



# WALKING *the* WAY of HOPE

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*A Retreat for Women's Christmas*

JAN RICHARDSON

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*This year's retreat is dedicated to  
Peg Carlson-Hoffman and Chuck Hoffman  
and to all who work to kindle hope  
with acts of hospitality, beauty, and grace.*



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*Prelude*

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HOW THE STARS GET IN YOUR BONES  
*A Blessing for Women's Christmas*

Sapphire, diamond, emerald, quartz:  
think of every hard thing  
that carries its own brilliance,  
shining with the luster that comes  
only from uncountable ages  
in the earth, in the dark,  
buried beneath unimaginable weight,  
bearing what seemed impossible,  
bearing it still.

And you, shouldering the grief  
you had thought so solid, so impermeable,  
the terrible anguish  
you carried as a burden  
now become—  
who can say what day it happened?—  
a beginning.

See how the sorrow in you  
slowly makes its own light,  
how it conjures its own fire.

See how radiant  
even your despair has become  
in the grace of that sun.

Did you think this would happen  
by holding the weight of the world,  
by giving in to the press of sadness  
and time?

I tell you, this blazing in you—  
it does not come by choosing  
the most difficult way, the most daunting;  
it does not come by the sheer force  
of your will.

It comes from the helpless place in you  
that, despite all, cannot help but hope,  
the part of you that does not know  
how not to keep turning  
toward this world,  
to keep turning your face  
toward this sky,  
to keep turning your heart  
toward this unendurable earth,  
knowing your heart will break  
but turning it still.

I tell you,  
this is how the stars  
get in your bones.

This is how the brightness  
makes a home in you,  
as you open to the hope that burnishes  
every fractured thing it finds  
and sets it shimmering,  
a generous light that will not cease,  
no matter how deep the darkness grows,  
no matter how long the night becomes.

Still, still, still  
the secret of secrets  
keeps turning in you,  
becoming beautiful,  
becoming blessed,  
kindling the luminous way  
by which you will emerge,  
carrying your shattered heart  
like a constellation within you,  
singing to the day  
that will not fail to come.

# WALKING *the* WAY of HOPE

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## *An Introduction*

There is a custom, rooted in Ireland, of celebrating Epiphany (January 6, which brings the Christmas season to a close) as Women's Christmas. Called *Nollaig na mBan* in Irish, Women's Christmas originated as a day when the women, who often carried the domestic responsibilities all year, took Epiphany as an occasion to celebrate together at the end of the holidays, leaving hearth and home to the men for a few hours. Celebrated particularly in County Cork and County Kerry, the tradition is enjoying a revival.

Whether your domestic commitments are many or few, Women's Christmas offers a timely opportunity to pause and step back from whatever has kept you busy and hurried in the past weeks or months. As the Christmas season ends, this is an occasion both to celebrate with friends and also to spend time in reflection before diving into the responsibilities of this new year.

The Women's Christmas Retreat is offered in that spirit. Within these pages is an invitation to rest, to reflect, and to contemplate where you are in your unfolding path. Mindful of those who traveled to welcome the Christ child, and who returned home by another way, we will turn our attention toward questions about our own journey.

## WISE WOMEN ALSO CAME

Years ago, when I was first starting to discover the artist layer of my soul, I sat down to create a collage to use as a greeting card for Epiphany. I found myself imagining who else might have made the journey to welcome Jesus. A trio of women began to take shape, carrying their treasures to offer the child. I named the piece *Wise Women Also Came*.

Years have passed since those wise women showed up in my life. My style as an artist has changed greatly, and the journey has taken me across much terrain—some that I had dreamed of, some that I never could have anticipated even in dreams. This image of the wise women continues to travel with me, posing questions that linger with me still.

This year, many of the wise women's questions have had to do with *hope*. In the wake of the unexpected death of my husband and creative partner, Garrison Doles, at the beginning of Advent 2013, my relationship with hope was forever altered. When one's hopes have been shattered, it becomes difficult to live with hope. As I have listened to my life this year, dreaming and discerning how God is stirring in this place I never hoped to be, I have learned that hope is stubborn. That it is persistent. That it does not depend on me for its genesis but that it does ask me to open my eyes, my heart, my hands to recognize it when it shows up and to respond to what it offers.

Hope knows its own way. It is a mystery, but it has a path, an invitation, a labyrinth for us to walk. As with a labyrinth, the way of hope does not allow us to see far ahead. But this way invites us to keep walking, to dream of how the path will unfold, and to trust that what we need will come to us.

This year's Women's Christmas Retreat invites you to ponder the way of hope. With readings and images inspired by my search for hope, both before and after Gary's death, the pages of this retreat offer a welcoming space for you to pray, to imagine, to rest, and to dream as you contemplate hope in your own life—where you find it, what questions it holds, and how it asks you to engage the world.

## NAVIGATING THE PATH

There are many ways to work with these reflections. You can set aside a day—on or near Women’s Christmas, or another time that suits you. You can spread out the reflections over several days or weeks. You might share the retreat with others—a friend near or far, a family member, a small group. You could get together with friends for a cup of tea or a meal on Women’s Christmas—or, again, whenever fits for you—and select just one or two reflections as a starting place for conversation together.

As you move through these readings, you will likely find that different readings invite different kinds of responses. For one reading, you might feel drawn simply to sit in silence or go for a walk as you engage the questions. With another reading, you might want to respond with words of your own: a journal entry, a poem, a prose piece, a letter, a prayer. A reading could inspire a collage. Or a drawing or painting or sculpture.

With each reflection, as you contemplate the words and the questions—including your own questions that these pages might prompt—I invite you to consider what helps you put the pieces of your life together: the experiences you carry, the scraps of your story, the fragments that seem jagged and painful as well as those that you think of as beautiful. What response—in words, in images, in prayer, in movement, in stillness, in conversation, in solitude—helps you recognize and honor the pieces and put them together in a new way, making your path as you go?

## BLESSING OF COMFORT, BLESSING OF CHALLENGE

Whenever I lead a retreat, I talk about how I hope to offer a space of comfort as well as a space of challenge. I hope you will find this kind of space within these pages. If you have arrived at this point in your path feeling weary and depleted, I pray that you will find something here that provides comfort and sabbath rest. At the same time, I pray that you will find something that stretches you into new terrain, that invites you to think or move or pray in a direction that will draw you into some uncharted territory in your soul, and there find the God who ever waits to meet us in those spaces that lie beyond what is familiar, comfortable, and habitual for us.

In the Gospel of Luke, we read that on the night of Jesus’ birth, shepherds arrive at the manger with a story of angels who brought them astounding tidings of a Savior’s birth. Luke tells us that all who hear the tale of the shepherds are amazed. *But Mary*, Luke writes—Mary, who has journeyed so very far from home—*treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart* (Luke 2:19).

As you engage this retreat, may you enter into a space where you can gather up the words, the stories, the fragments and pieces, the gifts and challenges of the past year. May you ponder them in your heart, and there find treasure to sustain you and illuminate your path. May you have comfort and challenge in good measure, and travel with hope and courage through the year ahead. Know that I hold you in prayer and wish you blessings on your way. Merry Women’s Christmas!





*Magnificat*

## WHERE HOPE BEGINS

A seed in the ground. A flame in the darkness. A hand outstretched. A child in the womb. Hope starts small and overtakes us, stretching the borders of what we have known.

One “yes” to an angel, and a young woman named Mary becomes a revolutionary. The child is hardly noticeable in her womb when she arrives at the home of her kinswoman Elizabeth, but the transformation is written all over her face, and Elizabeth instantly intuits what has happened. She blesses Mary for her hope, for her radical belief that God will fulfill the promise made by Gabriel. Elizabeth, pregnant in her advanced years, knows the power of hope. She, too, carries it in her womb.

Her ears ringing with Elizabeth’s blessing, Mary pours out a song, a cry of hope that echoes the one raised by her foremother Hannah after giving birth to Samuel. The powerful brought down from their thrones! The lowly raised up! The hungry filled with good things! The rich sent away empty! But Mary sings about these things as though they have already happened! A tiny child in her womb, and God has transformed the world? What sort of outrageous hope is this?

Mary knows in her soul, in her womb, that radical hope is found at the boundary where the outrageous gives way to the possible. A child given to her aged kinswoman? The courage to say yes to Gabriel’s invitation to her, an unwed woman? Well, then God might as well have turned the world into one where all things are possible! Even justice. Even freedom.

Mary knows that some things are so outrageous that sometimes we have to talk about them as if they have already happened in order to believe they could ever come about. And so if we believe that God has brought justice to the world, we live that justice, and we share in making the world more just. If we believe that God has brought healing to the world, we live that healing, and we share in making the world more whole.

Hope starts small, even as a seed in the womb, but it feeds on outrageous possibilities. It beckons us to step out with the belief that the action we take will not only bear fruit but that in taking it, we have already made a difference in the world. God invites us, like Mary, to open to God’s radical leading, to step out with sometimes inexplicable faith, trusting that we will find sustenance.

“Hope,” writes W. Paul Jones in *Trumpet at Full Moon*, “is the simple trust that God has not forgotten the recipe for manna.” The hope of God contains the promise that we will be fed, even if we never see the fruit of our hope-filled actions.

*Where does your hope begin? Where does hope live in you—how do you notice it in your body? When has someone shown up in a way that enabled you to hope in something that seemed impossible?*

## BLESSING

Guardian of the seasons,  
keeper of every time,  
tune us so to your rhythms  
that we may know  
the occasion for stillness  
and the moment for action.  
May we be so prepared  
so aware

so awakened  
in our waiting  
that when you prompt us  
into motion,  
our hands may be your hands  
and our purposes  
your own.





*Where Hope Lives*



## REMEMBERING FORWARD

Mary's song of hope reminds me of a passage in Lewis Carroll's book *Through the Looking-Glass*, where the White Queen and Alice have this exchange:

"The rule [says the White Queen] is, jam to-morrow and jam yesterday—but never jam to-day."

"It must come sometimes to 'jam to-day,'" Alice objected.

"No, it can't," said the Queen. "It's jam every other day: to-day isn't any other day, you know."

"I don't understand you," said Alice. "It's dreadfully confusing!"

"That's the effect of living backwards," the Queen said kindly: "it always makes one a little giddy at first—"

"Living backwards!" Alice repeated in great astonishment. "I never heard of such a thing!"

"—but there's one great advantage in it, that one's memory works both ways."

"I'm sure mine only works one way," Alice remarked. "I can't remember things before they happen."

"It's a poor sort of memory that only works backwards," the Queen remarked.

"What sort of things do you remember best?" Alice ventured to ask.

This is the kind of remembering Mary does as she sings the song we have come to know as the Magnificat. In singing of the transformation of the world as though that transformation has already happened, Mary is remembering forward.

This is what hope looks like.

It needs to be said that hope can be a tricky thing. Given how intimately it intertwines with our longings and desires, hope has the ability to slide into delusion or obsession, when we are so focused on a particular outcome that it distorts our perceptions. Or hope can dissipate into wishful thinking, in which we want something to happen but are idly waiting for someone else to set it in motion.

True hope beckons us to do more than wish or want or wait for someone to take action. It asks us to be the one who acts. It calls us to discern what lives beneath our wishes, to discover the longings beneath our longings, to dig down to the place where our deepest yearning and God's deepest yearning are the same. When we find that, when we uncover those deepest desires, hope invites and impels us to participate in bringing about those things for which we most keenly long.

Mary knew this. As she sings her Magnificat, she carries within herself the meeting place of her longing and God's yearning. Her *yes* to God, to bearing the Christ who takes flesh within her, becomes a microcosm of what God was doing in the world. What God had accomplished within Mary, God was accomplishing within the world. Had accomplished. Would accomplish.

This kind of hope bends our understanding of time and tenses. This hope challenges the linear, forward-moving way in which we usually live. But the tense in which Mary sings is precisely the tense we are called to inhabit. This is the tense God invites us to enact in this world as we, like Mary, remember how God has transformed the world even as we work with God to bring this transformation into being.

*In the spirit of Mary, the White Queen, and Alice, I want to ask you, what sort of things do you remember best about this season ahead, this year ahead? What did God bring to pass in the days to come? How did you participate with God in the living out of your deepest hopes, those hopes that, like Mary's, were so powerful that they transformed not only you but the world as well?*

## ROUGH TRANSLATIONS

*Hoping against hope, he believed.*

—Romans 4:18

Hope nonetheless.

Hope despite.

Hope regardless.

Hope still.

Hope where we had ceased to hope.

Hope amid what threatens hope.

Hope with those who feed our hope.

Hope beyond what we had hoped.

Hope that draws us past our limits.

Hope that defies expectations.

Hope that questions what we have known.

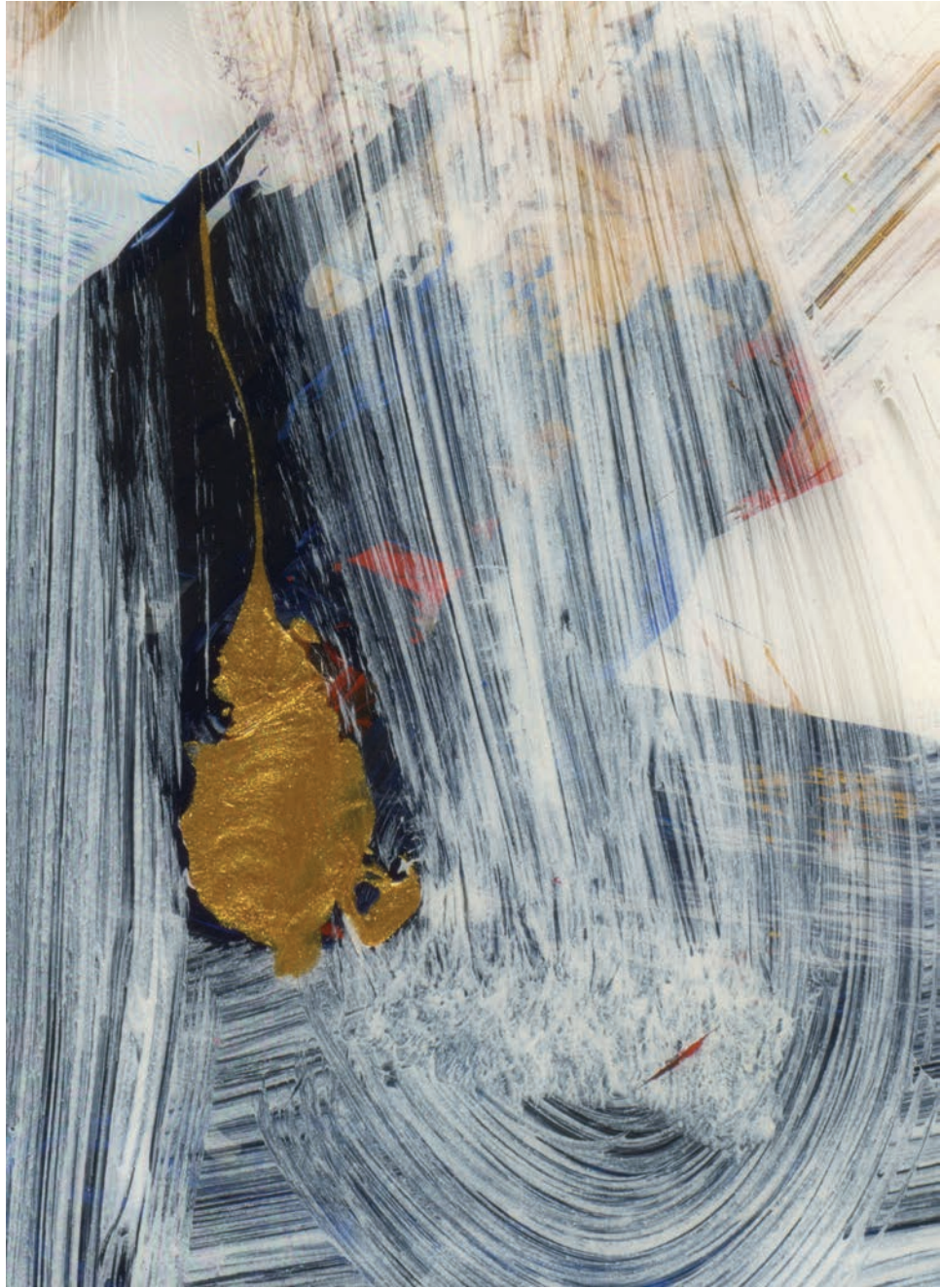
Hope that makes a way where there is none.

Hope that takes us past our fear.

Hope that calls us into life.

Hope that holds us beyond death.

Hope that blesses those to come.



*So That You May Know the Hope*

## BLESSING OF HOPE

*May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing,  
so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.*

—Romans 15:13

On this strange path of grief, I have found hope to be a curiously stubborn creature. It is persistent. It visits when I least expect it. It shows up when I haven't been looking for it. Even when it seems like hope should be a stranger, there is something deeply familiar about it. If I open my eyes to it, I know its face, even when I do not know where it is leading me.

Though hope may sometimes seem like a luxury—frivolous, groundless, insubstantial—it is precisely the opposite. Hope is elemental. It is made of some of the strongest stuff in the universe. It endures.

Hope does not depend on our mood, our disposition, our desire. Hope does not wait until we are ready for it, until we have prepared ourselves for its arrival. It does not hold itself apart from us until we have worked through the worst of our sorrow, our anger, our fear. This is precisely where hope seeks us out, standing with us in the midst of what most weighs us down.

Hope has work for us to do. It asks us to resist going numb when the world within us or beyond us is falling apart. In the height of despair, in the deepest darkness, hope calls us to open our hearts, our eyes, our hands, that we might engage the world when it breaks our hearts. Hope goes with us, step by step, offering to us the manna it holds.

*How has hope found its way to you in a time when you felt hopeless? What was this hope made of; how would you describe it? What invitation did it hold for you? What did this hope enable you to do?*

## BLESSING OF HOPE

So may we know  
the hope  
that is not just  
for someday  
but for this day—  
here, now,  
in this moment  
that opens to us:

hope not made  
of wishes  
but of substance,

hope made of sinew  
and muscle  
and bone,



hope that has breath  
and a beating heart,

hope that will not  
keep quiet  
and be polite,

hope that knows  
how to holler  
when it is called for,

hope that knows  
how to sing  
when there seems  
little cause,

hope that raises us  
from the dead—

not someday  
but this day,  
every day,  
again and  
again and  
again.



*In Every Chamber of the Heart*

## BLESSING FOR A WHOLE HEART

For several years I have been carrying a small piece of art in my purse. The size of a playing card, it's a collage created by my friend Priscilla. Within the collage is a single word, printed in her handwriting:

### *WHOLEHEARTED*

When Priscilla gave me the collage six months before Gary's death, she could hardly have imagined how much I would need it, and how soon. I continue to carry it as a reminder and a prayer—not simply that my heart will be mended, but that even in the shattering, I will know there is a hidden wholeness that has already taken hold. This wholeness is a mystery I catch only in glimpses. But when I look at Priscilla's word, I see not only a plea but also a blessing, a declaration of something that, in God's strange timing, has already come about, and that I hope to live into.

*How might it be to open your heart to the God who sees you whole? What would this look like for you? Who helps you know that, no matter what brokenness has happened in your life, you are whole?*

## BLESSING FOR A WHOLE HEART

You think  
if you could just  
imagine it,  
that would be a beginning;  
that if you could envision  
what it would look like,  
that would be a step  
toward a heart  
made whole.

This blessing  
is for when  
you cannot imagine.

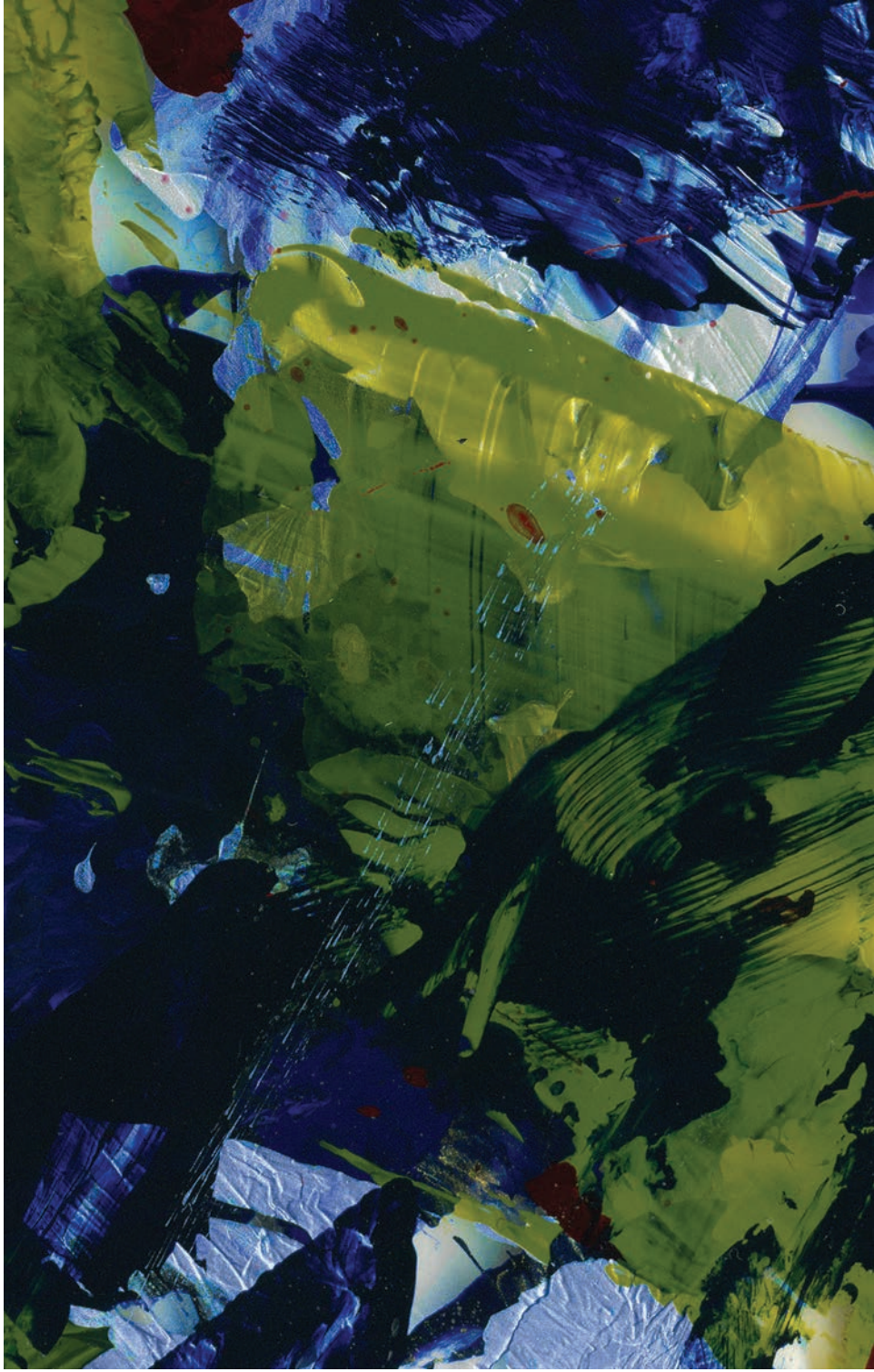
This is for when  
it is difficult to dream  
of what could lie beyond  
the fracture, the rupture,  
the cleaving through which  
has come a life  
you do not recognize  
as your own.

When all that inhabits you  
feels foreign,  
your heart made strange  
and beating a broken  
and unfamiliar song,  
let there come  
a word of hope,  
a voice that speaks  
into the shattering,

reminding you  
that who you are  
is here,  
every shard  
somehow holding  
the whole of you  
that you cannot see  
but is taking shape  
even now,  
every part of you  
coming together  
in an ancient,  
remembered rhythm

that bears you  
not toward restoration,  
not toward return—  
as if you could somehow  
become unchanged—  
but steadily deeper  
into the heart of the one  
who has already dreamed you  
complete.





*Drenched in the Mystery*

## WE CAN ALWAYS HOPE

On top of the cabinet above my kitchen sink sit a chalice and plate. Fired in earthy shades of green, they serve as reminders of the sort of encounter I experience from time to time and which I treasure, when someone crosses my path for perhaps the only time, passing along a gift I will always carry.

While on vacation several years ago in Maine with my sister and her family, I browsed through a jewelry shop with Sally one afternoon. I spotted a beautifully designed pendant made of deep, fiery opals. The women in my family have a genetic weakness for opals, and I fell in love with this piece on first sight. I don't wear much jewelry, but it took little encouragement from my sister to purchase this piece. The woman who crafted the pendant also owned the store and was there that day. We ended up visiting for a time. She shared a loaf of wondrous Italian bread with us and told us of her home in Tuscany, where she lived part of the year. She taught us a phrase she learned there: *speriamo*. "It means 'we can always hope,'" she told us.

Upon learning that I lived in Florida, the jeweler pulled out her business card and turned it over. "I used to live there on a houseboat," she said as she began to draw a map on the card. "I worked with this potter on Merritt Island. He still has a shop there—you should go check it out." Some time later, I did. In the shop connected to his studio, tucked among the trees, I found this chalice and plate, fired in shades of earth, of ocean water, of the opals I wore. I have celebrated Communion with the set many times, and when I pass the loaf and share the cup, I remember the jeweler's bread that she offered with a blessing: *speriamo*. We can always hope.

*Do you have things in your life that serve as visible reminders of hope—objects that carry a story, that remind you of a time when you crossed paths with someone who offered you a gift of hope?*

### BLESSING

That peace  
will rise like bread  
we can always hope.

That justice  
will flow like wine  
we can always hope.

That the table  
will make strangers kin  
we can always hope.

That our hope  
will rise like bread  
we can always pray.



*All Creation Waits*

## QUICKENING

Is this what it feels like? Sudden fires being lit inside me. Movement I have never known. Something stealing into my awareness, being knit together in the endless darkness. An unseen but tangible wholeness.

Connie finds me at church, tells me she is pregnant, tells me she has just begun the second trimester. When she hugs me, I can feel her growing belly against mine. *A whole new world*, I think, and do not know if I mean for her or for me.

*Where do you see signs of new life taking shape—life that gives you cause for hope? This day, this moment, how does hope feel in you?*

## BLESSING

This restless hope  
is what drives me  
beyond the weariness  
beyond the discomfort  
beyond every thought  
that what I carry within me  
will never come to birth.

This restless hope  
beyond all reason  
flutters beneath my heart  
and grows within my soul.

It is beyond me,  
and it is of me,  
and it is delivering me  
home.



## INTERLUDE

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### *Wise Women Also Came*

Wise women also came.  
The fire burned  
in their wombs  
long before they saw  
the flaming star  
in the sky.  
They walked in shadows,  
trusting the path  
would open  
under the light of the moon.

Wise women also came,  
seeking no directions,  
no permission  
from any king.  
They came  
by their own authority,  
their own desire,  
their own longing.  
They came in quiet,  
spreading no rumors,  
sparking no fears  
to lead  
to innocents' slaughter,  
to their sister Rachel's  
inconsolable lamentations.

Wise women also came,  
and they brought  
useful gifts:  
water for labor's washing,  
fire for warm illumination,  
a blanket for swaddling.

Wise women also came,  
at least three of them,  
holding Mary in the labor,  
crying out with her  
in the birth pangs,  
breathing ancient blessings  
into her ear.

Wise women also came,  
and they went,  
as wise women always do,  
home a different way.



*The Desert in Advent*

## THE DESERT SHALL REJOICE

*A year before he died, Gary and I began offering online retreats for Advent and Lent. We loved intertwining my writing and art and his music and sharing all this with the communities that traveled with us through those seasons. Gary and I had worked together to plan a new Advent retreat for 2013. He died on the second day of Advent. This is a reflection I shared with our retreat community during that journey.*

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*The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing. . . . And the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.*

—Isaiah 35:1, 10

This morning, in churches around the world, people are hearing this passage from the prophet Isaiah, whose words come to us in one of the readings for the third Sunday of Advent (Isaiah 35:1-10). Gary and I were drawn to these words as we planned this retreat, so compelled by Isaiah's imagery that we designed the theme for this week—"The Desert Shall Rejoice"—around this passage.

You can imagine how this scripture sounds to me now; how it is to read Isaiah's words about rejoicing, about gladness and singing, about blossoms in the desert, about joy. In this darkened season, it is difficult for me to lean into the sense of celebration that Isaiah conveys with such delight.

Yet what Isaiah tells us is this: the desert *shall* rejoice. I love Isaiah's hopeful certainty, his conviction that although joy may elude us in the current landscape of our life, we can trust that there will come a day, a time, a season of celebration. If this stretch of our journey lies in shadow and barrenness, then the invitation is to trust that something sacred is at work beneath the surface, being tended in the darkness.

It seems important to remember also that celebration is not a someday thing, a state of joyous completion that we cannot attain until life gets better. The Christ who came to us in a dark season reminds us that rejoicing is what happens when, in the midst of the deepest night, we refuse to give in to despair. Celebration is what happens when we learn to lean into the light that others hold for us, when we cannot hold it for ourselves.

This is how Gary and I described it in the description we wrote for this third week of the retreat, not knowing what lay ahead of us: *The way of Christ draws us into a landscape where life bursts forth when we least expect it: where connection and community take hold in the midst of sorrow, and suffering gives way to celebration. How do we open ourselves to the God who shows up—in the world, in our lives—in the most surprising ways, breaking forth in even the most barren places?*

You can bet I'm wondering about the answer to this question. I am so glad and grateful to be carrying it with you.

*And you? How do you remain open to this God who shows up even in the most barren places? Where have you seen this? Where do you need to see this now—in the world and in your own life?*

## BLESSING THE DESERT

Ask me what  
this blessing sounds like  
and I will tell you  
about the wind  
that hollows everything  
it finds.

I will tell you  
about locusts  
who chose this night  
to offer their awful,  
rasping song.

I will tell you  
about rock faces  
and how it sounds  
when what was sturdy  
and solid  
suddenly shears away.

But give me long enough,  
and I will tell you also  
how beneath the wind,  
a silence,

not of absence  
or of agony  
that leaves all speechless  
and stricken  
when it comes,  
but of rest,  
of dreaming,

of the seed  
that knows its season

and the wordless  
canticle of stars  
that will not cease  
their singing  
even when we cannot bear  
to hear.





*Testify to the Light*



## FESTIVAL OF LIGHTS

We are dancing in the streets of the city of my college years. The downtown is lit up for the holidays, and the music blares as our feet repeatedly hit the hard surface of the street. Tomorrow we will long for hot baths to soak the soreness from our legs, but tonight we are dancing at the Festival of Lights.

In the years to come I will learn how necessary it is to keep dancing, how celebration is not a luxury but a staple of life, how in the grimmest moments I will need to take myself down to the closest festival at hand. I will go not to drown my sorrow or to mask my despair or to ignore the real suffering of the world or of my own self. I will go to beat out the message with my feet that in the darkness we are dancing, and while we are weeping we are dancing, and our legs are aching but we are dancing. And under the night sky we are dancing; lighting a match to the shadows, we are dancing; starting to sing when they have stopped the music, we are dancing; sending shock waves with our feet to the other side of the world, we are dancing still.

*Has there been a community that has stirred your hope? Do you have a circle of friends who help you live into hope even—and especially—when you do not feel hopeful? Who might need you to invite them to their own personal Festival of Lights, no matter how small—to light a candle with them, to sing, to dance, to remind them they are not alone?*

### BLESSING

Bless the feet that dance  
in Guatemala  
in El Salvador  
in the midst of the night  
in Nicaragua  
in Argentina  
stamping out the message  
in South Africa  
in Liberia  
we will be free.

Bless the hands that clap  
in Haiti  
in Rwanda  
the rhythm of liberation  
in every heart  
in every place  
that light a match in the dark  
in you  
in me  
and carry the coming dawn.



*Grace in the Dark*

## MORE THAN EVER

In the wake of the attacks on the United States that took place on September 11, 2001, I exchanged some correspondence with a lifelong friend of mine who lives in New York City. A professional artist who provided my first art lessons as a child, Tom was walking to work when he saw the plane fly into the first tower of the World Trade Center. Writing shortly after the attack, he commented to me, “We need artists now more than ever.”

I have thought often about his comment in the years that have followed the devastation of that day. My artist friend, who has witnessed and shared in the grief and healing of the city he calls home, continues to create and to offer his artful gifts to the world. And hundreds of miles away, in a wee studio in central Florida, I continue to work at sharing my own creative gifts. What I fashion in my studio doesn't provide a cure for cancer or an end to poverty or a cessation of terrorism. It is, however, what I have to offer the world: an act of hope, a commitment to creation amid devastation, a practice that is not removed from the brokenness of the world but rather is a tangible, tactile, transforming prayer that arises from within it.

What my friend noted in September 2001 is no less true today: we need artists now more than ever. And not just artists, but everyone who can contribute any form of life-giving creativity. The creative life is not limited to making visible work that we can put on a wall or a stage or a screen. It also encompasses less tangible but equally powerful modes of creativity: forming families, tending friendships, cultivating communities of hospitality and peace.

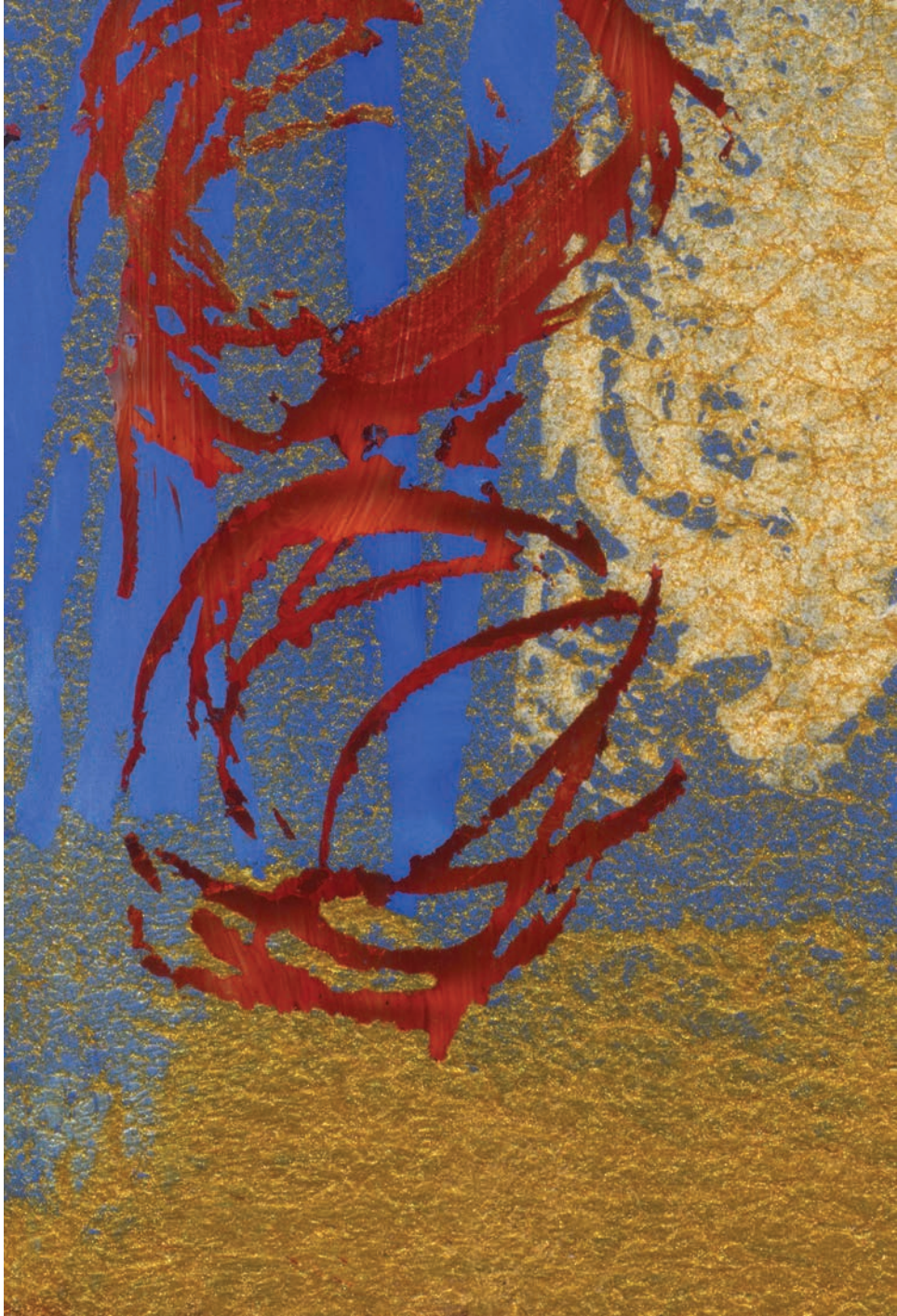
*How is creativity connected with hope? Do you have a form of creative work that helps foster your hope and give it expression in the world? Where have you encountered art, in any form (painted, sung, danced, written, etc.), that prompted your hope?*

## BLESSING

Now  
more than ever  
let us be the ones  
who will not turn away.  
Let us be the ones  
who will go  
farther into the wreck  
and deeper into the rubble.  
Let us be the ones  
who will enter into the places  
of devastation beyond belief  
and despair beyond our imagining.

And there let us listen  
for the Spirit that brooded  
over the formless darkness,  
and there let us look again  
for the God who gathered up the chaos  
and began to create.  
Let us be the ones  
who will give ourselves  
to the work of making again  
and to the endless beginning  
of creation.





*Holy Even in Pain*

## BLESSING IN A TIME OF VIOLENCE

*For Beirut*, I wrote when I first shared this blessing in the wake of a terrorist attack there in 2015. *For Kenya, for Paris, for Syria*, I added, grieving the attacks that had occurred there as well.

And so many places that can be added to the list in the time since I wrote this blessing. Berlin, Baghdad, Brussels, Istanbul, Lahore, Nice, my hometown of Orlando. And more still.

*For every place broken by violence and hatred*, I wrote when I first I shared the blessing. *For every person in pain and grief. For you, from me, in sorrow and in hope.*

Still.

*In a world of continual violence, how do you find the hope and courage that help you keep going? Do you have a place where you can lament? Do you have people who can hear and hold your anger and fear and help you turn them into hope? What helps you resist going numb in the face of violence?*

## BLESSING IN A TIME OF VIOLENCE

Which is to say  
this blessing  
is always.

Which is to say  
there is no place  
this blessing  
does not long  
to cry out  
in lament,  
to weep its words  
in sorrow,  
to scream its lines  
in sacred rage.

Which is to say  
there is no day  
this blessing ceases  
to whisper  
into the ear  
of the dying,  
the despairing,  
the terrified.

Which is to say  
there is no moment  
this blessing refuses  
to sing itself



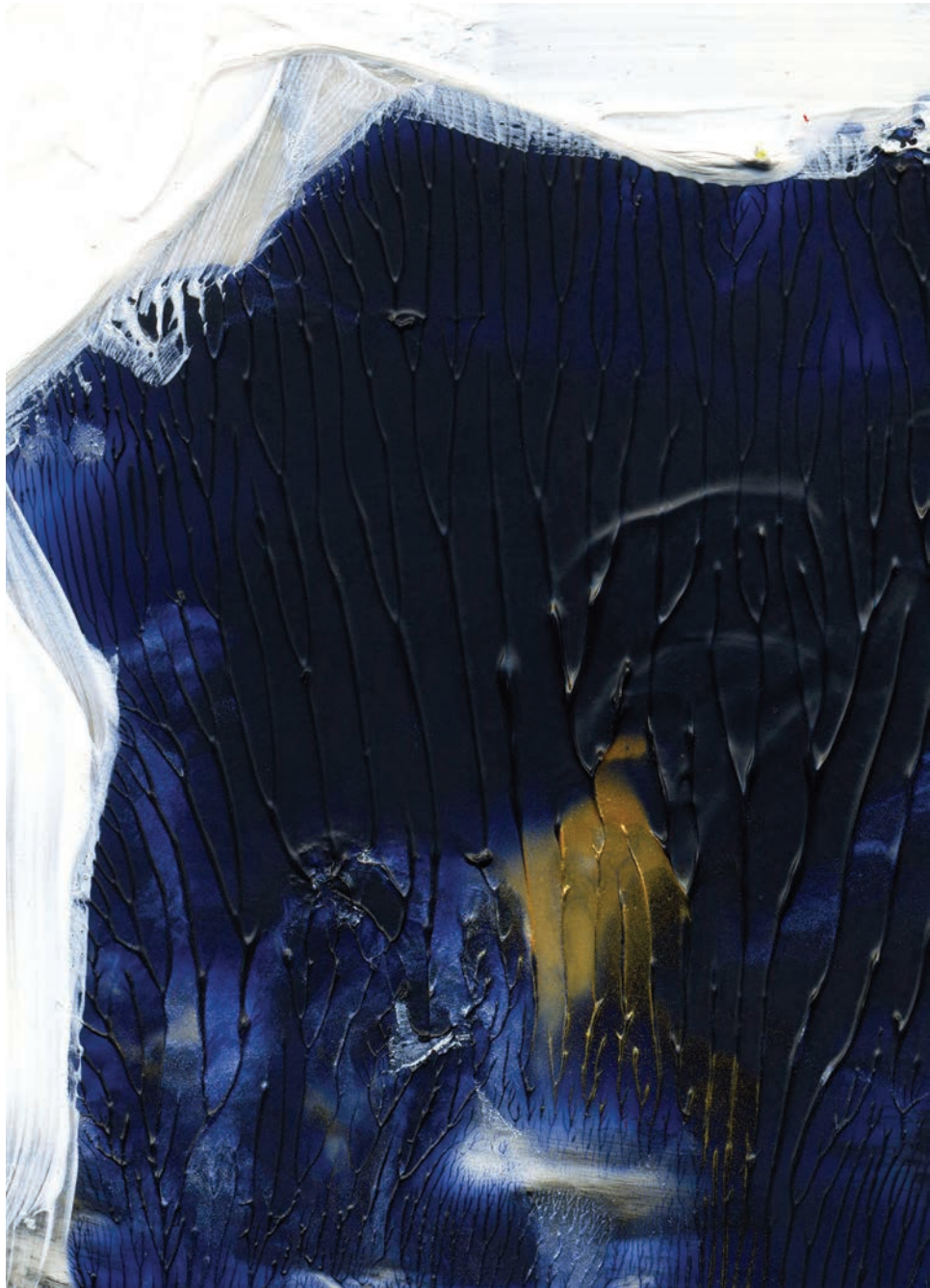
into the heart  
of the hated  
and the hateful,  
the victim  
and the victimizer,  
with every last  
ounce of hope  
it has.

Which is to say  
there is none  
that can stop it,  
none that can  
halt its course,  
none that will  
still its cadence,  
none that will  
delay its rising,  
none that can keep it  
from springing forth  
from the mouths of us  
who hope,  
from the hands of us  
who act,  
from the hearts of us  
who love,  
from the feet of us  
who will not cease  
our stubborn, aching  
marching, marching

until this blessing  
has spoken  
its final word,

until this blessing  
has breathed  
its benediction  
in every place,  
in every tongue:

*Peace.*  
*Peace.*  
*Peace.*



*We Light a Candle in the Cave of the Heart*

## BEARERS OF HOPE

While doing research for my first book, I became familiar with the work of Julia Esquivel, a Guatemalan poet who spent nearly twenty years living in exile for speaking out against the government. The images in her work, drawn from the decades of oppression that her people suffered in the wake of the CIA-sponsored coup in 1954, continue to haunt and challenge me.

In the poem “I Am Not Afraid of Death,” from her book *Threatened with Resurrection*, Julia writes of death’s “dark and cold corridors” that may yet lead to life. Going into the cave of our hearts means that at some point we have to connect with those dark corridors. It means we have to go back far enough into the cave that we begin to hear not only our own inner voice but also the voices beyond us, the voices of people we are called to hear and to be in relationship with. Go far enough, and those voices echo, the voices of the ones whose tongues are scarred from speaking out again and again, the ones in Central America, in South America, in South Africa and elsewhere, the ones who had nearly everything but their voices taken from them. Oscar Romero, Nelson Mandela, ETTY HILLESUM, the Mothers of the Disappeared . . .

Go far enough into the cave and you will find them, those who know the exact place where contemplation leads to action and reflection gives birth to revolution and prayer gives way to a shattering power that cannot be grasped but can only be received, can only be gathered as the wind is gathered by a sail. Go far enough and you will feel them soaring past you, flying through the dark tunnel toward life, toward birth, hands outstretched in invitation, in liberation, in blessing, in release.

*If you were to create a litany in honor of those who have given you hope, whom would you include? Who would be on your list of people who have spoken words of hope, who have lived lives of hope, who have been hope enfleshed? How do they inspire you to hope and to bear that hope into this world?*

### BLESSING

Blessed be the ones  
who dance  
in the corridors of death,  
who sing  
in the hallways of terror,  
who laugh  
in the prisons of fear,  
who shout  
across the silencing walls,  
who love  
beyond the borders of hatred,  
who live  
to welcome home freedom,  
who die  
never turning their heads,  
who return  
as the rising of hope.



*The Best Supper*



## TABLE OF HOPE

When I think of what hope looks like, I think of tables. I remember the spaces where bread has been broken and wine shared. Where conversations have lasted long. Where differences have been savored, listened to, learned from. Where sustenance has been offered and manna found: enough to get me through this day.

I think of the table of Eucharist, the table where heaven and earth meet. Where past and present and future come together. Where we remember backward, recalling what God has done for us. Where we remember forward, praying that we may live into what God has already brought about.

This is a blessing I wrote to accompany the image *The Best Supper*. As I created both the image and the blessing, all these tables were much on my mind: the tables where we were welcomed in grace, the tables where we were sent forth in blessing.

*Where have you found a table of hope? Where have you experienced a meal where hope took tangible form, so real you could taste it? When has hope come to you as manna, offering sustenance to help you through this one day? How might you offer this kind of table to someone who is hungry for hope?*

### TABLE BLESSING

To your table  
you bid us come.  
You have set the places,  
you have poured the wine,  
and there is always room,  
you say,  
for one more.

And so we come.  
From the streets  
and from the alleys  
we come.

From the deserts  
and from the hills  
we come.

From the ravages of poverty  
and from the palaces of privilege  
we come.

Running,  
limping,  
carried,  
we come.



We are bloodied with our wars,  
we are wearied with our wounds,  
we carry our dead within us,  
and we reckon with their ghosts.

We hold the seeds of healing,  
we dream of a new creation,  
we know the things  
that make for peace,  
and we struggle  
to give them wings.

And yet, to your table  
we come.  
Hungering for your bread,  
we come;  
thirsting for your wine,  
we come;  
singing your song  
in every language,  
speaking your name  
in every tongue,  
in conflict and in communion,  
in discord and in desire,  
we come,  
O God of Wisdom,  
we come.

## Postscript

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*So that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know  
what is the hope to which he has called you.*

—Ephesians 1:18

Three years ago, my husband and I arrived at the hospital so that the unruptured aneurysm detected in his brain several months earlier could be treated. We anticipated all would go smoothly. The treatment options were clear and low-risk. We had every cause for hope.

Then the neurosurgeon emerged at 4 a.m. and told our family, *It did not go as we anticipated*. There was a clot; there was a massive stroke. Although the surgeon spoke words of hope, hope faded in the days that followed. Complications accumulated, then cascaded. Gary never regained consciousness. Eighteen days after his initial surgery, my husband died.

I think of those who waited and prayed with such hope through all the days we kept vigil with Gary until it became clear our vigil was at an end. What is the use of hoping, when hope comes to such a pass?

When we experience a tragedy, it is common to encounter well-meaning people who want to help us locate our hope in *someday*, who want us to know our loss is part of a larger plan and a bigger mystery that we cannot grasp here but that we will understand one day.

I have a tremendous tolerance for mystery, a great capacity to abide the unknown. In the wake of Gary's death, what I know is that it is not enough to attribute suffering to a larger plan. It's not that I am uninterested in the bigger mystery, or in the possibility that I might understand it someday. It's just that *someday* does not provide sufficient hope to get me through *this* day, to move me from one moment to the next in this world where Gary is not.

Like so many things that shattered with Gary's death, my understanding of hope came apart. Then it began to come back together in a new way. I realized how stubborn hope is, how enduring. I learned that it lives in me like a muscle that keeps reaching and stretching, or a lung that keeps working even when I do not will it, persisting in the constant intake and release of breath on which my life depends.

Coming apart and coming back together: that's what hope is. Hope is what happens when we dare to sit with what has shattered, to weep over the wreckage, and to begin to imagine how the pieces could connect in a new way. The pieces will never assume their previous form, and that is cause for grief and lamenting. Letting ourselves grieve is an integral part of hope. It makes room for what wants to emerge, for the life that still wants to unfold in us.

Hope is not always comforting or comfortable. Hope asks us to open ourselves to what we do not know, to pray for illumination in this life, to imagine what is beyond our imagining, to bear what seems unbearable. It calls us to keep breathing when the world falls apart around us or within us, to turn toward one another when we might prefer to turn away. Hope draws our eyes and hearts toward a more whole future but propels us also into the present, into *this* day, where God waits for us to work toward a more whole world now.

This year, this day, this moment, may we work toward that world. May we walk the way of hope, the stars blazing in our bones.

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## ABOUT JAN

Jan Richardson is an artist, writer, and ordained minister in the United Methodist Church. With a distinctive intertwining of word and image, Jan's work has attracted an international audience drawn to the welcoming and imaginative spaces that she creates in her books, online blogs, and public events. She frequently collaborated in retreats and conferences with her husband, the singer/songwriter Garrison Doles, until his sudden death in December 2013. Jan's most recent book is *The Cure for Sorrow: A Book of Blessings for Times of Grief*. She makes her home in Florida.

You can find Jan's books, artwork, and more at her blogs and websites:

*The Painted Prayerbook*  
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