Finding Courage in Challenging Times
Contents

Introduction 3

Ash and Starlight 4
Prayers for the Chaos and Grace of Daily Life
by Arianne Braithwaite Lehny

Help and Hope 6
Disaster Preparedness and Response Tools for Congregations
by Amy Gopp, Brandon Gilvin

Sustaining Hope in an Unjust World 13
How to Keep Going When You Want to Give Up
by Timothy Charles Murphy

When Kids Ask Hard Questions 21
Faith-filled Responses for Tough Topics
edited by Bromleigh McClaneghan and Karen Ware Jackson

For Such a Time as This 27
Hope and Forgiveness after the Charleston Massacre
by Sharon Risher with Sherri Wood Emmons

Fear Not 36
Living Grace and Truth in a Frightened World
by Eric H.F. Law

Dessert First 56
Preparing for Death while Savoring Life
by J. Dana Trent

Available Hope 74
Parenting, Faith, and a Terrifying World
by Julie E. Richardson

99 Prayers Your Church Needs (But Doesn’t Know It Yet) 81
by Bethany Fellows, edited by Cara Gilger

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Introduction

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Odds are you’re reading this at home. Odds are you’re probably getting a little antsy already as we plunge into the coronavirus shutdown and its uncertainty. You’ve got a lot on your mind. These are fear-filled times unlike anything most of us have lived through.

That doesn’t mean you have to be overcome by the fear. God wants us to be fearless. Isaiah 43:1 reminds us,

“Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have summoned you by name; you are mine.” (NIV)

Of course, God doesn’t want us to live like an ostrich with its head in the sand, oblivious to what’s happening around us, but God wants us to live lives free from the anxiety and stress generated by all the turmoil that surround us.

Chalice Press brings you the voices of the hopeful, the optimistic, those who can help us see the light in darkness. Pulling passages from nine Chalice Press books, we have created this compilation, Finding Courage in Challenging Times, to lift your spirits, to buoy your soul, and to remember that this too shall pass.

We are already seeing the church adapt rapidly: new worship styles to accommodate online worship, different ways to communicate, different ways to serve our community. Our congregations are overcoming the fear of the moment and finding new ways to bring God’s loving message to the world. We hope this compilation will inspire you to think in new ways – take a deep, slow breath, and then to breathe it out as you expel the fear, anxiety, and stress of the moment, at least for a while. Then repeat as needed.

Stay healthy and stay hopeful.

Gratefully,
Brad Lyons

President and Publisher
Chalice Press
Christian Board of Publication
When I can’t sleep

Quieting God,

I ask for your gentle strength to
cover my fears tonight.
I’m afraid of the darkness,
afraid of the uncontrollable,
afraid of the unthinkable.

I’m afraid of tomorrow.
How will I make it through the day?
How will I care for people who depend on me?
How will I perform to meet expectations
when I cannot think clearly
(or fall asleep on the job)?

I despair I will never sleep again,
caught in the fear coiling around my heart
and anxiety compressing my mind.

I ask, Soothing One,
that your presence
would fill me with holy calm.
That you would lift this pressure
and deepen my breathing.

I ask that your Spirit of peace
would whisper your truth in my ears,
reminding me I need not be afraid.
The fears feel so convincing and so real….
in my heart and in this world.

Though the fears may not dissipate,
your assurance strengthens me to face them.
To name them for the small things they are
in comparison to the Great One within me.
Regardless of how I feel come morning, 
you will not leave me to face the day alone.

For the simple acts of living and loving, 
of sleeping and trusting, 
I need your holy comfort, God.

I will feel my body sink into this bed 
as my heart sighs into your hands.

All will be well.

Amen.


“I will both lie down and sleep in peace; 
for you alone, O LORD, make me lie down in safety.”
—Psalm 4:8
Constructing a Sermon on Disasters

Brandon Gilvin

I preach about disasters a lot.

As part of my work with a denominational mission fund for disaster response, refugee resettlement, and global development, I am often invited into congregations to share about the work that we do in partnership with the Church and our partners from all over the world. Our congregations are diverse, made up of people with a variety of opinions, different perspectives on the role of God in the world, and a range of experiences with disasters large and small—often, very personal.

Given my call to this work, I've spent a lot of time thinking about how to preach about disasters in a way that is theologically responsible, provides insight into some of the “best practices” of disaster response, ties the work that we do as a mission fund to God’s redemptive work in the world, and hopefully inspires listeners to see our work as part of their calling as well. In doing so, I've developed a few interpretive strategies and structural habits that have proven helpful.

Preaching is a craft, and I've leaned on the work of colleagues, mentors, and writers and artists in all sorts of mediums to find ways to forge something that works for me. Some of these strategies might work for you; you may have other ideas that prove to be better tools.

Preach the Gospel

While there are many good, fair, ethical ways to speak about disasters, there is a difference between giving a speech about a disaster and preaching

Brandon Gilvin, currently the pastor of First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Chattanooga, Tennessee, served as Associate Director of Week of Compassion, the disaster and development fund of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).
the Gospel. To preach the Gospel is to proclaim the Reign of God (Mk. 1:14–15; Mt. 4:17): the hope that one day all people will be reconciled, all that has been damaged will be restored (Lk. 4:17–21), and that the priorities of an often violent world will be turned upside down (Mt. 5.1—7:29; Lk. 6:20–49). The Gospel is an invitation to see peace where there is war, food where there is hunger, and hope where there is nothing.

A sermon, therefore, invites its hearers into an imaginative act: locating our story in the vision of a coming Reign of reconciliation, peace, and hope for the suffering. For a person of faith, disaster response is more than just a technical endeavor, and a well-executed response is more than just a job well done. It is holy work. A disaster site, filled with the stories of loss and recovery, is holy ground.

For people of faith, most of the key metaphors, images, and stories that shape the notions of what is holy—what the Reign of God looks like—come from scripture. Weaving a sense of how holy the work of disaster recovery is into one’s sense of the holy means making connections between scripture and the stories we tell. Making those connections requires not only imagination, but also a little research.

**Historical Context Is Your Friend**

The Bible is full of stories of disaster. Inviting a congregation to experience a selection from scripture as a rich, powerful story requires understanding some of the historical and social contexts involved. The more you know, the easier it is to make connections to contemporary experiences of disaster. As I’ve spent time studying and preparing, several scriptures have emerged as rich resources for preaching the Gospel; the more I’ve learned about their context, the better.

Some examples:

- **The Book of Lamentations and Jeremiah.** At the heart of these books is the Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem in 586 B.C.E. and the exile that followed. Few events in the Bible are as disastrous, and the poetry of both Lamentations and Jeremiah evokes both powerful grief and resilient hope.
- **Exodus.** The rich stories of escaped slaves, oppression at the hands of a superpower, and a wandering, rag-tag multitude helps elucidate the experience of those displaced by violent, human-caused disaster.
- **Luke 6:17–23 and Acts 2:43–47.** This is a great combination of scriptures for a number of reasons. Most scholars assume that there’s a historical connection between the two books—perhaps written by the same author(s)—and they serve as great examples...
of Jesus’ vision of the Reign of God and how the early church attempted to live into that vision. The image in Acts 2:44–45 of the early disciples sharing their resources “as any had need” speaks powerfully to how we might respond to those affected by natural and human-caused disasters.

If preaching is not something you do regularly, or you have not attended seminary, that’s fine. While it’s important to responsibly interpret scripture and represent its context as accurately as possible, preaching is not the same thing as teaching a graduate seminar on an ancient text. Listeners can only digest so much history, and keep track of so many dates. Using good scholarly commentaries or even a well-written Study Bible will provide great, concise information that will help you. The Bible study included in this toolkit is a great resource, too.

To help a congregation dive into the scripture, I will often note a couple of things that I want them to listen for before I read the scripture, rather than interpreting a text or explaining a fine point in the middle of a sermon. This seems to help people make the connections between ancient scripture and contemporary story, and helps the sermon itself flow better. I keep this section very brief (30–120 seconds) and then read the scripture immediately after and, most importantly, I tell the congregation what I’m doing. For example:

Before I dive into the scripture this morning, I’d like to spend a little time “setting the scene.”

This morning’s scripture reading comes from the book of Lamentations, which is a collection of songs, poems, and prayers in response to one of the most devastating events in the history of ancient Israel.

In 586 B.C.E., the Babylonian empire—the superpower of the day—conquered Jerusalem and destroyed the temple—the center of religious, political, and social life—and hauled off Jerusalem’s best and brightest to Babylon to live in exile.

In terms of disaster, it’s hard to imagine anything more devastating.

But these poems, prayers, and songs also express a deeply embedded hope in a God who covenanted with Hebrew people: a God who promised to be present with them in all things.

It is in their hope that we can learn something about our own response to the disasters that affect us and our neighbors around the world.

Let us open our hearts and open our minds and hear God’s word in these words.…

Nothing too technical, nothing too scholarly—just basic information about the scripture that helps listeners understand that stories found in scripture are the stories of real people: people as real as those whose contemporary stories of disaster they know, and from which they draw meaning.
Stories Are Parables

According to the Bible, Jesus told great stories. His parables often focused on ordinary, unspectacular things: seeds, candle wicks, brothers who didn’t get along, lost sheep. In Jesus’ imagination, however, these ordinary events, people, situations, and items pointed toward something else: the Reign of God.

The ordinary becomes extraordinary in a parable by Jesus. Thomas Troeger, who teaches preaching at Yale Divinity School, suggests developing a habit of collecting stories from one’s own life as a way of enriching one’s own preaching:

Create parabolic stories or poems, depending on your natural bent as a writer, that have no blatantly religious tone or content but that reveal the truth and meaning of our lives in surprising ways. Save these pieces and periodically review them. You may then discover “the continuous thread of revelation” that would otherwise elude your most strenuous sermonic efforts.55

If you have lived through a disaster of any size, you likely have a story that points to some deeper truth, breaks open a new understanding, or has helped you reassign meaning to your life in some way. Perhaps you have been privileged enough to witness the actions of someone else who has brought a sign of grace and hope to an area affected by disaster, even in a tiny way. Even if your story seems ordinary, it has power, especially if you tell it from the heart and with integrity.

What Story Do I Tell?

To preach the Gospel is to tell a story of hope. This doesn’t mean that you should whitewash tragedy. Horrible things happen, especially in the midst of disaster. It is important to be honest about that. The psalmists, the author of Lamentations, the prophets, the authors of the Gospels—they described tragedy and disaster, often in graphic ways. However, whether by evoking Israel’s covenant or God’s Reign, the authors of the Bible understand God as the reservoir of a hope that can be counted upon. There may still be disaster—but disaster is never the final word. Remembering that will help you frame that story.

Second, it’s important to remember that you are not the hero of your story. If you were part of a volunteer work group, maybe you did an amazing job putting up drywall. You didn’t do that singlehandedly. Even if you built an entire house in a week, your work is part of a bigger effort—of a work group, of a community investing in the long-term recovery process, of a network of donors from around the region, country,
or world, of a loving God whose hope is for the reconciliation of all of Creation. The best way you can tell a story is as one bearing witness to a disaster, its recovery, and the hope of a community for a better future.

Third, bear witness to the dignity of those affected by disaster. Stories that are constructed to maximize our perception of the suffering of those affected by disaster, and reduce them to flat stereotypes, are exploitive. To simply portray people who are economically vulnerable, from the “Two-thirds World,” or very young, or elderly as victims without noting their own agency or resourcefulness may pull at the heartstrings of many a listener, but it does not tell the full story of a community in recovery, nor does it bear witness to the value of an individual as a child of God. Disaster Practitioners with critical eyes refer to this sort of writing as “Disaster Porn” or “Poverty Porn” for a reason. It may seem emotionally gratifying, but it only reduces people and their stories to objects for consumption.

Finally, as Paul Tche states, though it may seem easy or even natural to explain disasters by saying “everything happens for a reason” or describing a disaster as part of God’s plan or action for a community or all of humanity, don’t do it. The reasons for human suffering—social, psychological, political, and, yes, by way of natural causes—are complex and, in theological terms, mysterious. To quickly assign a cause-and-effect framework that puts the blame on sinful humanity or a micromanaging God is presumptuous at best and cruel at worst. It’s not Gospel—it’s abuse.

Several years ago, David James Duncan published an essay, “When Compassion Becomes Dissent,” which has become for me one of the most important pieces I’ve ever read on the practice of writing and, by extension, the task of preaching. The work of storytelling, the engagement of the spiritual life, and the ethics we live by as people of faith are, for Duncan, inseparable. When it becomes tempting to sketch out simple answers, or to write something that romanticizes someone’s suffering or my role in a community’s recovery, I think of his essay:

To be a Christian, a Buddhist, a Muslim, is to immerse oneself daily in unstinting fiction-making. Christ’s words “Love thy neighbor as thyself,” to cite a famously ignored example, demand an arduous imaginative act. This deceptively simple line orders me, as I look at you, to imagine that I am not seeing you, but me, and then to treat this imaginative you as if you are me. And for how long? Till the day I die! Christ orders anyone who’s serious about him to commit this “Neighbor = Me” fiction until they forget for good which of the two of themselves to cheat in a business deal or abandon in a crisis or smart-bomb in a war—at
which point their imaginative act, their fiction-making, will have turned his words into reality and they’ll be saying with Mother Teresa, “I see Christ in every woman and man.”

When I visit disaster sites or meet people affected by disaster, I listen for stories of hope. For example, following the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, I met a volunteer who talked about his time there. I’ve since used his story in my sermon on Lamentations and Disaster:

You notice Raymond as soon as he enters the room.

He’s built like a linebacker, but he speaks with a gentle precision that commands your attention: a deliberateness that underscores the fact that he has been admitted to Georgetown Law School.

And you notice that this brilliant, sharp-as-a-tack young man loses just a little bit of his precision when he talks about his time in Haiti.

The son of Haitian immigrants, Raymond took a week’s vacation just after the earthquake to serve as a medical translator. Raymond’s eyes get misty when he tells you about an old woman lying on a stretcher who reached out to him.

“Are you a doctor?” She asked in Creole.

“No, Ma’am. I am helping translate for the doctors” She looked puzzled.

“Are you getting paid for that?”

“No, Ma’am.”

Another puzzled look.

“Then why are you here?”

“Because, Ma’am, I could help.”

The woman held his hand and started stroking it, slowly, as a mother might her own child, and started humming a sad, sweet, yet grateful tune.

A Lament!

“The children of the ones who were forced to leave this place are coming back,” she said.

“And they will rebuild this country.”

And with that, she went back to humming that sweet, sad thankful tune.

Sharing a story—especially one that is not entirely your own does come with risks. Do I represent Raymond’s experience, the thoughts of an unnamed woman, their interchange, appropriately? Do I exploit her situation, her level of education? I hope not. The search for God’s hope in our narratives always requires revision. Get input from colleagues and mentors, trusted friends and family—take their critiques seriously and revise until you tell a story that inspires true hope, not cheap emotional responses.
Final Thoughts

To proclaim the Gospel—at any time—is to proclaim that nothing can separate us from the goodness of God’s creation or the love of God. It is to know the ways our sacred stories speak to our situations. It is to record the very real pain that an individual or community has experienced and yet look to the glimpses of shared humanity that break through the rubble or ash. It is to know that the easy answers don’t tell the full story, and that embedded in every story is the worth of every person.

Disaster-related preaching requires a specific strategy. This brief essay isn’t an exhaustive discussion on how to write a “Disaster sermon,” but, hopefully, it serves as a good starting point.

It is most important that you find your own voice. Should your community be affected by a disaster, large or small, your words will have impact. Speak in a way that not only “does no harm,” but can inspire the most good.

To preach the Gospel is, after all, to preach “good news,” even in the midst of heartbreak.
Faithfulness in a World of Suffering

At the seminary I attended, students had a field education placement each year in either a church or noncongregational setting. My first year, I served as a chaplain intern at an HIV/AIDS residential living program. I met many amazing people there, many of whom had tragic life stories. Some were struggling with addiction, while others previously had been homeless. Others had practiced unsafe sex in a world that despised them for their sexual orientation. Many were very matter of fact about their experiences; for them, life was hard and full of struggle anyway, and contracting HIV/AIDS was just one more obstacle. It’s not hard to imagine an outsider walking in off the street wanting to make moral judgments about residents. Empathy was in short supply toward their lives. You could imagine the criticisms: “If you hadn’t done this, if you had only done that, then perhaps you wouldn’t be in this situation.” Such hurtful statements are meant more for the ears of those not directly impacted by such toils and snares. People feel the need to rationalize problems and reassert a basic moral arc to the universe. Their pat answers do more wounding than healing.
For me, one person in particular put the lie to such unhelpful perspectives: Ashley. Part of my responsibilities as a chaplain there was to make rounds and visit with people who needed a friendly ear. It was in that situation that I met her. At 22, she was probably the youngest person living there. I just so happened to be the same age, so we had a natural point of reference from which to talk. Other than that, our lives were very different. Ashley had lived with HIV/AIDS for a decade ever since been sexually assaulted by a relative when she was only 12. Since that time, her health had gradually deteriorated. With little holes now opening up in her esophagus, she had reached the point where she couldn't drink or eat anything directly, lest food particles enter her lungs, so all nutrition was administered through a tube. She desperately desired to taste food and drink, so she was allowed to put them in her mouth but had to spit them out before swallowing. This was essentially an impossible condition. What is more natural than the desire to eat? Even if she could manage to avoid the desire to swallow food, some liquid or food always made its way down her esophagus along with her saliva.

When I first met her, she was already so tiny and frail. She moved like an old woman, but she talked like a typical 22-year-old who wanted to go out and live her life. It was not to be. No matter how much liquid nutrition was pumped directly into her stomach, it was never enough for her to gain any weight. She died within a year of our first meeting. When her family had a memorial service for her at the shelter, they brought with them a picture of her from when she looked healthy. Gazing at her picture—her full face, her dark skin contrasting with a bright summer dress—I wouldn’t have known it was the same person.

There is no theological system in the world that can ethically justify why two 22-year-olds from similar regions of the country could have such divergent outcomes. Here I am, a cancer survivor still going strong over a decade later, while Ashley has been in the ground for over a decade. Some Christians say that God does not give us more than we can handle. 

God didn’t decide for me to live and Ashley to die.
Tell that to Ashley. Tell that to the thousands who die before their time. Tell that to those who are emotionally and spiritually broken by tragedy and not made stronger. Tell that to all those who give up in despair. God didn’t decide that I should live and Ashley should die. God doesn't have that kind of power nor use it that way. We need to reimagine who God is in relation to evil, tragedy, and injustice. The alternative status quo is too much to bear.

Theodicy—or Why a Good God Who Could Stop Evil but Doesn't Isn't Worth Worshiping

Why do bad things happen to good people? It’s a perennial question and it has to do with divine power, especially as it relates to unjust and avoidable suffering. The theological term for this is “theodicy.” Specifically, what is the relationship between a good God and the terrible things that happen? People give all sorts of answers: Is God, somehow, cool with this? Is it part of a larger plan? Is it a test? Maybe tragic events are not so bad looking back in retrospect? People try to defend God or rationalize away evil events. They say: “God doesn't give you more than you can handle.” “Everything happens for a reason.” “God needed them in heaven.”

All of these responses are downright hurtful or simply lackluster and insufficient. They push many people away from religion altogether. We might call such rationalizations theological malpractice. Like the Hippocratic Oath, religious answers should seek to do no harm. Not all of us directly experience profound injustice, but each of us will be confronted with death, loss, and unavoidable tragedy. Each of us at some point must wrestle with making sense of loss.

For centuries, religious thinkers have discussed the problem of theodicy. The fundamental challenge is how to reconcile three logically incompatible ideas: (1) God is totally good; (2) God is all-powerful; and (3) evil is real and not an illusion. These three ideas cannot be held together coherently. Every solution involves combining two of these items and relativizing the third. For instance, we can say that God is good and all-powerful. If that’s the case, then the things we think are evil are only so from our limited human perspective. They
may be part of a greater plan where the presence of apparent evil is part of some larger redemptive story. This would make evil actions worth it for the larger good they cause. But this would be dismissing evil as genuinely real. Alternatively, evil can be real and God can be all-powerful. In this case, however, God is not all good. In this option, God is both the bringer of the good and the bad, and it is our task to make sense of this. There are passages in the Bible that support this option of God being the source of both the good and the bad (Isa. 45:7), but while it’s a coherent option, it is not compatible with the prophetic call for justice and liberation from evil.

Many people are tempted to have it both ways. They affirm all three ideas but then proceed to muddy the waters. The best example of this is when people argue that God creates free will in humans but has the ability to take it away. In this rendition, humans, and not God, are the cause of evil. God could stop the evil from happening but won’t for some reason. If this is the case, that means that God again sees the evil as part of a larger good.

There is a third alternative. It is probably the least popular in American Christianity, though it does have a prevalent following among those who are inclined to what are called process, relational, and feminist theologies. In this option, we affirm that evil is real and that God is good. But it no longer sees God as all-powerful. In this option, the problem of making sense of God’s relationship with evil in the world originates from a misunderstanding of what God does in the world. God’s power is the power of relationship, not of coercion. God’s power is the power to inspire us to do better, not to control like a divine dictator. In this option, God desires good, encourages us to resist evil, but does not have the ability to stop injustice or evil unilaterally beyond encouraging how creatures should respond. God’s power has been misunderstood, leading to countless crises of faith across generations. This is the position this book most closely adopts.

All of these solutions have problems that come down to emotional resonance. Does the answer feel compelling enough that one can live with the costs? Many people find the costs of a God who cannot do certain things unworthy of their time or devotion. They ask themselves, “If God cannot stop evil from happening, why should I worship a God
so conceived?” This points back to our understanding that power is revealed through weakness. What is the character of the Divine? For Christians, an additional question follows: “How is God made known through the life of Jesus?” For me, it makes far more sense to see God as one who gets crucified, laments the horrors of the world, but walks with us for a better future than as one who makes such horrors part of a larger prearranged plan.

The answer is one of logical priority or causation. We can ask it this way: Does God cause or allow evil to happen so that good can be revealed? I think we need to answer with a firm “No!” Such arguments are so repugnant that in the face of such a god, the only moral response is atheism. But we can yet affirm that, even as evil happens in our world, God responds. God invites us to confront creatively the horrible situations we face so that something good can come from them. This response doesn’t make the initial injustice or evil act worth it. Of course it would have been better if that evil event had never happened. But God takes the world as it is and offers possibilities for how it can be different. If we respond, things can improve. If we don’t, God will offer up another option based on the additional mess we have made.

One strength of this perspective is that it can help us understand how evil forces, systems, and powers can exist in our world and act in opposition to the Divine. This does not mean that evil is equivalent to God in power or influence. We don’t need to think in terms of two warring gods, one good and one bad, perpetually fighting over the world, like the Lord of Light and his polar opposite in the TV show Game of Thrones. All we need to recognize is that there are forces in our world that act to destroy rather than build up value.

This summary does not resolve all issues about theodicy. There remain questions about God’s culpability with evil, primarily the idea that God deems it worthwhile that a world with all its risks of failures and mistreatment exists at all—for, in order for anything valuable to exist, the option for creatures to respond negatively has to exist. In that
way and that way alone can God be blamed for evil. If, on account of
the reality of loss and oppression, it would have been better for nothing
to have existed at all, only in that way is God guilty of allowing evil.
To take that position, you have to side on a metaphysical scale with
George Bailey at his lowest moment in the movie *It's a Wonderful
Life*—while he wishes that he had never been born, we would have to
say it would have been better for there to be no world at all.

Still, the natural response by many people is to reject this
description of God as no God at all. If God can't do whatever God
wants, some people say, that is not a God worth worshiping. Process
teology answers with the opposite: that a God who could stop evil
but chooses not to is the God not worth worshiping. Divine power is
different from what we often see as dominating power in our world.
Divine power is not a power that oppresses, exploits, or colonizes. But
it does make demands on us for the sake of justice and peace in our
world. When we fail, there is judgment insofar as there is an evaluation
of missed opportunities, active mistreatment, and the loss of what
could have been. We have to live with and be accountable for those
lost chances. But there is grace in being given another opportunity to
respond faithfully to what is before us.

I was given such an opportunity. When I was living through
cancer, I didn't ask, “Why is this happening to me?” I took it as a
given that people become sick randomly—without cause, merit, or
punishment. But I did have a sense that if I survived, I should use
the time I had to do as much good as possible. Surviving cancer at a
young age, while itself a terrible event, could help me empathize with
other people experiencing suffering. It could be a catalyst for good
things to happen, though that did not mean that my cancer was caused
in order that those good secondary responses happen. Spiritually,
such an opportunity meant that God was encouraging me to use
my experiences for the benefit of others for however long I might be
here. As I like to say: For me, everything after cancer is “bonus time.”

This dynamic is also how I see the greater struggle for social justice
and a better world. The experiences we have, liberating or oppressive,
do not necessarily lead to greater compassion for others. Someone
could just as easily live through a similar experience and decide, “I
never want to think about that again. I just want to get back to my normal life.” Or, they could think, “That experience was horrible. I need to make sure that I never have to feel that again, regardless of what that might mean to anyone else. If I have to climb over someone to avoid being hurt again, so be it.” It’s not the events that direct our actions as much how we interpret and respond to them. When it comes to social injustices, the same dynamic is at work. One person sees their experiences as a chance to expand their compassion and solidarity. Another wants to push them aside and forget. Still another is willing to oppress others to achieve some sense of personal safety.

God, the Universe, or however you describe ultimate reality, gives us a lot of freedom in how we will respond to what confronts us. We cannot choose the cards we were dealt—whether they benefited us, harmed us, or were indifferent to us. But we can decide how we are to respond—broadening or restricting our concern—in light of those moments. We can conclude: I’ll work so this never again happens to anyone, or it will never again happen to me.

We humans are meaning-making creatures. We can’t help but try to make sense of what befalls us. I chose to consider receiving cancer as a blessing in disguise—not that the cancer was somehow caused in order to be a blessing. It was hell. But I realized that after it is over, it could be made into a blessing. I could take this horrible thing and find something positive from it going forward: “lemonade out of lemons.” Though it can seem a bit trite, that is not too far off the mark. As a recommendation you offer to another amidst their pain, such a phrase is worse than useless. It only works as an answer you find for yourself. Even worse is, “God has a plan for you.” By that, most of the time people mean God either caused or allowed the event to happen for some larger purpose. To that we should respond, “No thanks.” One of the requirements in the ethics of social experimenting is the consent of the one being experimented on. The same standard would apply for God (regardless of any literary bet between God and “the Satan” in the book of Job). Discounting any divine foreknowledge, I like Joseph’s statement in the book of Genesis summarizing how he interpreted his experience of being sold into slavery by his brothers: “Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for
good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today” (Gen. 50:20). We can’t control what happens to us, and neither can God, but even the greatest injustice can be flipped in order to produce something positive.

Social injustice and oppression are generally unmitigated disasters for people and communities. They ripple across generations, passing down traumas and pain. It would be better if they had not happened. We can pray that they will end and that justice will be done. We can work to respond to immediate problems and try to mitigate future problems. There is really only one good thing that comes out of them: they can motivate us to care for others in similar situations more deeply, to empathize with their struggles, to help them feel less alone in a seemingly uncaring world. That does not make those injustices worth it, it does not make them good things, but it does mean that good things can sometimes arise in spite of it all. Even a cross can lead to a resurrection.
One of the things I value about my relationship with the Divine is God’s voice. Having not been part of a faith community when I was young, it was one of the most tangible differences after I started my walk with Christ. It was not a loud, audible voice like the one heard by some of our favorite biblical characters. It was a whisper at times, correction at times, and clear guidance when needed. It was this voice that gave me the strength to advocate for myself and others when I needed it. It encouraged me when I became a wife and mother (and quickly learned I did not know what I had gotten myself into).

Three and a half years ago, I became a widow. It was an unexpected death and one that has both shaken and helped to form my faith. One of the most tangible things I remember from the experience was the feeling that God was silent. There was a deafening silence in my despair, one that I had not experienced since I had given my life over to Jesus. I felt completely alone and unable look after my children—or even offer them comfort or words to encourage faith. I did not know if I would ever feel normal again. I felt as though I could not do simple things, such as eat, sleep, or care for my children—let alone myself. In those first days after the accident, there were times when I could not think about the next five minutes. I could not begin to comprehend a lifetime without Justin, and sometimes I still can’t. I had to keep focused on the immediate and take each moment for what it was.

This kind of existence shook me to the core. It was during this time that many from the missional community, clergy members, and friends came to visit. They came to offer me their time, silence, prayers, and presence. I thought for certain that I would never regain myself again, that God had simply abandoned me, and that it would be best to abandon any idea that I was called to ministry. After all, why would someone who doubted their faith so much be called to lead any kind of faith community?
It was during this time of reflection that I remembered a story that is found in 2 Kings 4—of the prophet Elisha and the widow’s oil:

One day the wife of a man from the guild of prophets called out to Elisha, “Your servant my husband is dead. You well know what a good man he was, devoted to God. And now the man to whom he was in debt is on his way to collect by taking my two children as slaves.”

Elisha said, “I wonder how I can be of help. Tell me, what do you have in your house?”

“Nothing,” she said. “Well, I do have a little oil.”

“Here’s what you do,” said Elisha. “Go up and down the street and borrow jugs and bowls from all your neighbors. And not just a few—all you can get. Then come home and lock the door behind you, you and your sons. Pour oil into each container; when each is full, set it aside.”

She did what he said. She locked the door behind her and her sons; as they brought the containers to her, she filled them. When all the jugs and bowls were full, she said to one of her sons, “Another jug, please.”

He said, “That’s it. There are no more jugs.”

Then the oil stopped.

She went and told the story to the man of God. He said, “Go sell the oil and make good on your debts. Live, both you and your sons, on what’s left.”

(1 Kings 4:1–7, The Message)

A good oil supply was a sign of stability and prosperity for a family. For this widow to miraculously receive an endless supply of oil that she no longer could gather enough jars to fill meant that she would be taken care of. She would have status in her community. She would not go hungry, and she wasn’t left forgotten after her husband died.

The community of individuals that surrounded, visited, and prayed for me in those early days were the endless supply of oil for my children and I. Like the widow in the 2 Kings story who was left with not one empty pot, it was during those days that many people visited me. They sent cards, made meals, phoned, spent evenings with me and the kids, surrounded me with their love, and reminded me of the call to the community. They filled the empty vessel of my heart with love.

One sunny afternoon while we were eating, my youngest child started to talk about his dad and tell stories about him, crying and remembering. Suddenly, his sister decided to shush him. She wanted him to be quiet, in an effort to keep away the pain. The desire to ignore the loss and move on laid heavy in the air, and I could see how this silence would harm our
family dynamic, so something inside me stirred. I decided we needed some new family rules. I explained to the kids that our family was different now, and that because of that the way we communicated needed to be different. I told them there would be three “rules.”

1. We all have the right to talk about dad whenever and wherever we want.
2. We will love each other by listening and sharing our feelings, without judgment or expectation.
3. We all have free liberty to cuss.

The last rule was met with wide eyes. “What do you mean, Mom?” asked my daughter. “Do you know what cuss words are?” I asked. “Yes,” said the elder two. “No,” said the five-year-old.

For the next few minutes I explained cuss words and how they can be used to be hurtful or inappropriate. “But,” I explained, in certain instances when emotions are too much, and regular language cannot articulate it, “Mommy uses cuss words. Mommy even cusses when she speaks to God—and, because of that, it feels safe to share things with God on a deeper level.” I told them, “Yes, you are allowed to use those words when you feel they are needed in order to express your feelings. However, if they are used to be hurtful or inappropriate, then that would not be okay. Also, if they are used casually or unintentionally, that can be a big problem. If you say a cuss word, it should be because no other word will do, and it should be in an appropriate place. If you say a cuss word at school, you will get in trouble.” The moments that followed were sprinkled with nervous giggles as I explained the meaning of various words and used them, appropriately, in sentences.

These past three-and-a-half years of grieving have been a time of growth for me in understanding my relationship with God, my vocation, and my call to ministry. When I started seminary, I felt that I clearly heard the internal call to ministry. I had a desire to share the word of God, to serve the community, to act for justice, and to extend grace. I felt that acquiring a Master of Divinity degree would equip me to do this work, and I felt a clear leading. So, I pursued that degree. After my husband’s accident, this desire went dormant. The voice that seemed so clear in the past was not the same anymore.

One night as I sat in my room weeping, my eleven-year-old daughter came in with a cup of tea to join me. She sat at my feet and asked, “Mom, what are we going to do now?” I replied, “Honey, I am not sure yet. I think I am going to start looking for a job. Like maybe as an art teacher, in an office, or something.” “What!” she replied. “What are you talking about? What about becoming a pastor? What about finishing seminary?”
I quietly listened and responded, “Honey, I am not sure that I heard God right. I am not sure I am supposed to be a pastor. I am not sure if I hear the call anymore.”

It was then that she said the words that have penetrated deep into the heart of who I am: “Mom, that is shit.” I sat there, stunned, as I heard a foul word come out of my beautiful child’s mouth. “What did you say?” She repeated herself, and then followed with, “Why do you think there are people that come to see us every day? Why do you think they come here and pray, bring food, and take care of us? It is because you are their pastor! It’s because you have taught them that this is how we love people. What does that even mean: that ‘You don’t know if you are called anymore’? I am calling you, Mom! They are calling you. You have to finish! Be the pastor that we know you are.” It was then—in that room—that, at last, the last bowl of oil was filled. It was the external call of the community—one that my grief had not allowed me to hear; one that was revealed through the words of a child. I began my seminary studies again a month later, three months after the accident.

We finished my degree last summer. I say “we” because it was a “we” (and I am not just talking about my children and I). My amazing community kept filling my pots with oil: helping me financially, helping me care for my kids while I was at school, and finally standing with me at my ordination this past fall. They were the voice I needed: the voice in the wilderness—in the silence—encouraging me to press on and seek God no matter what the circumstances.

I was ordained in October 2018. There were two moments that evening when I clearly heard God’s voice. First, my children came up and laid hands upon me; and, then, my fellow colleagues, other pastors, and the bishop laid their hands on me. The community that surrounded me that evening were God’s voice embodied.

Community allows us to hear the voice of God in new, surprising, and unimaginable ways. My small family has experienced a lot these past few years. Recently, we moved from Alaska to California in order answer a call different from any I had ever envisioned. We left our home and our community to follow God’s call to California Lutheran University, where I now will serve as a chaplain, and continue to listen for the voice.

* * *

Walking through grief with my children, I eventually realized that if I wanted to support and encourage them during times of struggle, I needed to take care of myself first. For me, that meant I needed to make sure I was secure in my spiritual community and my connection with God—that, even if I struggled to hear God’s voice, I kept listening. Our three family
Why Did This Happen? Reflecting on Loss

Communication rules allowed me to express my loss with vulnerability and honesty, and to trust that those around me would be God’s voice in times of loss. My call to pastoral ministry, my ability to respond to the Holy Spirit, and my community leave me near speechless. My children and their truth, their love, their grace, their pain, their resilience, their joy, and their power shatter and reform me for God’s glory every day. They give me courage to move when the Lord calls. They inspire me to create a nurturing environment for all to explore their faith and relationship with God and the world. Even in the midst of unimaginable grief, even when everything is broken and nothing seems redeemable, even when hope is silent and life is “shit,” God speaks. And, I hope we are listening.

Crafting the Conversation

Even if your children don’t experience the world- rending loss of a parent, they will experience grief. While I’m not saying that all loss is the same, most children know what it is to mourn the death of a beloved pet, to kiss a grandma goodbye for the last time, to be defeated in a big game, to move away from best friends and begin a new life in a new town.

When we give our children language to speak the truth of their hearts, we give them power in a world in which they are often powerless. Children don’t get to choose where they live or go to school. They rarely choose what they eat or when they sleep. Many spend their “free time” in various scheduled activities and commitments. When we factor in the tragedy and brokenness of the world—things over which even adults have no control—it is little wonder children feel powerless.

While we cannot protect our children from pain and sadness, we can empower them with language to express their emotions, and we can listen when they speak.

• Help your children find language for their loss.
  – You do not necessarily need to teach your children to cuss. However, beyond providing a unique description for otherwise unspeakable situations, “bad words” offer an emotional release. It can be difficult for a child to understand where and when cuss words are cathartic rather than crass, which is why we generally avoid them. And, yet, our children hear them (if not from us, from their friends). Helping your child understand where and when they are can speak freely is a vital life skill. Note, many words—such as racial and religious slurs—are never appropriate. Be clear.
  – Use words to express your own emotions. And don’t be afraid to cry. Tears can express emotion that words cannot.
  – For younger or nonverbal children, this may mean connecting actions or facial expression to words.
— Ask feeling questions. Even older children might need help expressing how they feel. Consider using questions such as: “Do you feel frustrated? Do you feel betrayed? Do you feel hopeless?”

— Use the Psalms. They are full of emotion—lament, joy, fear, and even anger. In our family, we listen to some of the laments (try Psalm 22) and draw or paint our feelings. Sometimes, we even write our own psalms.

— Journal writing or prayer journaling can be wonderful for children. We write down our highs and lows each day as a way to get started.

• Listen when children speak.

— Put down your phone. Turn down the music. Sometimes children pick inconvenient times to share, but they need and deserve as much attention as we can give. Give them eye contact, and try to kneel or sit so you can be at the same level.

— Share your highs and lows with one another every day. In our family, we often do this at the dinner table, but bedtime or even the car can work. This is more than just asking kids, “What did you do today?” It encourages mutual sharing—from adults and kids—about what was wonderful and what was hard.

— Believe what your children say, even if their emotions are different from what you would feel in their place. Follow up. Investigate. If you find out they misinterpreted events, or told a lie, you can address that. Remember, even fanciful, silly stories can be speaking truth about emotions.

— When you child speaks truth—be it challenging or comforting—have the humility to listen. Since the days of David, Jeremiah, twelve-year-old Jesus in the temple, and Timothy, God has never hesitated to use young prophets.

Further Exploration

For exploring grief and emotion with children:

*Praying in Color,* Sybil Macbeth

*Prayers of Lament,* Ann Weems

We love the meditative prayer app “Pray as You Go.” My kids and I listen to the imaginative prayers daily. They love it (and so do I)!

The Rev. Hazel Salazar-Davidson is the mother of three amazing humans. She resides with them in Thousand Oaks, California, where she serves as Campus Minister for California Lutheran University. Hazel enjoys reading, painting and napping.
Lessons Learned

Life has given me challenges and failures, good times and bad times. Along my journey I have known feelings of hopelessness, shame, guilt, and unworthiness. Sometimes I have replayed old tapes of toxicity in my mind and plunged into darkness, wallowing in all things negative. Yet, inside I knew, Sharon, you’re better than this, and that eventually I would find my way back to the present.

But life has given me some lessons that I want to share with anyone willing to take heed. My stuff may not compare to someone else’s, but we all have stuff. No matter who you are, what you have, the house you live in, the job or title you hold, life is going to toss you around sometimes. Nevertheless, God has given us all what we need to be the best person we can be.

The things to ask yourself are, “Am I comfortable with who I am? Can I be content being the authentic me? Is there room for change in my life? Am I willing to do some deep self-reflection and take inventory of myself? Is there purpose in my life beyond just getting through?”

Sometimes I sought answers to those questions, and at other times life forced me to reckon with the solutions. Consequently, I have learned a few things along this journey called my life.

You can’t heal in isolation. This is one of the first things I learned after the Emanuel tragedy. After the shootings, planning Momma’s funeral, and attending Rev. Pinckney’s service, I returned to Dallas, where I was alone with my thoughts twenty-four hours a day. For weeks I allowed myself to wallow in my pain and grief. I couldn’t process everything that had happened. I didn’t call anyone except my children and Esther.

Even my conversations with my children mostly consisted of automatic responses to their questions about how I was doing. Caring for my beloved pet gave me a reason to keep going. Puff Daddy is old and needs medication and care beyond the normal walking and potty times. So I had to get up.
People were calling at times to check on me, but I still felt alone and lost. When I returned to work at the hospital, so many of the nurses and even some of the doctors stopped me to express their heartfelt condolences. All of this was going on in the midst of the hospital’s move across the street to a new billion-dollar facility.

My ankle was hurting a lot, but it was nothing compared to the emotional pain I was experiencing. I made it through on autopilot. I was grieving the loss of my mother and the transition from a place now called Old Parkland. I had invested so much of myself in that place, where I was respected among my colleagues. I had loved being with the patients there and felt that I was finally in my dream job. Maybe it was just too much change during a time when my foundation had been pulled from underneath me. My heart was just not ready to move on and I had a severely broken ankle, so I took medical leave from the hospital. I was all alone in Dallas, and now with medical needs.

I was miserable. Finally, I decided to come out of the darkness and reach out to people—to reach out myself. Maybe people just didn’t know what to say, and so, sometimes, they said nothing. The why was unimportant. All I knew was that I had to reach out for help, so I began making calls. In reaching out I discovered that the people in my life who loved me were there for me, and I really needed them.

The first person who changed things for me was Lucy McBath from Everytown. When she reached out to me, it felt like finally somebody knew what I was going through. As a hospital chaplain, I had met families who’d lost loved ones to violence and were dealing with that kind of grief. But I was in counselor mode then. Lucy asked me how I felt. It was so easy to talk to her. She allowed me to cry, which was a gift. And she cried with me. That was special. Everyone needs that. I knew it was okay, because Lucy had been through what I was going through. I could be real with Lucy.

Michael Waters came into my life at a point when I had stopped going to church. I didn’t want people to be uncomfortable around me because they didn’t know what to say. I found church services on the Web. I had met Michael before and started watching his church’s live stream services on my computer. Eventually, I made up my mind to visit his church. During all of this time, I was dealing with my broken ankle. I couldn’t walk and couldn’t drive, but I found a way to start going to his church.

From that first visit to his church, Michael became my pastor. People always say, “If you ever need anything, call me.” Well, he said
that, and he meant that. Just like with Lucy, it was a connection of knowing in my gut that he was sincere. So I would call Michael when I was crying or sad or angry, and he would listen to me. He wasn’t preachy or throwing Scriptures at me. He just let me cry. He let me talk, and he would always tell me, “We are here for you. The church is here for you. If there is anything we can do, please let us do.”

I felt like he was my personal pastor. He ministered to me. It wasn’t about a congregation. It was just to me as a person. And I thank God for that.

God had placed good people to help me. I just needed the sense to know that I needed help. All I had to do was ask, and help was there. Trust your gut instinct and cling to your faith. Instinct is knowing deep in the pit of your stomach, or even your soul, what is the right thing to do. Sometimes we make selfish decisions. Whether it’s a personal decision or a financial one, when we act solely from selfishness, we know deep inside it’s not the right thing to do. So we give ourselves justification for our choices and end up making bad decisions and living with the consequences.

Sometimes our selfish choices have a severe impact on others. We cause pain to our loved ones with our bad decisions. When I provoked Bernard into the fight that led to our separation, I knew that I was wrong. But I kept making justifications for what I’d done. I ignored my gut instinct, and I caused so much pain, especially to my children.

But I have always felt okay about my decisions when I trusted my instinct and my faith, even though sometimes it’s scary. When I came back to Dallas after the shootings, and was on medical leave for a while, my boss called several times to find out when I was coming back and all of that. At the same time, I was grieving the move from the old building, which had become a home to me. The old Parkland Hospital felt secure, safe.

While on leave, I already had some worries about whether I could go back and engage in the ministry I so dearly loved. Momma’s death had changed me, and my soul was saying, “I’m not gonna be able to do it.”

During that last phone call when my boss asked when I was coming back, my gut instinct confirmed, “You’re not going back.”

I have second-guessed that decision a lot. There is always that craving for the old normal. I liked having work to do—knowing my schedule, knowing that I would be helping people at the hospital. I enjoyed my work. Mostly, my tendency to reevaluate my decision to leave Parkland is just me wanting my old life back.
In my mind, trusting your gut instinct is really about clinging to your faith. It is knowing that, no matter what happens, God's with you. As my savings dwindle and speaking engagements come farther apart, I keep affirming, “Okay, God, I'm not going to worry about money. You've taken me this far. I'm not gonna worry.”

My gut instinct tells me it’s going to be all right because I’m doing what I’m supposed to do. If I get down to five dollars in my bank account, I still know it’s going to be all right because God hasn’t failed me yet.

I’m not saying the prosperity preachers are right when they say, “Oh, if you believe, God will make you rich.” There have been times in my life when I felt like I was in the ocean and about to drown. The water was getting ready to go in my nose. That’s the way it has felt for me to be patient and wait on God. But I know that water will not drown me. I will come out of it.

That’s what it means to trust your God-directed instincts and go with what you know is right. It was really hard to leave my kids in North Carolina and move to Dallas to attend seminary, but my gut said they would be all right. God told me, “Yes, you have to do all of this.” So I left, trusting my gut and my faith no matter how hard it was.

Be prepared to get rejected. In life, there will be times when you’re told, “No.” That’s just the bottom line. How we deal with that rejection tells how we will continue to move forward. If you’re going stay down every time somebody tells you no, you’re not gonna make it. And truthfully, sometimes getting a no is a good thing. If I had gotten everything I wanted in life, I don’t know if I’d even be alive today. I think about things I wanted that were not good for me, and somehow or another they didn’t work out. I can look back and say, “That was the best thing that could have happened.” Sometimes getting a no positions us to do greater things.

Growing up, I was the light-skinned girl with the curly hair in a neighborhood of dark-skinned people. I had a few good friends, such as Myra Thompson, but I faced a lot of rejection. Some people tried to bully me, but I just didn’t let them. My momma was a fighter and she taught her children to be fighters. So, you throw me down, I get back up.

One of the toughest rejections I ever faced was the one that forced me to leave the Presbyterian Church. I had attended seminary mostly on the Presbyterian Church’s dime, but to get ordained in the Presbyterian Church candidates have to pass five written exams. Well, I passed two or three of them and couldn’t pass the rest. My committee
in North Carolina kept wanting me to take the exams over, and I did. I took them three times, but I just couldn’t do it.

I felt like the Presbyterian Church could have worked with me, as they already had a lack of people of color in the denomination. I had graduated from their seminary, and they couldn’t figure out a way to have me ordained? That hurt. That rejection was heart-wounding on a whole different level.

Since ordination was off the table, I had to make a decision about whether I was going to let this defeat me or whether I was going to pursue other options. Well, God made more than the Presbyterian Church.

During my hospital chaplaincy, my friend Pam Jones from the VA hospital invited me to attend World Harvest Church, which is nondenominational. “Come to church with me. I think our bishop will like you. You’ve got your degree, and you could probably do some good things with our church.”

I went with her, and soon started working with the church’s food pantry. World Harvest ordained me, and that ordination gave me what I needed to continue my chaplaincy training. Because of my faith, and because of my momma, I found another way.

You’ve got to persevere. No matter what, you have to keep trying. That is something I learned from Momma. Something in her said that no matter what life threw at you, you still have to figure out how to survive. She had five kids that she needed to take care of. When I was young, Momma did laundry and ironing for a white lady named Miss Anne. I remember going with her and watching her work.

Later, when Momma worked at the auditorium, she sometimes took me with her, and I would help her clean up. She was a hard worker. When she finished cleaning, you would know that Ethel had been there, because everything was done right.

After Momma was killed, during the times when I felt like giving up, I could hear her saying, “What you gonna do? Fold up?”

And always there was that knowing: Yeah, you might be down for a little while, but you’re not down for the count. You just can’t give up, no matter what.

When I think about my family and what my ancestors survived, it motivates me. In my head I know I’m biracial, but in my heart I’m black. Blackness isn’t just about skin color; blackness is about our souls. Our black souls came from across the water and survived the Middle Passage, slavery, Jim Crow, and denied opportunities. If they survived all of that, who am I not to be the best I can be?
Don't give up on humanity. If you give up on humanity, what are you going to do? Lock yourself up in your house and not be a part of society? You can't give up.

My friend Arno is a former white supremacist. When we met, I really didn't believe that someone could change that much. Even though Arno doesn't share my faith tradition, I had to realize that, in my own faith, Jesus Christ can change anybody. And I had to accept Arno, because I know that God changed me too. You just can't say that people can't change, because we already know the changing power of God.

In my speaking across the country, my faith in humanity is restored. After I speak, people offer condolences and hug me, and often we pray together. All of that reaffirms that—whether black, brown, red, yellow, or white—there are a lot of good people in the world.

You have to take care of yourself. Nurture your body and your soul.

At sixty years old, I'm finally able to pay attention to me. I have abused this body in more ways than one. I've had some issues with my knees, a hysterectomy, and a few mammogram scares, but basically, I'm in decent health. I take my vitamins. I have arthritis and sciatica, but all in all, I'm good. I might make it another twenty-five years.

But just as important as taking care of your body, you have to take care of your soul. I believe in the power of laughter. You have to be able to laugh at yourself.

I have done many things that were so funny I had to laugh at myself. I'm clumsy and I will just trip while walking. Sometimes, I'll lose my glasses, only to find them right where I left them. I have to laugh at myself for that. With everything going on in the world, laughter at such moments is a great release.

I was in New York City last year and I had a meeting at Bloomberg Tower. I didn't check the address. I just called an Uber. And the driver picked me up, drove one block, and said, "Ma'am, you're at your destination."

I looked back, and I could see the hotel! I just sat there and burst out laughing. I'd just assumed that because I was in New York, I was going a great distance. That one-block ride cost me a few dollars, but gave me a great big laugh in return.

We can't be heavy all the time. We're all into our jobs, raising kids, and whatever it is we are doing. We have to release stress. Whatever we're doing, we have to just be able to laugh at ourselves.

Another way that I take care of myself is through music. It's healing to me, and I have music for my every mood. I take the message and use it as a mantra.
Kendrick Lamar’s “Alright” came out around the time of the Charleston shootings. There is anger and pain and all of that in his lyrics—accompanied by a funky beat. Over and over he says, “But we gon’ be alright.” That song gave me a way to dance and feel and know I wasn’t the only one who’d felt anger and pain. I can put myself in that song. Esther was the same way. That was our song. We’d say, “We gon’ be alright,” because everything was so heavy.

Drake’s “Started from the Bottom” is another song I can relate to, because I’ve felt that I started from the bottom. His song gives hope that you can start from the bottom, and still go places. I never in my life thought that someday I would be flying around this country and people would actually want to hear me speak.

Those songs uplifted me, even when my circumstances were heavy and my hope was dim.

Music always has been part of my life, and dancing was a part of our family. I grew up with Smokey Robinson and Diana Ross, and all of that great music. We all listened to the radio and we danced. I rely on the old hymns too, as they are part of our family tradition. Even before Momma joined Emanuel, she played gospel music. Saturdays were gospel music days, and we listened to that music while we did our Saturday chores.

Music and laughter are as important as vitamins and medical checkups. They will heal your soul.

Everybody has a purpose. Now that I’m in my seventh decade, I finally believe that I’m where I’m supposed to be, and that I’m operating in my purpose—advocating for sensible gun laws and speaking about racism, and Momma, and my own experiences.

Each of us has a purpose, so we need to live purposeful lives. We need to be nice and kind and talk to people who don’t look like us. Maybe your one purpose today is to open a door for an old lady who needs you right at that moment. Your purpose is to be the best you that God has equipped you to be. And if you’re a person of faith, you’ll try and live by the moral compass of your faith and what you believe.

I believe that if we follow the Ten Commandments we’re on the right track. If we do what God has called us to do as His people, we will be all right. And when we slip, then we confess. “Here I am God, messing up again. So that same grace and mercy you gave me last week, can I have some more?” I joke about it, but I know that grace is for real.

If you try to do the right thing, if you try to be loving and kind, then you’ll be all right.
Use the wisdom of the role models in your life. The night I heard Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. speak at County Hall, a seed was planted in me. I wanted to be like him. I wanted to speak like him. He inspired me then, and he is still a motivation to me today.

Momma taught me about perseverance. She was my cheerleader. Whatever I got myself into, she was right there to make sure that I could do it. She would see to it that I was going to do it well, and I was gonna look good doing it. Momma always knew presenting yourself well would take you far in life.

When I was young, I wanted to be like Angela Davis. She was out there advocating for black power and talking about the things that we deserve as black people but have to fight for. She said that if fighting is what we need to do, that’s just what we need to do. We can’t just sit back. That resonated with me because I once had thought I would go to law school and then become a politician, because law is the route often taken to get into politics. Angela Davis was putting it out there, and she looked like me.

So as screwed up as America is, there are people out there we can look up to. Whatever your flavor, you can find somebody to look up to.

You have to put in the work to achieve your dreams. Momma would always say, “You got to get up to find the job. The job ain’t gonna find you.” That meant you needed to be proactive about achieving what you wanted.

When I was young, I had my life route planned for a career in politics. I knew I’d have to work hard to achieve that, starting with enrolling in college and figuring out how to pay for it. I did work study and I worked at a jewelry store. I did what I had to do to stay in college and work toward what I wanted. I worked hard for that college degree.

In my forties, I followed a new path and enrolled in seminary. Bernard drove me to Dallas, with Brandon and Aja in the back seat. They helped me pack up all my stuff and then they helped me set up my dorm room. We toured the campus, then they hugged and kissed me and said goodbye. After they left, I stood on the dormitory steps, looking over the campus and crying, wondering: What have I done?

I got a job in the admissions office and worked harder at my coursework than I have ever done in my life. There were many times when I thought I wouldn’t make it through. I took Hebrew three times. I took Greek twice. I hated my Christian history professor with everything I had in my soul because the course required so much memorization. That’s not my strength, but I got through it. I would write things down a hundred times, and my hand would get used to what the answers
should look like. My apartment had papers everywhere, with Greek and Hebrew taped to the walls. When I got that blessed degree, I was so proud because I truly had worked for it.

After graduation, I entered chaplaincy training at the North Texas VA hospital in Dallas. I came up from Austin for the interview in my lucky brown suit. I went through the interview, and before I got back to the front of the hospital to head back to Austin, they called to tell me I had been accepted in the program. Being at the VA hospital meant working with veterans who were dealing with all kinds of trauma and injuries.

My second year of chaplaincy training involved specialized training in mental health and substance abuse. That’s when I really started to shine as a teacher. *This is what I’m supposed to be doing. Because, who can talk more about substance abuse than me? I sure know what you’re talking about. My experiences might not have been your experiences, but when you’re in a fog you’re in a fog, no matter what substance it is. I could relate to the veterans’ struggles and come at them from my heart and be real. They had no trouble talking to me because I could relate.*

The time God allowed me to attend seminary was the freest I’ve ever felt in my life, and maybe the most scared, too. I finally had a vision of who I really was and what I could do—again, because of Momma. She taught me the value of working hard and doing your best, and I am so grateful for that. She was there to celebrate my accomplishment at graduation, and she is with me every day as I continue doing my best work.

Through all of the tragedy and hurt, I believe there’s a place called heaven, and that my mom is there—with her mother, and with Terrie and Esther. When I die, I pray that God then will allow me to enter heaven, too, so I will be reunited with the people that I love. And those spirits, those angels, the saints that have come before me, I believe in the power of their goodness to guide me until that day comes.
Introduction

In 2017, a week after Hurricane Harvey hit Texas, I was visiting a relative in Lake Arrowhead, located in the San Bernardino Mountains in Southern California. Across from my relative's home was a house surrounded by heavy wrought iron fences. Right behind the gate was a huge sign that said, “Liberal Free Zone.” Flying in front of the house was a large American flag. My immediate reaction was “Oh, I’m not welcomed in that house. But how would they know I’m a liberal? Do I have a sign on my forehead that says: “I’m a liberal!” Then a sadness came over me. This meant that the people in this household only wanted to be with people who were like them. Even if I wanted to have a meaningful conversation with them to achieve mutual understanding, the chance of that happening was minimal. Perhaps the sign on the fence is a sign of our times. It signaled to me that the fear-exploitors had successfully isolated people, fostering fear and phobia of the other to the point of ignoring history and factual truth, creating many fear-conquerors who strike back in ways that strip others of their constitutional rights, targeting scapegoats like the immigrants and forcing the poor and powerless to be fear-bearers.

While I was feeling self-righteous about what I just wrote, I realized I might be as guilty as the person who put up the “Liberal Free Zone” sign. Have I not also isolated or insulated myself from those who are politically different from me? Even though I don’t have a sign that says, “Conservative Free Zone” in front of my house, or my church, I wonder if I do have an invisible sign that

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says just that. I, too, have a fear of the others that causes me to insulate myself and not hear and know the others’ truth. How many conservative friends do I really know?

The people of the United States are so polarized that it is almost like we live in separate countries. All one needs to do is look at the map of the 2016 election results. We listen and are influenced by totally different sets of “truths,” which are more like a litany of fears of the other. Some are imminent and most are not. Most people are so overwhelmed by the nonstop projections of fear that we stop trying to discern which are imminent and which are mostly a distraction.

Back to Lake Arrowhead where I was standing in front of the house with the “Liberal Free Zone” sign when a question came to me: “If a super storm or a huge earthquake hit Lake Arrowhead and my house was destroyed, would the people in this house help me, even though I am not like them? Or if their house was destroyed, would they let me help them?” The answer is, of course, yes.

Natural disasters, destructive as they are, tend to unify communities and even nations. A storm like Hurricane Harvey didn’t care whether one was a Republican or Democrat, rich or poor, citizen or immigrant, documented or undocumented, gay or straight or transgender. The storm just blew wind and poured rain on everyone. A natural disaster brings out the need for compassion and cooperation in order for people in any community to survive together.

Even the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement and U. S. Customs and Border Protection understand this. Both departments issued a joint statement before Harvey made landfall the first time: “The Department’s law enforcement components will be at the ready to help anyone in need of assistance. . . . Routine non-criminal immigration enforcement operations will not be conducted at evacuation sites, or assistance centers such as shelters or food banks.” The full statement was translated into Spanish, Chinese, Korean and Vietnamese. They wanted to make sure that people who don’t speak English got this message. Similar statements have been issued before other hurricanes since Harvey too.

The good news in the midst of the bad news is this: despite any preemptive strikes on unity, people across the country and especially in Texas have stayed united in helping each other
through the storm and in the recovery process. So one way to counter these divisive forces is to gather people in community for disaster preparedness. I call this movement a preemptive strike on divisiveness. We can start a movement by facilitating Community Disaster Preparedness events in every local community across the nation.

In addition to sharing vital information on what to do in case of a disaster, invite people to connect with each other on a most basic human level. Invite them to consider what they would share in order to help the community survive together. Through this conversation, we might find opportunities to share our love for this land, and share our experiences of what different divisive forces are doing to our personal lives and our communities. In the process of sharing our truths, we might find the common truth that we can speak together and from which to take action to return our country to its original calling: people are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. This is not going to be easy. It requires us to take down our visible and invisible fear-based signs that say “conservative free zone” or “liberal free zone” and become vulnerable. It will feel like we might lose our lives if we open ourselves up to listen to another who has a different and even opposing view on life, community, and nations. Yet that’s what is required of us in Jesus’ call to love our neighbor as ourselves and to love our enemy. The following dialogue session can help us heed Jesus’ call.
Building Bridges Now¹: Disaster Preparedness

**Topic: Disaster Preparedness**

**Objective:** To invite participants into a gracious time and space to experience a constructive dialogue on disaster preparedness on a personal and community level in response to the increasing frequency of natural disasters in recent times.

**Type of Group:** Adults from diverse backgrounds (race, ethnicity, age, gender, economic status, political affiliation, etc.)

**Size of Group:** Six to twelve, if the group is larger than twelve, you will need to have additional trained facilitators – one facilitator per group of six to twelve participants.

**Setting:** A bright, large room with empty wall space for posting chart paper. Chairs for participants should be arranged in circles of six to twelve, with a clear view of the chart paper and video screen.

**Material:** Session handouts, sturdy writing surface (such as a cardboard or clipboard for each person), pens/pencils. Setup for video presentation. Chart paper and dark markers (water-washable are best).

**Time Required:** Two to three hours depending on the size of the group

**Preparation:**
Before participants arrive:

Post pieces of chart paper on the wall (Conocimiento Chart) with the following categories across the top:

- *Name*
- *The last disaster I experienced/witnessed . . .*
- *One important thing I learned from that experience is . . .*

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¹Building Bridges Now is a carefully designed dialogue online curriculum provided by the Kaleidoscope Institute. It consists of two major areas of dialogue: 1) topics on race relations such as Race and Children, Lives Matter, and Immigration, and 2) topics to explore what it means to live in the United States such as Declaration of Independence, Bill of Rights, Voting Rights, and Post-Election Dialogue. See www.buildingbridgesnow.com for information.
With whom or what group have I had a conversation about disaster preparedness?

On a scale of 1 to 10, how prepared am I for a natural disaster?

Write reflection questions for the first and third videos on chart paper (a worksheet will be used for the second video):

a. For first video:
   • What were the things that stood out for you as you watched this video?
   • What challenged you?
   • What was affirmed for you?
   • What are you going to do in order to be ready?
     • Personal
     • Family
     • Friends
     • School/Workplace
     • Other organizations such as faith community, neighborhood association, etc.

b. For the third video:
   • What were the things that stood out for you as you watched this video?
   • What are the different neighborhoods in your community and what might be the differences in disaster preparedness among these neighborhoods? (If you don’t know, what would you do to find out?)
   • What would you do to help the different neighborhoods to be prepared in case of a disaster so that what happened at the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina will not happen in your community?

Set Up the Videos:
• “Disaster Preparedness From Ready.gov” Contact the Kaleidoscope Institute office, kscope@kscopeinstitute.org, to get a password to the link to the video on our website. You can also download this video from YouTube at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7CTj5KZk7eg
• “A Secret Weapon for True Disaster Resilience” Contact the Kaleidoscope Institute office to get a password to the link to the video on our website. You can also download this video from YouTube at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iQxryNvZnbI
• “New Orleans after Katrina: A Tale of Two Cities”
  Contact the Kaleidoscope Institute office to get a password to the link to the video on our website. You can also download this video from YouTube at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=602rez0ZA60

Overview of Dialogue Process:
• Gathering, opening reflection, and setting parameters for dialogue
• Introduce (or review) Respectful Communication Guidelines
• Focusing Text: Excerpt from Speech by UN Secretary-General
• Introduction using Conocimiento chart and Mutual Invitation
• First Dialogue Process: Disaster Preparedness
• Second Dialogue Process: A Secret Weapon for True Disaster Resilience
• Third Dialogue Process: New Orleans after Katrina: A Tale of Two Cities
• Commitment to Future Participation
• Closing and Sending

How to Proceed:
1. As participants arrive, invite each one to take a marker and complete the Conocimiento charts.
2. Welcome and Opening Reflection:
   A facilitator invites participants to sit in the circle of chairs and read the following welcome statement:

   Welcome to Building Bridges Now. This program is sponsored by __________ and the Kaleidoscope Institute to provide a gracious space to have constructive conversations in our community on race relations and other important issues of our time. The purpose of dialogue is to bring together people with diverse backgrounds, viewpoints and experiences to have meaningful conversation on a common subject.

   We invite you to enter into a time of dialogue, remembering that:
   • Dialogue does not force anyone to change. It is not a debate in which we try to convince others that we are right. It is about mutual understanding.
• Dialogue is NOT about finger pointing, demonizing, or punishing individuals or groups. True dialogue invites each one of us to commit to sharing his or her truth while being willing to listen deeply to another’s truth.

• Dialogue does not avoid our history and present differences, pretending that everything is okay. Dialogue acknowledges our history and our present differences. By sharing our different experiences, we can achieve greater understanding of the issues and move toward potential reconciliation, fostering constructive change within our community.

3. Respectful Communication Guidelines²

Hand out copies of the Respectful Communication Guidelines. A facilitator gives the following explanation: (Note: an abbreviated version can be used if there are no new members joining the group since the last gathering.)

We, people from different cultural backgrounds, bring with us different assumptions about communication styles. Sometimes, these different assumptions may cause communication breakdown. Therefore, before we begin our dialogue, I invite you to consider a set of Respectful Communication Guidelines. They are written in the acronym from the word “RESPECT.”

Two or more facilitators may take turns reading the following explanations of the Respectful Communication Guidelines.

**R =** take RESPONSIBILITY for what you say and feel without blaming others
Avoid judgmental language, which can cause defensiveness and cut off communication. Instead, use “I” statements. Begin what you want to say with “I,” claiming what is yours. For example, I feel, I know, I believe, I think, I notice, I wonder, etc.

**E =** use EMPATHETIC listening
Put yourself in the other person’s shoes and attempt to see and experience the issue from the speaker’s perspective. This is a commitment that we make to try as hard as we can to understand each other, knowing our limits. Therefore,

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it is okay to ask clarifying questions. It is also okay to give
feedback to check if you have understood what the speaker
was saying.

**S** = be SENSITIVE to differences in communication styles
When someone behaves differently from you, don’t simply
interpret that behavior using your own assumptions about
what is good communication. Remind yourself that this
person might be communicating in a very different way
and there might be opportunities to learn more about how
the other communicates.

**P** = PONDER what you hear and feel before you speak
Think before you speak.

**E** = EXAMINE your own assumptions and perceptions
As you ponder, ask yourself what caused you to feel,
think, or react in a certain way. Where might these ideas
come from for you? If you are able to notice your own
assumptions, you are more able to take responsibility for
your own thinking and feeling.

**C** = keep CONFIDENTIALITY
In order to uphold the well-being of each person in this
group, I invite you to keep the personal information shared
here in confidence.
This way, we can feel safer in talking about real issues that
come from for you? If you are able to notice your own
assumptions, you are more able to take responsibility for
your own thinking and feeling.

**T** = TRUST ambiguity because we are NOT here to debate who
is right or wrong.
In order to address these issues constructively, we must
be willing and able to listen to each other’s different
experiences and points of view even though at times, the
ambiguity might be uncomfortable for some of us. By
listening empathically without judgment and debate, we,
as a community, may gain a fuller description of the issues
we are trying address. In this way, instead of being divided,
we can move forward, working together to find constructive
ways to address them.
After the reading of the explanations, a facilitator asks participants if there are questions and then poses the following question:

*Do we have an agreement to uphold these guidelines for the rest of our time together? I need a sign or gesture from all of you to indicate that you agree.*

If nobody disagrees, the facilitator can continue with the dialogue process. If there are questions, discuss it until there is an agreement, and then continue with the dialogue process.

Problems to anticipate in this section:
Be prepared to give concrete behavioral examples if there are questions about the meaning of the guidelines.

_In this dialogue session, we will have opportunities to dialogue on disaster preparedness on personal and community levels. To help us focus our time together, I would like to read an excerpt from the speech by former Secretary-General of the United Nations, Ban Ki-moon, at the opening of the UN World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction in 2015:_

*Now we must respond to the world’s growing needs by empowering individuals, supporting communities, and backing promises with resources. We must especially help the poorest and most vulnerable people. Climate change is intensifying the risks for hundreds of millions of people, particularly in small island developing states and coastal areas. Disasters put persons with disabilities and older persons in grave danger. Nine out of ten disaster fatalities are in low- and middle-income countries.*

* . . . But disaster risk reduction is in everybody’s interest—and it is everybody’s business. In this globalized economy, our world is smaller than ever. An earthquake in one country shakes up financial markets in another. Tropical storms in one region cause economic turbulence in another.*

* . . . The global annual price tag in damage now exceeds $300 billion. We can watch that number grow as more people suffer. Or we can dramatically lower that figure and invest savings in development.*
. . . Resilience is not just a matter of strong buildings that can withstand earthquakes. True resilience comes from strong bonds among countries and communities.³

4. Introduction Process:

A facilitator gives the following instructions to introduce the process. (Note: if there are not new members joining the group, simply remind participants that we will be using Mutual Invitation again for the next process and skip the detailed instructions. If the group is bigger than twelve, you will need to divide the group into smaller groups of no more than twelve with a facilitator for each group giving the following instructions.)

_In order to help us get to know each other better, I invite you to introduce yourselves using the categories on the wall chart, which you filled out when you arrived._

_In order to ensure that everyone who wants to share HAS the opportunity to speak, we will use a process called Mutual Invitation⁴:_

_The leader or a designated person shares first. After that person has spoken, he or she then invites another to share. Try not to invite the person next to you so that we won't move into the habit of going around in a circle. After the next person has spoken, that person is given the privilege of inviting another to share._

_If you are not ready to share, say “I pass for now,” and we will invite you to share later on. If you don’t want to say anything at all, simply say “pass” and proceed to invite another to share. We will do this until everyone has been invited._


⁴I first introduced Mutual Invitation in Eric H. F. Law, _The Wolf Shall Dwell with the Lamb_ (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1993), 79–88. It is now one of the principal gracious skills in all our dialogue processes. You can find this process described in Spanish, French, and Chinese at the Kaleidoscope Institute website, http://www.kscopeinstitute.org/free-resources.
We invite you to listen and not to respond to someone’s sharing immediately. There will be time to respond and to ask clarifying questions after everyone has shared.

Any questions?

A facilitator may decide to demonstrate the Mutual Invitation process by inviting the group to share “What is your favorite ice cream?”

We have set aside about ____ minutes for this process. That means each person will have ____ minutes to share. I will ask you to respect other people’s time as you share. Are there any questions?

Facilitator then begins the process by introducing him/herself.

When everyone has introduced themselves, the facilitator debriefs the group by asking participants to complete the sentences:

I noticed. . .
I wonder . . .

Problems to anticipate in this section: People sometimes forget to invite others after they finish speaking. Do not invite for them. Simply remind them they have the privilege to invite the next person.

Break (Facilitators set up the video, ready to be played.)

5. Dialogue Using the Video: “Disaster Preparedness from Ready.gov”

Facilitators invite participants to return to their seats arranged for viewing the video.

Facilitators play the video.

Give a moment of silence. [A facilitator refers to the reflection questions on chart paper for all to see.]

I now invite you to ponder these questions, which are also on your handout:
• What were the things that stood out for you as you watched this video?
• What challenged you?
• What was affirmed for you?
• What are you going to do in order to be ready?
  • Personal
  • Family
  • Friends
  • School/Workplace
  • Other organizations, such as faith community, neighborhood association, etc.

Give participants time to ponder the questions.

Using Mutual Invitation, let’s share our responses to the questions.

Break (Facilitators set up the second video, ready to be played.)


Facilitators play the video.

Facilitators guide participants in working through the worksheet: Building Capacity for Disaster Preparedness.

In the video, Lucie Ozanne talked about the four capacities that were developed through the Timebank in Christchurch, New Zealand. They are:

• Communication – That is, in case of a disaster we need to have an effective way of communicating information.
• Social – that is, do we have a working network of trusting relationships that can provide mutual support for people during and after a disaster?
• Cultural – that is, do we have a shared culture that supports the recovery effort?
• Community Efficacy – that is, do we know how to work together to solve problems as they arise?

On your worksheet, I invite you to reflect on the following questions for each of the capacities,

• What is already in place in your community that establishes and practices this capacity?

5Learn more about Timebank at the Timebanks USA website: https://timebanks.org.
• What does your community need to do to increase this capacity?
• What resources are you willing to offer to develop this capacity in case of a disaster?
• When you have finished filling in the boxes, consider the last question: What are your thoughts on the community “Timebank”?

(Pause and let participants write.)

In a moment, we will use Mutual Invitation and invite each of you to share your insights from this exercise.

Give time for participants to reflect and/or write on the worksheet.

We’ve set aside ___ minutes to share our reflections from this worksheet. We’ll use Mutual Invitation. Please share only what you are comfortable sharing with the group. Each person will have about ___ minutes to share.

When everyone has shared, the facilitator debriefs the group by asking participants to complete the sentences:

I noticed . . .
I wonder . . .

Break (Facilitators set up the third video, ready to be played.)


Facilitators invite participants to return to their seats arranged for viewing the video.

Facilitators play the video.

Give a moment of silence. [A facilitator refers to the reflection questions on chart paper for all to see.]

I now invite you to ponder these questions, which are also on your handout:

• What were the things that stood out for you as you watched this video?
• What are the different neighborhoods in your community and what might be the differences in disaster preparedness among these neighborhoods? (If you don’t know, what would you do to find out?)
• What would you do to help the different neighborhoods to be prepared in case of a disaster so that what happened at the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina will not happen in your community?

Give time for participants to reflect and/or write on the worksheet.

We’ve set aside ___ minutes to share our reflections from this worksheet. We’ll use Mutual Invitation. Please share only what you are comfortable sharing with the group. Each person will have about ___ minutes to share.

When everyone has shared, the facilitator debriefs the group by asking participants to complete the sentences:

I noticed. . .
I wonder . . .

8. Reflection on the Experience
Invite participants to recall what they learned from the last several hours and to consider the question:

What are you called to do in the next week or month?

Invite participants to share using Mutual Invitation.

9. Commitment to Future Participation
Facilitators invite participants to take up different tasks for the next dialogue meeting:

• host(s) at the meeting location
• person(s) responsible for refreshments
• If a meal is involved, assign responsibility for different parts of the meal for example, meat, vegetable, fruit, drink, dessert, . . . etc.
• person(s) responsible for communication
• transportation coordinator(s) if needed

10. Closing:
Facilitators invite participants to take part in reading the excerpt from the speech by former Secretary-General of the United Nation, Ban Ki-moon, at the opening of the UN World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction in 2015:

Now we must respond to the world’s growing needs by empowering individuals, supporting communities and backing
promises with resources. We must especially help the poorest and most vulnerable people. Climate change is intensifying the risks for hundreds of millions of people, particularly in small island developing states and coastal areas. Disasters put persons with disabilities and older persons in grave danger. Nine out of ten disaster fatalities are in low- and middle-income countries.

. . . But disaster risk reduction is in everybody’s interest—and it is everybody’s business. In this globalized economy, our world is smaller than ever. An earthquake in one country shakes up financial markets in another. Tropical storms in one region cause economic turbulence in another.

. . . The global annual price tag in damage now exceeds $300 billion. We can watch that number grow as more people suffer. Or we can dramatically lower that figure and invest savings in development.

. . . Resilience is not just a matter of strong buildings that can withstand earthquakes. True resilience comes from strong bonds among countries and communities.

A facilitator invites participants to complete the sentences:

- I am thankful today for . . .
- My hopes are . . .

A facilitator invites participants to share their sentences using Mutual Invitation.

11. Sending Forth:
A facilitator reads the following to send participants out to the world:

Nourished by understanding
Warmed by friends
Fed by loved ones
Matured by wisdom
Tempered by tears
Made holy by caring and sharing
Go forth in peace!

Adapted from Leonard Nimoy

12. Donation Request:

*If you appreciated this dialogue process, please make a donation to the Kaleidoscope Institute so that they can continue to develop more dialogue sessions and offer the Building Bridges Now resources to more people, including those who have limited financial resources.*

Excerpt from the speech by former Secretary-General of the United Nation, Ban Ki-Moon, at opening of the UN World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction in 2015:

Now we must respond to the world’s growing needs by empowering individuals, supporting communities and backing promises with resources. We must especially help the poorest and most vulnerable people. Climate change is intensifying the risks for hundreds of millions of people, particularly in small island developing states and coastal areas. Disasters put persons with disabilities and older persons in grave danger. Nine out of ten disaster fatalities are in low- and middle-income countries.

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. . . Resilience is not just a matter of strong buildings that can withstand earthquakes. True resilience comes from strong bonds among countries and communities.
Reflection questions for the video: “Disaster Preparedness From Ready.gov ”

What were the things that stood out for you as you watched this video?

What challenged you?

What was affirmed for you?

What are you going to do in order to be ready?

- Personal
- Family
- Friends
- School/Workplace
- Other organizations such as faith community, neighborhood association, etc.
Capacity Building for Disaster Preparedness

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Capacity Capacity</th>
<th>What is already in place in my community that establishes and practices this capacity?</th>
<th>What does my community need to do to increase this capacity?</th>
<th>What resources am I willing to offer to develop this capacity in case of a disaster?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Communication Capacity</td>
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<td>Social Capacity</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cultural Capacity</td>
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<tr>
<td>Community Efficacy Capacity</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Question: What are your thoughts on the community “Time Bank”?

Reflection questions for the video: “New Orleans after Katrina: A Tale of Two Cities”

• What were the things that stood out for you as you watched this video?

• What are the different neighborhoods in your community and what might be the differences in disaster preparedness among these neighborhoods? (If you don’t know, what would do to find out?)

• What would you do to help the different neighborhoods to be prepared in case of a disaster so that what happened at the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina will not happen in your community?
Respectful Communication Guidelines

R = Take RESPONSIBILITY for what you say and feel without blaming others
E = EMPATHETIC listening
S = Be SENSITIVE to differences in communication styles
P = PONDER what you hear and feel before you speak
E = EXAMINE your own assumptions and perceptions
C = Keep CONFIDENTIALITY (Share Constructively to uphold the well-being of COMMUNITY)
T = TOLERATE ambiguity because we are not here to debate who is right or wrong

(from The Bush Was Blazing but Not Consumed by Eric H. F. Law)

I agree to uphold these guidelines for the time we have together.

__________________________________________          __________________________
Signature                                                            Date
Let’s Talk about Death

“I realize how open we are to the persistent message that we can avert death. And to its punitive correlative, the message that if death catches us we have only ourselves to blame.”
—Joan Didion, The Year of Magical Thinking

“Time is the school in which we learn,
Time is the fire in which we burn.”
—Delmore Schwartz, “Calmly We Walk through This April’s Day,” Summer Knowledge

The Grief Train

Grief, my therapist once told me, is a unique train ride in which the bereaved are often the sole passengers. It’s a long journey through which we remember our loved ones, learn from the process, and receive moments of clarity about who we are without them. There is no fixed schedule, no pre-determined set of train cars, and no final destination. The train has no conductor—it just moves. There may be some useful, anticipated, or unanticipated visitors—former passengers on their own grief trains—who board along the way. We learn from their wisdom. Other times, the trip may seem isolated and purposeless. My therapist added that the train may even reverse directions, take an
unexpected loop, slow its speed, or accelerate without warning. But it is our train, unique to each griever.

When my therapist first brought up this metaphor, I thought it to be the loneliest cross-country tour I’d ever heard of. Who wants to ride a damn imaginary train for an unknown amount of time in which there may or may not be a dining car with hot cocoa, restrooms, welcome visitors, or stops? *This ain’t the Polar Express,* I thought.

Assuring me, she said it would all work out the way it was supposed to, because this was my train.

The stations, she said, were the points at which we receive clarity in our grief, processing the lessons gleaned from time spent in these “railroad cars”: wisdom from former passengers who become mentors in our coping, as well as the support of our very-much-alive family and friends—all helpers and witnesses to our suffering.

“You are on your train right now,” she told me, then added, “and remember, no two grief trains are alike.”

There is no standard route in grief. As the wisest grievers I know have told me, “There is nowhere you can be but in it.” There are, however, common “cars” we all ride in heartache—similar threads woven in the fabric of loss: first anniversaries, new years, meaning-making, identity struggles, emotional poles, struggles to talk about our grief and death itself, and—ultimately—acceptance. Those shared railcars serve as touchpoints of normalcy—connections through which we encounter wisdom and comfort in a mutual human experience. *Keep a look out for those cars and passengers,* my therapist said, *there you’ll find the helpers, the mentors, and lessons that will unfurl.* These, she assured me, would help me discover my own stations: tools and meaning for my own path.

**Station One: Time-Keeping**

After my mother passed, I marked important days, events, and anniversaries by reading through old journal entries and listening to old voicemails, looking for glimpses of Mom to carry into the present.

On significant days such as my promotion to a new faculty position, her brother’s death, the new book contract, a family reunion coordinated because I wanted her memory to live on—
these milestones served to both bring her close, but also to remind me she was gone. They reminded me I could no longer say, “Mom knew about this.” Every day following August 24, 2017, was an inching further away from her knowing any of the events of my life.

Days marked on the calendar, hours on the clock, years marked with tears, pages written in the journal—are all integral to the bereaved.

Months after Mom died, I called her eldest brother’s widow to invite her to that family reunion I organized. Uncle Charlie had been the first of my mother’s five siblings to die—just four short years after their own mother’s death. Though my aunt had been widowed nearly 20 years ago, she was the first to bring up her own grief train when I phoned.

As we talked she told me that, on one particular important grief anniversary, she woke up and just realized her husband wasn’t coming back. “He ain’t gonna come walkin’ through that door ever again,” she recounted to me as her thoughts from that time. “So, I said to myself, ‘You can either stay miserable, or you can pick yourself up and get on with your life.’”

Listening to her talk provided me with the recognition of a daunting reality: I didn’t want to pick myself up and get on with my life without my mother. But after we hung up, I realized I’d encountered a shared stop on the train, a brief moment of grief clarity. Though two decades had passed—and my uncle had existed solely in her (and our) memory for 20 years—my aunt’s grief decisions—and her own train ride, seemed as fresh to her as Tuesday.

Grief never goes away, I realized. It just changes shape.

But finding fellow sojourners on the grief train who understood the way time-keeping and grief are inextricably linked felt like a rare gift.

In her memoir, Everything Happens for a Reason: And Other Lies I’ve Loved, Kate Bowler shares a courageous narrative of her Stage IV colon cancer diagnosis. At age 35 she was living her dream life: a tenure-track professor position at Duke, a perfect baby boy, and a strong marriage with her high-school sweetheart. And then her world exploded with one word: cancer.
“Ever since the diagnosis,” she writes, “there has been a moment, in the minute between sleeping and waking, when I forget, when I have only a lingering sense that there is something I am supposed to remember.”

Though describing what it feels like to live with a terminal diagnosis, Bowler’s words precisely construct what the days and weeks following a loved one’s death also feel like: that precious, dream-state moment every morning when the world—even if just for one breath—is whole again. It’s the moment we’ve forgotten that our parent, our spouse, our best friend—or whoever our “person” might be—is gone. I woke up with this exact feeling every morning for six months after losing my mother.

Each morning, the alarm went off. And for those brief seconds before full awakening, I forgot I was still on the train.

“I used to think that grief was about looking backward,” Bowler writes. “I see now that it is about eyes squinting through tears into an unbearable future.” When death and dying arrive—whether swiftly, as in my father’s cardiac arrest, or through a terminal diagnosis, as in my mother’s perforated diverticulitis—future time with them vanishes. Every birthday, anniversary, family gathering, or circled calendar day that used to be previously anticipated—the joy, the laughs, the memories—lives under the fog of zero visibility. Time is ripped to shreds when you realize your loved one will not be there to share it with you.

You lose the ability to imagine the future will contain any morsel of happiness. Bowler describes being stuck in this kind of semi-permanent present tense. Some moments that first year, I found myself saying, I can hold it together this minute, but the next minute is fair game. This was especially true as I was forced to go about my regular routine, or “put on my clothes and act like I’m somebody,” as my mother used to say. Mom also named and made personal this inability to anticipate and move oneself into the future, calling it, “My get up and go done got up and went.”

Mom died the second week of my fall semester. As faculty, I couldn’t simply push a pause button on my students’ learning. I had to keep going. The grief train had to coincide with my daily teaching life, even if “my get up and go” was gone. There was an urgency to return to my courses, which, in some ways, was a welcome distraction. In other ways, it was a nightmare.
I remember distinctly one rainy commute to school. It was a September Wednesday after Mom’s death, and I’d slinked out of bed to teach my 8:00 a.m. section of Critical Thinking. I was making a left-hand turn onto an on-ramp leading to our city’s busiest beltline. Mid-turn, I asked myself, *How will I take this drive day after day, with no sense of the future, no faith or hope in this gut-level pain ending? How will I be able to stand this?*

Those first months, I *forced* myself from under the covers, but reserved commutes, bathroom breaks, solitary elevator rides, and rare moments alone in hallways and offices as opportunities to fall apart. I distinctly remember thinking: *How am I going to survive living minute to minute like this?*

Before her death, I saw Mom nearly daily, and spoke with her on the phone at several points throughout the day, including during that commute back and forth to school. After she died, these commutes—and the hours—felt empty. Where her voice had once been in my car, in my ear, and in my life, there was instead silence. I could no longer access her with a button, the ring of a phone.

The literal and metaphorical direct line I’d had to her for 36 years was cut off, without even notice first of a late bill. She just wasn’t there. I tried to drown out the sadness with music or podcasts, but every lyric or lesson reminded me of her in some way—and, I would be right back where I had started: hours spent empty, lonely, and on a train I wanted to derail.

Loved ones told me this is often the hardest part of that first year: this inability to *plan* for a future with our loved ones—and the persistent absence of their voice. The loss of their bodily presence in a realm where we could see, touch, and hear them is so visceral you feel as if you’re slowly bleeding to death, hour by hour.

Five months after my mother’s August death, my grief train “hit a crossing.” The train would not budge. The commuting tools that had helped me make it through the first holidays—Thanksgiving and Christmas—somehow left me unprepared for the New Year’s arrival.

It was a new year. *Without mom.*

The proverbial calendar had flipped over, time had marched on, and the future had *arrived,* whether I liked it or not. I met a
new phase of grief: determining what meaning Mom’s death held for my new life without her.

**Station Two: Meaning-Making**

I found myself returning over and over to Joan Didion’s wisdom in *The Year of Magical Thinking*, and Kate Bowler’s willful prose on being terminal. I encountered them as sojourners—passengers on their own grief trains—who’d also taken the ride, and were now offering the wisdom of the shared cars, the journey, the long narrow tracks. They were part of the tribe of mentors who could assure me that the stations of clarity would arrive, and I was going to be OK.

From Didion I learned that “grief turns out to be a place none of us know until we reach it.” We can make some generalizations, certainly, about the train ride everyone takes: from the initial shock, to the five stages Elisabeth Kübler-Ross so famously outlined in her book, *On Death and Dying*.

But the day-to-day grip of filling the void eludes us. “Only the survivors of death are truly left alone,” Didion concludes. “The connections that made up their life…have all vanished.”

Mom had vanished. The woman I used to visit and speak with every day of my life was gone.

Living the routines and rituals that once involved our loved ones are difficult enough. Memory “vortexes,” as Didion calls them, can feel even worse, because they appear out of nowhere, even as the brain and body believe they are purposefully avoiding thinking of the deceased. Vortexes are those innocuous thoughts that lead to other seemingly innocuous thoughts, until you arrive at a germ of a memory of your loved one. “The way you got side-swiped,” wrote Didion, “was by going back.”

I didn’t want to go back to memories of her—it was too painful—but neglecting the loss…was worse. I needed those reels of Mom to remind me that she’d lived, and help me understand why the grief felt so real and raw. I needed them to discover how I’d make sense and meaning out of all this hurt.

Vivid dreams were common cars on my grief train. I wrote each dream down, desperate to grip fleeting dawn details, hopeful for clues they’d left me. I hoped for signposts to signal a new lesson, provide some clarity—or, better yet, a message that the
trip was coming to a close, and soon I could exit, leave the train’s journey, and say, “Well, thank God that’s over.”

But there is no full-on end to the loss, no final destination in grief. No leaving the train.

I had recurring dreams about my paternal Grandmother Dorothy, who died my second year of seminary. In one dream, I rummaged through the familiar dresser drawers in the one-story Indiana retirees’ apartment she shared with my grandfather. In the dream, her bedroom is intact; the furniture and its contents haven’t been moved, and I know what’s in each drawer, since I’d seen her open them thousands of times. As I spread my hands over her belongings, I’m not certain what it is I’m looking for. Jewelry is my best guess, as we both shared a passion for all things shiny and tacky.

When I shared this dream with chaplain friends, they told me I wasn’t looking for material goods of Grandmother’s at all; I was looking for the “gold”: the valuable meaning amid the loss.

I began to learn to read the grief dreams on the train and to anticipate other signs for meaning—some that arrived even during the waking hours.

For example, nearly eight months after my mother died, I opened her Bible for the first time. A piece of paper clipped to the first page had an undated handwritten note that read:

“Forgive me.
I forgive you.
Thank you.
I love you.
Goodbye.
My final words before passing.”

It came special delivery, an undated grief parcel of meaning. I was just certain it hadn’t been there before—after all, we’d had her Bible and everything from her hospice bedside—and had never noticed it paper-clipped to the inside. I wondered if she’d sent it after her death, a reassurance that we’d said what we’d needed to say, and that the labor of Mom’s death had been sufficient.

Didion writes that death and grief are full of symbols and omens that yield meaning. Did my mother know I would need that note? Had she sent it after her death? Did the founder of the now-ubiquitous Death Café movement know that following its advent he was going to die? Was it inclination—or, a strange force
drawing him to do the work of wrestling with death, to be ready for his own?

Years ago, I thought of writing a book similar to this one. I’d survived hospital chaplaincy, my father’s death, and Fred’s father’s death. During a family gathering, I sat in our apartment living room with my husband, mom, and in-laws, and told them I was scared to write down all I’d learned in chaplaincy from the dying; I feared it would bring about someone’s death.

Three years later, in August 2017, my mother died.

On the “train,” Didion taught me that survivors do see—or, at least, they read meaning into what they perceive to be messages they missed. The bereaved, she wrote, “live by symbols,” adding connotation to the seemingly mundane.

**Station Three: Identity**

Following Mom’s death, I spent 13 months in hospice grief counseling, scrambling to find new tools and work harder for the lessons—the stations of clarity that I wanted to arrive at quicker and move through faster. I wanted to get grief “done”—like a to-do list—and deboard this damn train. That first year, I attended grief workshops and kept a detailed grief notebook. I made terrible art projects out of clay and paint. I strapped Mom’s ashes in my passenger seat and took her on road trips. I planted myself neck deep in my mother’s death in those first few months as I ticked off the tasks—for, I couldn’t see a future without her. I couldn’t see myself.

Is this, I ask, what grief feels like: a desperate need to discover meaning amid a loss of self, a rupture of our identity, a sudden void—a disappearance of those who have shaped and formed us? Are lost loved ones the start of an ongoing quest to find meaning and discover who we are on the other side of loss? Who we are without our parents or grandparents? Who we are without our partners? Without our best friends? Who are we if we are not someone’s granddaughter, daughter, or wife? These relationships help define us, and their sudden loss is suffocating, because we do not know who we are anymore.

When someone close dies, the ripe, plump fullness we knew ourselves to be, as seen in and among those who have lived alongside us, knowing our stories—many since our births—is simply gone.
At one session of hospice grief counseling, I stormed in, talking a mile a minute and asking all these questions. I’d built up an arsenal of things that needed to be processed. I told my counselor about this swirl of conflicting emotions and identity crises. Some moments, when I tried to make meaning out of what was happening, the sadness for Mom being gone felt like too much, like I—my identity—was going to get stuck in the abyss of grief and I would never scratch my way out.

Those were the hours I missed her so viscerally I could vomit. But other hours I felt so free for her and me that I sang my favorite songs at inappropriate volume because I felt relief for us both.

I can still picture the look on the hospice counselor’s face that day as my words rushed out at her. Without speaking, she simply took a deep breath. I mirrored her instantly, as she knew I would.

“OK. You know you don’t need to figure all this out *right* now,” she’d said.

And yet I longed to read meaning into every mood, moment, and memory—to let myself be sad, but I was floundering to understand the moments I felt relief in my newfound identity without her.

The hospice counselor assured me that this was “spot on.” I was *not* losing my mind. I was actually grieving. And, as with processing *any* big life event or relationship change, the hours were dynamic. Some minutes would *feel* like two contradictory emotional ends of a pole, and that was normal.

I’d never had these emotional poles with the loss of anyone else, because my identity had not ever been so enmeshed with anyone else. This was the difference between grieving my mother and grieving my father. Mom was my source and mirror—a significant part of what I thought made me *me*. When she died, I had time and ability to process who I was without her. Dad, on the other hand, had been distant all my life, like a satellite dimly broadcasting a fuzzy picture. When he died a month before my wedding, the letter had been sent, he’d already been cut off, and there was no time to dissect meaning and identity. There were wedding details to organize, a man to marry, and a mother to take care of. I took no time to grieve.

Now, I was swinging the other way, taking a bit *too much time* to think about it all at once—trying to *control* a train I couldn’t conduct, *over-processing* who I was amid loss, chastising myself
that I wasn’t mourning 24/7…and horrified at the times when I was.

I wanted to feel my grief deeply and figure out who I am as a result of it. But my counselor reminded me that it was also OK to have hours “off” from all this searching. I needed to take deep breaths, gaze out the grief train’s window, and remember there was still a living world of focus and function, and singing and laughter. It was all OK, because it was my grief train.

Grief, my hospice counselor taught me, was about offering ourselves radical grace and self-care while encountering all these emotions, questions, and experiences on the train. We ride in railcars of deep despair and relief—and even euphoria— that our loved one isn’t suffering or in pain, that they are in peace and not enduring endless surgeries, treatments, or medicines to repair an aging body that cannot be fixed. But there are also cars of identity—for determining who we are as we navigate the world without our people.

Being kind to myself while sitting in all these different railroad car seats was important. I needed to hold the sorrow and reprieve, acknowledging the immense gratitude I felt for her suffering to have ended. It was OK to despair and be joyful at the same time. It was OK to search for myself. This was the journey. I wasn’t expected to sit in the very same seat for the entire ride.

But I couldn’t have known all this was normal unless I had been willing to talk with others about it, and they had been willing to talk with me, too.

Station Four: Talking about Grieving

Intellectually, I “knew” death and grief. As a minister and chaplain, I’d read books, learned the stages, and cared for the dying and bereaved.

But I belong to a culture that tucks death away in hospitals and nursing homes, that banishes grief with clever social media posts that ward off reality. So, how is it possible to begin to broach the taboo topic of mourning a loss when so few people are willing to even acknowledge its existence?

Bystanders generally believe that—outside traditional, private counseling settings—the bereaved don’t want to talk about grief, hear about, or speak of the dead. But one of the most comforting things is for someone to utter our loved one’s name, or lend an
ear—even if both are offered only briefly. A memory lifted or a simple, “I miss her, and know you do, too,” is a significant touchpoint. While others cannot ride your grief train for you, to know that they see you—this is comforting. They know where you are, and what it feels like to be there—perhaps because they’ve been there themselves. They understand what it means to love and lose.

Without those touchpoints—the grief “crutches” of train car passengers’ support that came in the form of coffee with best friends, phone calls, cards, and lessons from Didion, Bowler, Kübler-Ross, and fellow chaplains—I would not have survived. I would not have grieved Mom well—and, I’m not certain what would have happened to me. My best guess is that I’d still be at that left turn at the on-ramp, unable to envision any future, any hope, and wondering, How will I make it through?

From the ridiculous airline safety videos, to American culture’s obsessive fear of aging and our avoidance of death, we just don’t want to acknowledge or talk about “it”—grief, death, dying…any of it. And for the grieving, this can be devastating.

Of all the people I’ve met over the years, very few understood all the train cars running the grief tracks: time-keeping, meaning-making, identity, emotional poles, and the importance of naming the reality of loss. Those who understood—my mother, fellow chaplains, pastors, ministers, counselors, and others—were those who’d grieved deeply, and had helped others do the same. Most everyone else I encountered seemed oblivious to the fact that people just dropped dead and left others behind to mourn them. Of course, it wasn’t their fault they couldn’t name the obvious. It was just American. This culture isn’t exactly known for its profound chats on mortality. Weather and scandalous reality TV show characters, yes. Dying, no.

During that year of ministering in the hospital, we learned what one minister friend aptly named the “chaplain’s sacred walk of death.” That is, we learned that unique perspective chaplains are privy to in partially entering into the other side of the curtain—the real side of life (death and subsequent grief). It’s the behind-the-curtain experience my mother thought of when she drafted her advance directives papers in 1997, telling Ron and me exactly how she wanted to die. The “sacred walk of death” is life’s heartache, the reality of taking care of and being with people
who are finishing up “their assignments” here on earth, as I once heard a wise spiritual woman call them. Chaplain residency taught me how to walk with patients in their final days, hours, and moments, we learned the many gifts of leaving—including a clarity of what’s important—and gained the ability to talk to others about the important lessons we’d received from the sacred walk of death.

After my mother’s death, I had a small, core group of friends who became frequent companions on my grief train. They were the first to acknowledge that the ride is not a ticket anybody wants. They understood when I spoke of the train’s speed, its overwhelming—and sometimes underwhelming—pace. These friends reassured me that despite twists and turns, lulls and lags, acceleration and whiplash, there’s nowhere you can be but in it.

We’d often commiserate about why few people can—or want to—acknowledge the heaviness of grief, a fact that is so integral to life. We talked for hours long-distance about this mystery. Their willingness to talk about grief made the ride bearable.

Rev. Sally Bates was one of those consistent conversation partners on the train. From time to time, we’d meet to talk about my mother’s death and subsequent grief trains we’d encountered—including those of her family and friends. When she cared for a friend during the last days in ICU, she was, like me, appalled at the way Americans erase death—and its aftermath—from Main Street. “We’ve banished both birth and death from our households, bedrooms, and parlors,” she said, “and sent it off to the sterile land of modern medicine.”

Comparing notes on ICU pastoral care, we talked about how raw and real death is in those hospital units, and how strange life feels when you step outside into a world that pretends as if mourning isn’t a thing—or, at the very least, it’s something to overcome, and quickly. Even though it’s normal, and all of us will experience it, our skittishness about life’s end isn’t useful when it comes time to process the grief.

It wasn’t until Mom’s death, and with the gift of those ongoing conversations with Sally and others, that I intentionally began to wrestle with how close grief had hit home—and just how meaningful a part of my life it had become.

If my fate was to ride this grief train, I wanted to understand it so I could help others understand it, too. Moments of literal
and metaphorical “tea and coffee” with fellow sojourners were an important part of that. Sally and friends kept me an active participant in my own grieving, by talking about it, so that I could make sense of it for myself. To talk about grief is to make it a part of living.

But we don’t want to talk about grief. We fear being “Debbie Downer,” the exaggerated Saturday Night Live character who disrupts bowling night with her gutter balls of reality. But culture and conversation will have to shift to being more open soon, out of necessity. The number of dying Americans is expected to rise by more than one-third in the next 20 years, thanks to the Baby Boomers. The Baby Boomers—the generation to which my father belonged—is the largest living generation, and they will soon be the largest dying generation. Like my father—who was born in 1946—the Boomers have lessons for us, even as we (and they) may do our best to ensure that death, grief, and all related questions are still hidden under the table. With the death tsunami coming, more of us will be riding grief trains, so we need to start the larger, public conversation.

An unwillingness to acknowledge reality has grave consequences. For those hovering between a good quality of life and their final years, weeks, or days—not talking about death—from brass tacks to big, meaningful things that need to be said, can be devastating.

I learned this from another sojourner who arrived in my life prior to Mom’s death, but whose wisdom echoed as I rode my own grief train. Rev. Stimpson “Stimp” Hawkins, retired Presbyterian minister, had a long career in pastoring and hospice chaplaincy. In those years he’d known birth and death: he’d seen relationships blossom and decay, children succeed and disappoint, faith grow and doubt crush. Stimp, along with my mother, showed me that these losses clarify yet another station on the grief train: anticipating and preparing for death.

Station Five: Talking about Death

Stimp was a part of the “The Positive Death Movement”—positive in that it doesn’t view death as a shameful, taboo topic. Like Mom, he was a part of a relatively small set of the population: older adults who actively talk about and plan for death. Few Americans give death consistent public air time, but
“The Positive Death Movement” is a growing one, brought on in part by the Baby Boomers. Evidence of its growth is visible in “The Conversation Project,” Death Cafés, Death Doulas, the “Ask a Mortician” YouTube series, and best-selling books on death and dying. It offers a constructive approach to mortality.

I was introduced to “Stimp, the Death Pimp,” as he was known in central North Carolina, while attending a Buddhist Meditation Center. He was the wisest, mellowest octogenarian I’d ever met. In the short time I knew him, Stimp changed my understanding of how we all could approach death—whether we are 82 or 18.

Stimp earned his moniker through participating and serving as a facilitator, teacher, and willing participant in any setting in which folks needed a little nudge on how to start “the conversation.” He spent his final years ensuring that everyone he encountered knew that they had more control over their death than they realized—all they had to do was talk about it.

Planning for our own deaths, he said, is the “greatest gift” we could ever give ourselves and our loved ones.

“All we have is this moment,” Stimp always said as he patted his shirt pocket where he kept his M.O.S.T. (Medical Orders for Scope of Treatment) papers with him 24/7.

“Should I fall out right here, y’all know what to do—or rather, what not to do,” he added, in his Virginian accent. Stimp, at 82, was so fervent in his wishes for a peaceful passing of only comfort care that, not only had he prepared all the legal papers to reflect his wishes, but he also had had “D.N.R.” (Do Not Resuscitate) tattooed above his heart—with a monkey underneath. The tattoo ink, of course, offered no legal weight, but served as a symbol and reminder to reinforce the legal ink he’d placed on paper: his declaration of intent for a natural death.

Stimp’s “Death Pimp” ways of “Let’s Talk about Death” galvanized conversation—and action. It also garnered statewide attention. WUNC, our NPR affiliate, interviewed him live during his own cardboard-casket signing party.

“I want to die naturally,” Stimp told Frank Stasio, North Carolina host of the radio show The State of Things. “I’ve had a great life. When it’s my turn to go, I’m ready.” Stimp had indeed had a wonderful life: four children, one stepdaughter, and 12 grandchildren who adored him. He spread his mantra of “JOY!” (his favorite word) everywhere he went. Stimp had charisma; a true
minister and chaplain, within minutes of meeting you, he could get almost anyone to open up about everything—from sharing your life story to unwittingly sharing how you wanted to die.

No one could resist Stimp’s charm—evidenced by the fact that he even convinced Stasio to get inside and lay down in Stimp’s casket on stage during a live broadcast. Stimp was ready for death, and wanted everyone else to feel a bit readier, too. The death conversation was one he was passionate about, and he helped others voice it—openly, honestly, with care and humor.

Nearly six months to the day after Stasio interviewed him, Stimp died. Stimp’s widow, Dr. Martha Taylor—a registered licensed dietician, professor, and hospice consultant—now continues to champion Stimp’s mission to educate others on death. Martha and Stimp were regulars at Greensboro’s Death Café and Café Mortale, where Stimp would lead with the obvious conversation starter: always be prepared to die.

Stimp believed people were hesitant to talk about death because of the unknown. No one knows exactly what the afterlife will be like. Denial, Stimp felt, is a powerful sentiment. By having death conversations, Stimp believed, and in discussing our death wishes and plans, we take away the power of its sting. The grief train, in turn, becomes easier to ride.

His number one rule was: Start the conversation. “None of us is getting out of here alive,” he’d say, laughing. The conversation, he insisted, “is the biggest gift you can give your family.”

Stimp’s insistence on talking about death ensured his family’s grief train would already be on the tracks—equipped with tools his loved ones needed to remember and mourn him well. He knew the train was unavoidable, so packing for the ride was key. How could he prepare them to make the ride—even in its sorrow—more comfortable?

He reminded them he was going to die—we all are. He talked about death. He lessened their fears by showing his courage in facing the inevitable. Stimp planned his own memorial service, secured his casket, got the casket signed by friends and family, and even ensured that there would be handwritten notes of encouragement for his loved ones to revisit when they needed company and assurance on their grief train.

No detail had been left undone. All this talking about death—these arrangements and assurances—freed his family and friends
to be in their grief, to simply remember their beloved father, grandfather, friend, and mentor well.

Stimp died according to his plan—at home with hospice. Martha and his children engaged in his care. When the time drew near, the funeral home brought the signed cardboard casket—the one he and Frank Stasio had lain in on stage. Finally, Stimp was placed inside, sent off with a Bible verse and love.

That first, innocuous meeting at the Buddhist Center unfurled into hours of conversation about death. Stimp, Martha, Fred, and I kept in close touch. In just a few years of knowing him, Stimp offered me lessons I didn’t know I’d need so badly—ones that would continue to remain with me during Mom’s death, and on my own grief ride.

**Station Six: Acceptance**

A few years before Mom died, I led a writing retreat at which I met a fellow Baptist who specializes in grief care. Rev. Brad Mitchell is an ordained pastor and grief counselor who works closely with a funeral home in his community.

Since I’d found so few people who understood the grief train—who actively wanted to talk about the stations of grief and death—I reached out to Brad after Mom died. I imagined him as part of a group of “morbid grief train superheroes,” who I’d secretly dubbed “The Death Squad.” Sally was among this crew, as are Joan Didion and Kate Bowler. During my grief train journey, I considered them welcome companions—safe people whose wisdom I could dive into deeply and quickly.

Brad is a gracious member of “The Death Squad,” confirmed by his willingness to talk about his end-of-life doctoral work in pastoral care, as well as his professional and personal experience with assisting others on their own grief trains. He is someone who sees and processes death every day in his work as a pastor, grief counselor, and community partner for his local funeral home. And among his gifts to me was the way in which he entertained my ongoing, nagging question: “If this is something we all go through, why do we avoid talking about it?”

“Unknowns bring fear,” he responded, corroborating Stimp’s experience. “Most people will avoid anything that brings them fear.” Grief is frightening, and death is, too. This understandably makes people anxious, he explained.
When I asked how he—as Stimp could—got people to open up amid fear, and talk about their grief and death, he reiterated what every chaplain, minister, and dying person I’ve ever met has shown me: presence. Presence means we are willing to accept the uncomfortable circumstance over which we have no control in order to sit with it. Whether in grief, difficult conversations about end-of-life, or actual times of death, there’s nothing more required of us than to just be in it.

But why is it so hard?

Brad suggested that it’s because we don’t practice. We don’t accept it, in order to just be. We get nervous, dance around these tough topics, and try to fix them. Our unwillingness to sit with the hard stuff leads to harmful, hurtful, and insensitive sentiments—even when they are meant from a place of love and care.

Similar to Kate Bowler, Brad offered me specifics of how to be present, instead of saying those “what not to say” comments when grief or death come up in conversation. What are those unhelpful comments? Brad nominated phrases such as: “They lived a long life—you should be grateful;” “They are in a better place;” “Heaven gained an angel;” and, “God needed them more than we do.”

Acceptance that leads into our being present, in Brad’s experience, is far better when words fail us and we want to solve the unsolvable or skirt the unavoidable for fear of the unknown. Often, our presence—not our Pollyanna responses—is what is needed most.

Brad also reminded me that each person’s perception of death, dying, and grief is different. We are all on our own grief trains; we talk about, face, and cope with death and grieve differently. From my brother Ron, to me, to Fred, to my aunt, to Sally, to Stimp and Martha—we have our own tracks. There are common threads—time-keeping, meaning-making, identity struggles, and stations of clarity. But our direct experience is unique to us. Brad reminded me that grief expectations and timelines imposed on others are not useful. In beautiful candor about processing his own father’s death, he admitted to me that he preferred to grieve alone.

When he said this, he didn’t realize the gift he’d given me. I’d struggled with the fact that I often didn’t want to express public emotion over my mother’s death. I let very few people onto the
train with me. Some of this I attributed to the cultural and societal norms around grieving, but some of it felt like personal preference (though, I did blubber like a baby during her *entire* funeral).

Grieving alone, Brad added, meant that people didn’t experience him grieving as they might have expected. After his father died, he grieved in unconventional ways: jogging and writing. He always held his composure in public—until a year after his father’s death.

He was at a ceremony to which he had been invited, during which his deceased father’s memory was honored. At the event, Brad was overcome with grief. Unable to push down tears, he showed his emotion and cried in public. When a family member told him that she was “glad to see you finally let it go,” it sparked his frustration with the lack of understanding that comes from that kind of comment—a frustration he relayed to me: “I hadn’t met her expectations, so she had missed the fact that I had adequately grieved in other ways,” Brad said. “We have to be careful not to project our own way of grieving onto others—it’s a weight they do not wish to bear.”

Grief—I realized again—dissolves, changes form. We might move to another railroad car on the train and find a change of scene; maybe this car has fresher air, with a view of soothing landscapes enjoyed from brighter seats.

Mom’s sudden illness and death brought about an urgency to talk about grief and death, but I had to do it my own way. I needed my own “Death Squad”—those mentors along the way whose wisdom brought moments of clarity when the train slowed into a station and the sun shone bright through the windows.

I knew that at some point on the journey, my itinerary would shift. I would need to share the lessons I learned—the waves, the loops, the permission to grieve, the coaches, and the meaning-making—with others. As we march toward the upcoming “big death tsunami” of the Boomers, we must face the looming reality with tools—beginning with how we talk about, understand, and accept the single most *certain* aspect of life: death.

Once we understand the grief train, and talk about it, we can talk about our own deaths.
CHOOSING HOPE

Last summer, just before school started, Maddy and I took a quick trip to North Carolina to visit my parents. They live on the eastern side of the state, a couple of hours from the coast, and as a summer’s end treat, my mom made plans for us to visit Shackleford Island, a small island on North Carolina’s Outer Banks—uninhabited and unsettled by human beings, and home to a herd of wild horses. The island is protected by the state park system, and there isn’t so much as an outhouse, old wooden bench, or makeshift shelter of any kind for human beings. The island belongs to the horses.

The inner shore of the island faces the calmer inland waters that make up the bay of Beaufort, North Carolina. The outer shore is the Atlantic Ocean, and the day we visited, we landed a couple of hours before afternoon high tide. Across the island’s sand dunes and scrub brush, you could already see the waves kicking up and the vast expanse of beach disappearing under the water’s edge.

Whether or not you actually see the island’s residents is pure luck. And we got very lucky. As we walked off the boat that had brought us across the bay and to the island, about six of the horses were already hanging out along the beach, one of them a newborn colt, just eight weeks old according to the crusty captain who’d gotten us across. “Be careful,” he said, “They’re wild animals. Pretty to look at, but not pets.”

I repeated his cautionary words to Maddy, her eyes already as big as saucers, her flip-flops already kicked off, and her long legs already
dashing across the sand to get a closer look at the beautiful beasts. And, truly, it was magical. The horses waded through shallow tide pools, stopping to nibble vegetation here and there, occasionally looking up at the dozen or so two-legged visitors madly snapping cameras in what seemed like quiet amusement. We humans were mostly silent. An unspoken agreement to disrupt the horses as little as possible seemed to have been made among us all, and if anyone did speak, it was in low, almost whispered tones.

After taking a few shots of my girl with the horses in the background, I asked if she wanted to go look for shells along the water. She readily agreed, and so she and I and my mom set off to do just that. Meanwhile, my dad had gone further into the island,
across the first line of sand dunes, having seen another group of horses he wanted to get a closer look at. No one was in a hurry—we had two hours before the boat would be back for us.

As Mom and Maddy and I turned toward the water and our shell-seeking adventure, I looked up and noticed something that gave me pause—dark storm clouds rolling in from across the bay and Beaufort. Very dark ones. Moving quickly.

“Mom?” I said, and as she looked at me in response I simply pointed my finger toward the sky. Her gaze widened in realization of what I was indicating and I said, “There’s nowhere to go.”

And, five minutes later, when those clouds exploded in a fury of wind and rain, all of it intensified by the ocean’s waters stirred up and angry themselves, there wasn’t... anywhere to go.

“Mommy!” Maddy screamed and ran over to me. I turned my back to the rain and tried to shelter her little body as best I could. Mom scanned the horizon for my dad, any efforts to call his name futile.

“He’s over there!” I hollered over the storm and directed her to a still figure in a broad-rimmed hat, hunkered down off in the distance behind a dune, his backpack keeping him propped up. And “over there” she went, wanting to be sure her husband was okay.

Maddy, meanwhile, was less than thrilled with the situation. The rain stung, and the wind was hard to stand up against for me, much less her. “Mommy, what will we do?” she wailed.

I thought fast. Made a decision. And, pulling her close to me, I said, “Maddy, we have two choices. I cannot get the boat here faster. And there is no shelter. And I know this is hard. So we can choose to be miserable.” She nodded, clearly identifying with the word “miserable.”

I soldiered on, “Or, we can choose to see this as an adventure. We can dance in this rain. And run and play in it. We’re already wet. And if we choose adventure, for the rest of our lives, you and I will
be able to tell people about the day we got stuck in the rain with a bunch of wild horses on a deserted island.”

I’ve never in my life been prouder of her than when she responded, a valiant effort at smiling beginning to make itself known across her face, “Okay, Mommy. Okay.”

And so we danced. And ran. And skipped. And sang. And watched the horses huddle together against the storm. And kept an eye on Dad as best we could at our distance from him.

I don’t know how long exactly the storm lasted, but I know it felt like it was going on for a very long time. Just as I thought maybe the storm was beginning to wane, Maddy exclaimed, “Mommy! There’s Neana!” and across the top of the dunes I saw my Mom walking determinedly toward a tall thicket of brush. She saw us too, and waved us over, pointing toward the brush.

“Maddy,” I said, “I think Neana has an idea,” and sure enough, Neana did. For the last several minutes of that storm, Maddy and Mom and I huddled underneath a large bush of some sort, its strong branches and thick, wiry leaves enough to keep the worst of the wind and rain off of us.

The absurdity of it all struck me as the three of us crouched low under the branches. “Mom,” I said, “Is this really happening?” and we both descended into laughter at ourselves. Here we were, in the year 2015, every gift of modernity normally at our disposal, but, in that moment on Shackleford Island, we were entirely defenseless against nature—completely at the mercy of the earth and its mighty ways.

And then, as the last bit of wind receded and a hint of sun peeked out from the thinning clouds, and the rain died down, Maddy exclaimed with all the joy of a child who has just experienced something amazing, “This is the Best. Day. Ever!”

And it was. We crawled out from under our sheltering bush, and saw Dad rising up from his protective dune and heading toward
us. And the horses shifted out of their huddle and the colt kicked up its heels and ran across the sand with such glee. And a gentle ocean breeze began to dry us out. And the tide rolled in and we found shells upon shells and drank in the beauty of how wild and unexpected and perfect it had all been.

Perfect because we chose to make it so. Not because things had gone as planned. Not because we were entirely comfortable (wet underclothes do not for happy people make). Not because hot showers were at our immediate disposal.

Not at all. Perfect because, in a crucial moment, we made a choice to give ourselves to what was happening and so salvage the joy to be found in simply being alive. In simply being together. In simply having been held safe in the midst of it all.

It was the best day ever because we chose to believe it had been.

I’ve written in these pages about experiences and people that have led me to hope. I’ve shared the things about being Maddy’s mom that drive me to believe in a better world for her and her peers. I’ve offered some thoughts on what it means to learn from our children, trusting that they know things we don’t.

I have, in many, many ways, had a very fortunate life. There are many who face much greater challenge and loss and heartache than the things I’ve told of in these pages. Not a one of us escapes life unscathed—in fact, at the core of living is a realization that it will not always be easy. Sometimes, this life threatens to destroy us. But, oh—oh the moments when it puts us back together again, when it calls us out of hurt and fear and into trust and love.

At the end of the day, and everything I’ve written in this book aside, I choose hope. Just like Maddy chose to make a stormy day at the beach her best day ever, I actively, consciously, intentionally, and despite any evidence of its existence to the contrary, I choose hope.
This is more difficult some days than others. As I was finishing the manuscript for this book, the world we live in was reeling from a series of terrorist attacks in Paris and in Beirut. The Middle East remains in turmoil. A nine-year-old boy was gunned down in broad daylight on the streets of Chicago. Over the summer a group of black men and women who had gathered for prayer at their church in Charleston, South Carolina, were murdered by a lone white gunman. Every day, it seems, as I wrote, another fearful story can be added, and I fear, deeply and daily, what Maddy’s future might hold.

But still, I choose hope. I choose not to let the fear control me.

I know no other way to have being. Even on the days when I am terrified of what might become of us all. Even on the days when I feel so small and insignificant. Even when I am wracked by insecurity and self-doubt. Still, and always…eventually, I choose hope.

That day at Shackleford, I found a cache of what at first seemed to be flat stones. As I dug them out of the sand and brushed away the grit from their surface, I realized they were pieces of shells—tossed and worn and broken apart from their original whole by the ocean that delivered them to that shore, velvet-smooth at the edges and cool to the touch, even on a hot summer’s afternoon.

I carried them home to Kentucky. I washed away the dirt and grime, and now they sit in my living room, in a pottery bowl on an old wooden table that used to belong to my grandmother. Sometimes I gather a few of them in the palm of my hand and marvel at their simple beauty. Faint lines of color run across their surfaces, and they reflect the light available in the room when it shines just so across that bowl. They are, now, talismans of hope. Physical reminders—sacraments, even—of what it means to choose, in this life we live, a way of being that trusts the inherent goodness of the universe.

Because, the truth is that, choose all we want, some days are not the Best Days Ever. Not even close. And I, in writing about choosing
hope, do not mean to suggest that we can will away bad days or terrible experiences or the heartache this life often hands us. I speak only from what my own life has taught me, and what I have been taught is that there will be very bad days—both for me, personally, and the world, collectively.

Not long ago, during a particularly difficult time in my life, a dear friend who knows a thing or two herself about particularly difficult times, taught me a new word: sisu. It’s a Finnish word, and it doesn’t translate well into English—the closest thing perhaps is the phrase “having guts.”

It takes sisu to navigate the worst days. Or, as we’d say down in my beloved native South, pure grit.

I do not always succeed at such grit. I do not always manage to channel sisu. But for my beautiful, precious daughter’s sake, I keep trying. Despite my own shortcomings and mistakes, despite everything in this broken and beautiful world that would urge me to do anything but choose hope, on my best days, I do it anyway.

And...when I cannot, when it all seems just too much to bear, I trust that others are hoping for me. In particular, I trust the promise of a trusted friend, a precious brother in ministry and in life, who taught me what it means to hope for another person, to stand with another in her deepest and darkest days and say, “You will get through this. All is not lost.”

And, so, this is my prayer: That we will hope for and with our children. Standing with them always, into the darkest night and straight on again until a bright new morning comes.

They need us so much, y’all. And we need them. Because, in truth, the greatest hope we have available to us is each other—our children and ourselves—forging our way as best we can, towards a kinder and more whole world. Together.
Your congregation is considering significant changes to worship (time, format, etc.)

Steadfast Spirit, we give thanks for your enduring presence among us. We give thanks for the powerful ways you have spoken to us, as we gathered here to worship you. Move among us now, as we release our treasured traditions. Comfort us, as we grieve the loss of what has been. Rejoice with us, as we celebrate the blessings that have been poured out through this service.

Creator God, who breathes new life into all beings, let us trust this new thing you are doing through us now. Give us the courage to make a way in the wilderness where we have not gone before. Renew us, as we risk meeting you in new ways. Remind us that whenever, wherever, however we gather in your name, you are there.

May our worship be pleasing to you, O God, and draw us ever deeper into relationship with you. Amen.
Your congregation is forming a new community partnership

God who is always doing a new thing,

We are grateful for the new thing you are creating in and through us here today. You have formed us not to do everything on our own but to be a part of your beloved community. We know that on our own, none of us can fully share your love, your justice, your compassion, and your peace. On our own we can only accomplish so much. However, when we come together as one community guided by your love and wisdom, God, then we are unstoppable.

So, we ask today that you bless this new partnership so that it may be for your good. May our work together help make our community more like your beloved community, a place where everyone is loved as they are and has what they need to thrive.

As we start this new relationship, help us to listen and learn from each other. Help us to support each other, to advocate for each other, and to be each other’s best cheerleaders. When different strategies and opinions arise in how to do the work set before us, help us to always be curious instead of judgmental, and to assume the best in each other. When the work you have called us to is hard, help us to find times to seek your rest and joy in the midst of the work.

God we are so excited for this new partnership. We pray and we know that if we remain faithful to you that you will turn it into beautiful and powerful ministry that is better than anything that we could ever ask for or imagine. Amen.
Your congregation is participating in new justice work within the community

God, who never sleeps or slacks:
Each day, there are new, exciting opportunities for us to join you in your love and labor: crafting, cultivating, and cheering on your kingdom vision.

We give thanks, O God, that you share your kingdom vision with us.
You not only share your vision for kingdom, love, and labor with us:
You empower, equip, and embolden us as partners to imagine new possibilities for justice within our own community.
You invite us to love and serve alongside our neighbors as compassionate allies, committed advocates, and dear friends.
We have heard your call to serve as partners with you and our neighbors.
We have listened to our neighbors who have shared their needs, hopes, and ambitions.
And we have committed ourselves to new justice work within our community.

Gracious God, it is our holy and humble prayer that your way be revealed, your work be accomplished, and your will be done as we begin this new work within our community. Amen.
Your pastor is placed on short-term medical leave

Holy Creator, we pray for our pastor (name) as they take leave from their work for a season of rest. We pray that you might work toward their fullest healing, giving them strength and patience in this necessary time. Allow their rhythm to slow so that their recovery might be elevated to its fullest pace. Give them the assurance they need to step away from this holy space and holy work to tend to their own body and spirit for a season.

These are anxious times as we temporarily shift how we lead your people in this place. God, we ask that you would assure us of your presence and wisdom that we might continue the work that has already been set into motion by your holy Spirit. Give us vision and insight to faithfully lead your church, God. Amen.
Your community has sustained a significant disaster

Holy Creator, we come before you dazed, tired, and overwhelmed by the significant disaster that has happened in our community. The news, our insurance, they use the words “act of God” to describe what has happened to our community, but we know that you did not cause (insert specific disaster, for example: tornado, flood, fire, earthquake), but nevertheless have met us in this moment. Be present with us, O God, in our grief and sense of loss, not just of possessions and routines, but of a sense of security. We have an increased knowledge of the wildness of this world. Comfort us, O God, in our fear and our trauma.

Create in us a sense of security in your presence, O God. Through the manifestation of your loving care made known through the loving care of this community and how we care for one another in this time and place, may we see the love of Christ Jesus and the presence of the Holy Spirit. Allow us the privilege of showing your love through the way we serve our community in this time of deep need and grief, O God. As we clean up the wreckage caused by this disaster, let us see the potential of new life you are creating and let us meet it creatively and joyfully. We pray all of this in the name of the one whom you sent to meet us in the messy chaos of our lives and of this world, Jesus the Christ. Amen.
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