle to carry on or feel insignificant. When we are overwhelmed by our ordinary busyness or frozen in place by loss or regret. Throughout these pages, I am responding to a raw, honest question: How do we carry on when we realize that this existence is so fragile that it will be broken again and again and that it moves toward death with each breath? This is the question lurking in our Ecclesiastes Moments. We need a “why” to keep going. And the abysmal truth is that this “why” is never merely a given. We have to choose it, or assent to it, or be chosen by it. Hope is how we inhabit this world with a vital “why.” We trust in our marrow that this beautiful, horrifying, joyful, heartrending life is worth living as it actually is.

My first lessons in hope came from my mother, and for years I completely misunderstood them. When life got hard, Mom would say, “Tomorrow is another day.” She said it when other kids bullied me at school because of my speech impediment, when we were broke and on the run from her abusive husband, and when we were living in a car and begging for food. I assumed that she meant that tomorrow—or some other future date—would bring a happy ending. Things would eventually look up. Our circumstances might be lousy right now, but what we were going through would lead us to a better place. Once we got there, all our struggles would

have been worthwhile. This sounded like baseless, wishful thinking to me. I could not have been more mistaken.

My mother learned about hope in a place designed to drive people to despair. At the age of fifteen, she entered Mauthausen-Gusen Concentration Camp, and hope was the key to her survival in the face of the systematic brutality, humiliation, and deprivation of that place. Hope did not protect her from starvation, disease, torture, or execution. Hope is what kept her going each day.

As far as my mother could tell, prisoners left that camp only as corpses. There was no reliable news of an approaching Allied army. Everybody worked long, arduous hours on a diet of five hundred calories a day. People frequently collapsed from hunger, exhaustion, and disease. Each succeeding sunrise brought greater misery. Wishful thinking of escape or liberation was extinguished in Mauthausen.

It wasn't until I visited the camp and stood on those grounds myself that it finally dawned on me what Mom was getting at by telling me that tomorrow is another day. She had meant something like this: "Today is the day that you've been given. This is the life you have. And that life is worth living. Keep going. Don't give up. Do the good that you can here and now." She wasn't much of a Bible reader, but I think she was echoing Jesus: "Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today" (Matthew 6:34).

Yes, I believe hope is knowing in your gut, in your very bones, that this life is worth living. To be hopeful is to have a "why" that enables you not merely to endure all manner of hardship and suffering, heartache and disappointment, but to resist, to overcome, and even to thrive. Hope is not a head thing. It is a heart thing. My mother had her own Ecclesiastes Moment, and she learned to draw hope from within the present because that is where God showed up. I believe that is where God shows up for us, too.

You can profess the Christian faith without having an Ecclesiastes Moment that leads to an encounter with the felt presence of God—an

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encounter that leaves you breathless, turns you upside down, or makes you weep with joy or laugh like a toddler. But that kind of faith, which is grounded on religious principle and doctrine alone, is a social order rather than a soul-stretching, life-shaping friendship with the risen Christ.

On the night before Roman authorities murdered him on the cross, Jesus explicitly told his friends that he would not abandon them. His teachings about the Holy Spirit say, in essence, that God is perpetually in, around, and between us. God is right here. Right now. Always. Reaching out to be an essential part of our lives (John 14:18; 15:5-7). The problem is that we struggle to be aware of God's presence. As Christian Wiman puts it, "We can't perceive, and we miss the God who misses—as in longs for—us."²

The spiritual challenge, then, is to become aware of God's presence—especially in messy places—with such vulnerability, humility, and yearning that God's love for us transforms who we are. That love shapes our habitual way of being in this world into the way of love: Love of God. Love of neighbor. Love that makes life worth living. Love that leads us to hope.

That is the journey we will be taking together in this book—a journey of learning to look for God in the here and now. Because genuine hope begins and ends with the God who shows up in all our messy, beautiful, ordinary, and soul-wrenching places.



PART
I

*How Love
Gives Us Hope*

The very least you can do in your life is to figure out what you hope for. And the most you can do is live inside that hope. Not admire it from a distance but live right in it, under its roof.

—Barbara Kingsolver, *Animal Dreams*



A LIFE WORTH LIVING

*I am a frayed and nibbled survivor in a fallen world,
and I am getting along.*

—Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*

Joy and I had been stunned to learn that our daughter, Meredith, had a hole in her heart. She was an energetic, happy baby. During a routine healthy-baby visit, our pediatrician had heard what might be a murmur. He told us that it was probably nothing. Her development was very robust. But to be safe, he referred us to a specialist. Believing that the visit would be nothing more than a formality, Joy took Meredith to the specialist alone, and I went to work as usual. I will never forget the sound of Joy's voice when she called from our church's office following the visit to the cardiologist. Fighting back tears, she told me that Meredith was facing open-heart surgery.

Plenty of people sought to comfort and reassure us with prayers, kind words, and casseroles. I remained calm and told everyone, including Joy, that I was confident in a positive outcome. God would get us all through this ordeal. Meredith was going to be fine. We simply had to keep the faith and remain fervent in prayer. God wouldn't let us down. Even as I said these things, I knew that I was a big, fat phony. From the moment we got the news about Meredith's heart through the days and weeks leading up to the

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surgery, Joy and I nearly suffocated with dread. Time crawled. Each routine task took immense effort. Joy lost a startling amount of weight. I quickly found every ounce she had shed. When Joy is worried, she cannot eat. By contrast, anxiousness drives me to scarf down everything in sight, and I was doing nothing to soothe my troubled heart. Instead, over and over, my imagination leapt to worst-case scenarios. Images of the surgeon cracking Meredith's little sternum would come uninvited into my mind's eye. My blood pressure would spike, my mouth would go dry, and I would feel my heart pounding in my chest. I feared that she wouldn't make it off the table. Sure, my lips were saying all sorts of pious-sounding things. But just under the skin I was a terrified mess.

You might be thinking that I put up a strong front because I had learned that showing emotion makes you look weak. I confess that I grew up in the John Wayne/Clint Eastwood era, and my father wanted me to be a stoic man's man. But honestly, I was a miserable disappointment to him. According to the Meyers-Briggs Type Inventory, I'm an NF: an intuitive-feeler. Oh sure, I've got grit. I'm no quitter or shrinking violet. But, man, my feelings make themselves known, and I can't help but intuit the emotional temperature of any room I enter. So, no, I wasn't suffering from low emotional intelligence. Believe it or not, I was sincerely trying to be hopeful. Because, well, that's what people of faith do. Right?

The apostle Paul said that faith, hope, and love are the foundations of the Christian life (1 Corinthians 13:13). So, the thinking often goes that if you're a person of faith, you're supposed to be certain that God will work things out for you. We learn that's what it means to hope. People often express the idea to me, that, "You have to trust that God has a plan. Everything happens for a reason. Everybody faces challenges and disappointments, but God makes even the hardest life worth living. That's because God uses everything that happens in life to bring you to a better place, a place of true happiness. (Well, at least God does this for those who keep the faith.) So, if you want God to grant you your heart's desire, you need to push your doubts aside."

I was ashamed to admit that I was struggling with this popular understanding of hope. I kept trying to force myself to believe that God was in complete control and that my faith would somehow result in a successful surgery and a complete recovery, but I never genuinely embraced that sort of hope. To be perfectly honest, I don't even call that spiritual posture hope anymore. It's more accurately described as wishful thinking. In wishful thinking, the prospect of getting what we want—a healed daughter, a soul mate, eternal bliss in paradise—is what keeps us going in this world. God serves merely as the guarantor that we will eventually get our heart's desire. But leveraging God to give us the outcome we desire is not hope. Being hopeful is the sense that this life—no matter how untidy or harrowing—is inherently worth living.

Don't get me wrong. Our relationship with God is the *source* of hope. That's because God is with us and for us in this world. We live this life to the fullest by loving. And when we love, we encounter the God who loves us. Hope is how we lean into this world as God's beloved children. It is what keeps us going, no matter what. But it's far more than wishful thinking.

Beyond Wishful Thinking

There is nothing wrong with looking for favorable outcomes or working to improve your circumstances. Anticipating a better tomorrow for yourself or for your loved ones can motivate you to fight for justice or seek new solutions to old and vexing problems. When you consider the future, you learn to balance your desires for immediate gratification with a commitment to achieving a delayed but lasting good. The problem arises when getting what we want becomes our reason for living and we enlist God as the guarantor of our desired future. Again, this is wishful thinking. Hope, much more than wishful thinking, gives us the power to persevere and the stamina to endure. But hope involves a different understanding of God and our circumstances.

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Many of the Bible's stories teach us to trust in God's promises about our future. For instance, God promised childless Abraham and Sarah—themselves already well past childbearing age—more offspring than there are stars in the sky (Genesis 15:1-6). With some serious struggles and moments of doubt along the way, Abraham and Sarah trusted God. Sarah gave birth to Isaac in her very old age, and Israelites through the generations came to see themselves as the children of Abraham and Sarah. Similarly, when the people of Judah found themselves conquered by the Babylonians and enduring captivity in a distant empire, the words of Isaiah came to them, promising a messiah who would lead them out of bondage (Isaiah 9:6). But let's be honest. It's likely that Abraham and Sarah were wishing for babies to bounce on their own knees. Adulation by a nation of strangers centuries in the future was probably not what they had in mind. And Jesus was not the messianic figure that many of his contemporaries had come to anticipate. I mean, if you were looking for a warrior-king like David to rid you of the Roman occupiers, Jesus, the parable-slinging rabbi who was crucified, would have been a major disappointment. In other words, God doesn't seem to be in the business of fulfilling anybody's actual wish list. Nevertheless, sometimes we can approach God as if this is precisely how God operates—at least for those who *really* believe. We strike a sort of faith bargain with God: *If I believe, then God will deliver for me.*

Like my fellow bishops in the Episcopal Church, I travel to a different congregation most Sundays of the year. These congregations are scattered around my part of Louisiana, which is everything but the “toe of the boot” formed by our state's land mass. Farmers and lawyers, plumbers and nurses, students and retirees talk to me about how life is going. Sometimes they tell me that they have filed for divorce or that they are grieving a spouse's death. They may be struggling with a child's addiction or still looking for a job after months of unemployment. Most often it's when people are sharing stories of uncertain times, heartache, and disappointment that they tell me they're sure God has a plan. Often, this is just shorthand for saying that they trust

the loving God to carry them through life's rough patches. Their struggles won't have been in vain, and they will grow spiritually by enduring them in faith. This attitude is not what I mean by wishful thinking. Instead, we engage in wishful thinking when we think of our faith as our part in a transaction with God. That transaction goes like this: If we believe tenaciously and fervently enough, God will reward us with the result we want. Mind you, our desired outcome may be something very good: a job to support our family, the healing of a child, or the mending of a troubled marriage. There is nothing wrong with wanting our circumstances to improve. But wishful thinking is a poor substitute for biblical hope.

Wishful thinking makes us susceptible to feeling let down, abandoned, and betrayed by God. From there, it's a short walk to bitterness, cynicism, and despair. Perhaps you can relate. You and God had a bargain. Or, at least, you thought that you had struck a deal with your Maker. All you wanted was to be happy. Nothing flashy. You didn't ask to be a billionaire or a fashion model or a Nobel prize winner. Just a roof over your head. Well, and maybe a garage, a new-ish car, a good job, a loving spouse, and well-adjusted kids. But still, you were just shooting for the kind of comfort and security that's pretty common for the American middle class. Surely God, being a loving Creator, not only wants you to have a good life but also promises to secure it for you. All you have to do is stick to the right set of theological beliefs, walk the line morally, and worship the God who made you. Even the rough patches in life are merely intermediate steps on the way to the final destination of happiness. Just keep the faith, and God will get you where you want to go. Only, that's *not* how it has worked out for you. You've kept the faith, and everything has fallen apart anyway . . . and it's not getting any better. You've lost your job, the bank has foreclosed on your house, your spouse has skipped town with someone else, and your kids have joined a gang.

Or let's say you're a faithful Christian who becomes terminally ill—nobody's idea of a happy ending. Clinging to the wishful-thinking version of hope puts you in an intellectual bind. You could say that God is punishing

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you for something you're unaware of or for some error in your beliefs, despite the fact that you have been a devout and caring follower of Jesus. Just consider what such thinking would be saying about God—that moral failings or faulty theology could provoke God to strike you dead, leaving your family and friends heart-stricken. Yet, the Bible tells us that God is love (1 John 4:8). It's very difficult to square such a violent, devastating action with the picture of a loving God. Actually, it seems to be a slur against God's enduring character. But even if you could somehow convince yourself that giving you a deadly illness was loving, think about the kind of tenuous hope with which such a scenario would leave you. Your hope would always be infected with an anxiety-producing "if." God will come through for you—if you are faithful enough. Sincerely prayerful enough. Theologically correct enough. Morally upright enough.

As for me, I've always got room to grow. For that matter, I manage to make mistakes pretty much every day. So I would constantly wonder if I were doing enough to fulfill my end of the bargain with God. Wishful thinking would leave me insecure about God's love for me precisely because that love would be a reward for something I do or accomplish. God's attitude toward me would depend upon flaky, sometimes grumpy, often clueless me. I would keep looking over my shoulder and asking, "So, God, are we still cool?"

No, I cannot bring myself to think of God as an executioner. But I do see why some people might feel uneasy hearing me suggest that something could happen without God's explicit input. Once you allow exceptions to the idea that everything happens for a reason—once you admit that some things are not part of God's plan—you have introduced the idea that we live in a cosmos where sometimes things just happen. Perhaps there is no divine plan that will make moral and spiritual sense out of the tragedies, injustices, and heartbreaks that happen every single day. If there is to be any such thing as hope in a world where things don't always make moral or spiritual sense, we'll have to find it in something other than a divine guarantee of a happy ending, which is precisely what I'm saying. We need a shift in thinking about

hope. Hope is a visceral confidence that life is worth living. And that makes hope a matter of life and death.

A Reason to Live

The scenario we just considered is the sort of thing that makes writer Mark Manson want to be your barista. Before handing over your triple, venti, half-sweet, nonfat, caramel macchiato, he wants to pen a little note on your cup that would read like this:

One day, you and everyone you love will die. And beyond a small group of people for an extremely brief period of time, little of what you say or do will ever matter. This is the Uncomfortable Truth of life. And everything you think or do is but an elaborate avoidance of it. We are inconsequential cosmic dust, bumping and milling about on a tiny blue speck. We imagine our own importance. We invent our purpose—we are nothing.¹

Essentially, Manson says that the universe doesn't care about you at all. Things don't happen in your life to make you a better person, to teach you a lesson, to connect you with the spouse of your dreams, or to score a prime parking spot for you at the grocery store. The universe remains stubbornly indifferent to whether or not you get a promotion or make it through brain surgery, get the winning lottery ticket or survive a concentration camp. Stuff just happens.

Manson and I agree that we are hardwired to yearn for a reason to live. We disintegrate emotionally when we can't discern a "why" for all that we do. But, as he sees it, there is no such thing as a "why" in this universe of ours. He says that if we're going to survive, we have to make one up. So, we tell ourselves that the future will be better than the present. Whether it's through technological advances, political ideologies, natural laws, historical forces, or religious beliefs, something out there will make our life worth living by ensuring a happy ending. We only have to make a bargain with, or

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adhere to the dictates of, or be on the right side of that external power, and everything will come up roses. An anticipated future makes the present—whether merely mundane or dismal—worth enduring.

But what happens when you can't believe the comforting lie that a better tomorrow makes life worth living today? Here's what the philosopher Albert Camus says: "There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide."² When wishful thinking loses its hold on us, we move from asking *how* to stay alive to *why* we should stay alive. Camus tells the story of Sisyphus to illustrate his point. Angered by Sisyphus's pride, the gods condemned him to roll an enormous rock up a hill for all of eternity. Just as Sisyphus would reach the crest of the hill, the rock would roll back to the bottom. He would have to trudge down the hill and begin pushing from the starting point all over again. And again. And again. That's what a hopeless life looks like if hope is equivalent to wishful thinking. No matter how hard you work or how clever you are, nothing you do makes life any better. The gods could imagine no harsher punishment than the misery of an inescapably pointless life. Unless Sisyphus found something other than the anticipation of a happy ending to give him a reason to live, such a life would be unbearable.

We frequently use the word *despair* to refer to the kind of hopelessness the gods intended for Sisyphus. But a friend introduced me to a German word that I find evocative: *Weltschmerz*. You can translate the word literally as world-pain, but it's more aptly rendered as world-weariness.³ It suggests that to inhabit this planet, simply to breathe the atmosphere, has become impossibly-heavy lifting. It's more than a momentary disorientation, anger, or sadness. *Weltschmerz* is an all-consuming spiritual exhaustion—a visceral sense that maybe, just maybe, life is unbearable; that this life might not be worth living. Have you or someone near to you ever felt this kind of world-weariness?

As a pastor, I've sat with many families through the emotional and spiritual aftermath of suicide. Survivors struggled with why their husband,

wife, son, daughter, mother, father, sister, or brother took their own life. The best I've been able to offer in these situations is to be present with people in their grief, listen to their words, and abide with them in their silence. In most of these experiences I've sensed that when people ask "why," they're not merely seeking the cause for the suicide. They already know that their loved one was addicted to heroin or depressed or exhausted by chronic pain. Instead, they are expressing an ache. They recognize and yet cannot comprehend that nothing in this world—including their love for the one who has died—gave their loved one a reason to keep going. How could this be?

Most of us realize that our circumstances in and of themselves cannot make us happy. Yet, our responses to the suicides of popular celebrities or distinguished business leaders reveal that we have not entirely dismissed the idea that career success, material comfort, and admiration from others would make for the good life. One death that especially baffled me was the suicide of Anthony Bourdain, who was at the top of his professional game when he took his life. His show *Parts Unknown* was a hit. He was in love with a smart, capable woman. It appeared that the world had given him every reason to live. Still, Bourdain decided that his life was too heavy to bear. Countless essays and blog posts asked, "Why did Bourdain take his own life?" But as I reflected on his death, I realized that there is a more fundamental question. Each of us answers this question—usually tacitly and without reflection but sometimes with intentional passion—every time we get out of bed and lean into a new day: *Why should I keep living today? What am I really living for?*

Sometimes we confuse living with surviving. We all have a survival instinct. We are driven to find food and shelter, for instance. It's as automatic as breathing. Provided that we avoid a terminal illness or a catastrophic accident, we continue to survive until the wear and tear of advanced age finally takes us. Paradoxically, suicide shows us that living is more than surviving. We need to have something worth living for, a "why"

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that gives us a reason to persevere. Nobody else and nothing out there in the universe can give us such a why. *We* have to choose it for ourselves. Each day we are choosing whether to live or die, even if we do it passively and without much serious thought. It may come as a surprise to know that the Apocrypha says the same thing. For instance, Sirach says, “Before each person are life and death, / and whichever one chooses will be given” (Sirach 15:17, Apocrypha). As we will explore in the next chapter, Jesus teaches us that we make the choice to live when we choose to love. Loving makes life worth living, giving us hope, because in loving we connect with God.

Though Bourdain did not share his personal struggles with us, nutritionist Tara Condell gave us a tender glimpse into her inner life through her final blog post, written before she ended her own life at the age of twenty-seven. Her words reveal her world-weariness.⁴ She wrote that her life looked enviable “on paper,” but her world felt hollow. She acknowledged that there was much she loved about this life: “Real true authentic street tacos . . . unexpected hugs . . . the Golden Gate Bridge at sunset . . . saying I love you . . . shooting the shit.” And yet she was “tired of feeling tired.” Even though she recognized the incontestable goodness of many people, places, and things, none of them gave her the “why” she needed to carry on living. So she said goodbye. No tragedy, cruelty, or disappointment had led her to leave this life. There was simply no other option for her. “Shikata ga’nai,” she wrote. *It cannot be helped*. Nothing can be done about it. She said, “I have accepted hope is nothing more than delayed disappointment.” She had seen through the illusion of wishful thinking. Life was not too heavy to bear but, for her, too empty to endure.

Condell’s words suggest that, without something worth living for, she was ending her life because “it’s time for me to be happy.” She seemed to be saying that by dying, she would be escaping this dreary world and transitioning to an infinitely better one. Toward the end of that final post, she added a message to her deceased father: “I’m coming home, Dad. Make some room up on that cloud and turn the Motown up.” Rather than inspire

her to endure this life or to lean into it with grit, the afterlife seemed to offer her an attractive alternative to this world. Sometimes we, as Christians, can subscribe to a similar perspective when we embrace wishful thinking rather than a biblical concept of hope.

Hope and Eternal Life

When you hear the words *eternal life*, do you think first of traveling to a different spiritual location or going to heaven? Even if we believe in life after this life, the anticipation of a better hereafter is not what gives us real hope in the here and now. Just as I believe hope is vastly better than wishful thinking, I believe eternal life is greater than going to a place called heaven when we die. Some would say that the purpose of human life on this planet is to go to heaven, which is paradise. There you will never know pain, sorrow, or death again. Heaven is a place of undiluted, undisturbed happiness. While some believe that everyone goes to heaven when they die, others view this life as a proving ground or a trial for the next life. Many Christians hold that if we believe in Jesus—and some would add that if our faith is expressed in good works—then the pearly gates will swing wide for us. Hell awaits everyone else. In this line of thinking, the prospect of getting into heaven motivates our life on planet Earth.

By contrast, let us consider another idea—that eternal life is the kind of existence we begin to inhabit as we enter into relationship with Christ in our ordinary, everyday lives. In relationship with God, over time, we become our true selves. God’s love saturates and transforms us. Because we are the beloved, our daily lives take the shape of love, and this kind of life has an eternal trajectory. No tomb can contain it. Eternal life has no end but begins right here on planet Earth. That’s because this is where God first embraces us. That’s one of the lessons of Jesus’s birth. Our hope rests on the idea that God loves us so much that God will come to dwell where we are. Whether it’s in a crummy neighborhood in a backwater town

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like Bethlehem, an elementary school classroom, a field of wildflowers, or a concentration camp. God comes to where we are. God shows up in the kindness of strangers and friends, and God's presence changes everything. God's presence makes this life worth living. The Revelation to John expresses it this way: "The home of God is among mortals. / He will dwell with them; / they will be his peoples, / and God himself will be with them" (Revelation 21:3).

In her memoir *Everything Happens for a Reason: And Other Lies I've Loved*, Duke Divinity School professor Kate Bowler takes us along for the ride as she struggles personally to find hope in a world that offers no guaranteed happy endings.⁵ At the age of 35, doctors diagnosed her with Stage IV cancer. In her earlier book, *Blessed*,⁶ Bowler had closely studied not only the theology but also the spiritual lives of Christians who subscribe to the prosperity gospel: the belief that God rewards the faithful in this life with health and wealth. While she had had affection and respect for the people she came to know during her research, she had rejected the idea that hope is the anticipation of a God-given happy ending. After her diagnosis, Bowler recognized that her intellectual rejection of what I call wishful thinking had left her with spiritual work of her own to do. But she didn't look toward heaven for a way to make her life worth living. Instead, she found hope of a kind that sounds remarkably Jesus-y to me. She found it in the people she loves and those who love her. In her love for her son and her husband. In the prayers, the casseroles, the hand-holding, and the simple acts of kindness offered by friends and strangers, coworkers and family. She found it in the divine love that passes in and through other people right here in this life. And that love, I believe, is the beginning of eternal life.

Hope, you see, is more than even the most faith-infused wishful thinking. It is the sense that life is worth living because love dwells within us and pours out from us—a love that has the power to make life worth living.