

“Beyond despair: climate change, and hope”  
Westminster Presbyterian Church  
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*Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28 and 1 Timothy 1:12-17*

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Once upon a time, there was a child who loved the woods. Magic was there. Death became life, brimming in fallen trees, in mushrooms and seedlings. Everything was connected: the sunlight that glistened on the leaves, the ants that foraged the ground, the oaks that hummed with wrens and warblers, the child that dreamed beneath their boughs. *God* was there—in the grace that allowed the child to belong. Belong to something eternal, something achingly beautiful.

The child cried when he learned that people hurt the woods. It made him angry. He painted dozens of signs: one side a rain forest verdant and alive, the other fire and smoke. He posted these on every telephone pole in his neighborhood. He vowed to grow up and become a naturalist who would save the wilds of the world.

A couple decades later, news hit of that same fire and smoke, in the Amazon, set by farmers and loggers—nothing new (it’s been like that for years), except the rate at which they’re burning. What they’re destroying, we’re buying: the soy, the beef, the wood, and everything else they rip from the Amazon.

The child—now an adult—hasn’t done much to fulfill his vow. He’s recycled, conserved energy, signed the occasional petition, eaten organic, posted on Facebook, donated money, but his life is still driven by consumerism. Most days, he’d rather not think about what’s happening.

It’s scary. According to the largest study ever of biodiversity, a million species now teeter on the brink of extinction; within decades, many will be gone forever.<sup>1</sup> Scientists say that we will soon reach the point of no return. Climate change is here. It means more extreme and frequent natural disasters, rising seas displacing coastal and island peoples, crop failures and ruined economies, completely altered ecosystems, and refugees by the millions. This is the world we have left our children. We wonder: Can we see any hope?

You know, I’ve read that in Los Angeles, the city of angels, there are days when the smog is so thick that you can’t see anything but what’s right in front of you.

Which makes me think of Jeremiah. Because what’s in front of him is not a burning forest, but a burning city, God’s city, Jerusalem. Through the fog, Jeremiah sees only death and exile for his people at the hands of an invading enemy, Babylon. He imagines mighty engines of destruction, laying cities and fields in ruin. “Because of this,” Jeremiah writes, “the earth shall mourn, and the heavens grow black.”

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<sup>1</sup> “Climate Change and the New Age of Extinction,” Elizabeth Kolbert, May 20, 2019, *The New Yorker*.

For years, he and the other prophets had begged the people to change how they lived; they ignored the warnings. And now, it's too late.

And if you listen again to Jeremiah's words, you can hear God breaking too.

When you love someone completely, as God loves us, you open yourself up to the possibility of incredible pain. It is that pain we hear in our Jeremiah text—the pain and anger of a parent watching their child destroy themselves.

And into all of that, Paul tells us in 1 Timothy, walks Jesus Christ, who endures the same violence and feels the same despair, even to the point of crying out from the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

This is part of the good news. And it's a weird part. Ever since Paul's time, critics have asked, “Wouldn't it have been more god-like, more miraculous, if Jesus had been saved from death on the cross?” Paul's answer was: no. It is far more stunning that Jesus faced death. It is good news to know that, in our raw moments of pain, and even death, God stands with us.

What good to us is a heavenly God when our world is burning? We need a God, scarred and grizzled, who walks through fire and knows death. Only that God has anything worthwhile to say to us; only that God has any hope to offer us.

But you know, here's the thing about that smog in Los Angeles. It can be overpowering, and for a time, you can think there's nothing beyond that smog, that this is just now your life, your world. But when that smog lifts, on a really clear day, you can see those beautiful mountains on the horizon. You can see that there is so much more to the world, and to life, than what's right in front of you.

Author Anna Olson writes: “On the days when you can see them, it is impossible to believe that the mountains have ever been invisible. On the days when they are obscured, it is equally impossible to believe that they even exist.”

And you know, I think hope is a lot like that. There are days when you can't believe it exists, you hurt so badly. But then you get a glimpse, and it's hard to know how you didn't see it before.

We get a glimpse of it in Jeremiah. To be honest, I overlooked it the first time. Didn't even notice it—it's so inconspicuous, so out of character with the rest of the passage. But there it is, in verse 27, when God whispers, “Yet, I will not make a full end.” It is, in the words of Walter Brueggemann, “one soft note of grace”.

But where we really see that hopeful grace is in 1 Timothy.

Paul<sup>2</sup> says that for awhile all he knew was sin and violence. This is the man, once named Saul, who persecuted the early church. But then something happened, he says. While he was on his way to Damascus to arrest Christians, Jesus Christ appeared to him and revealed just how little he had been able to see of the world around him. He knows he didn't deserve forgiveness, but Christ, he says, forgave him anyway, as a sign of just how much stronger are God's mercy and love.

Yes, there is death, but such is not, in the words of the prophet, the end. There is so much more waiting for us.

Yes, Jesus Christ cried out from the cross, and experienced death, but he walks through it, beyond it, in resurrection, a sign of the love that will triumph and the life that awaits.

In Jesus, we have something better than a miraculous escape; we have a God who faced death and came out on the other side. And I think that is precisely the God we need to see today, in the midst of forests burning and a world held captive to the despair of climate change. We don't need a false hope that says everything will be fine if we just recycle a little more. We certainly don't need a false denial that pretends everything's OK.

We need the scarred hope of the gospel, because it's a hope that is rooted in truth; a hope that looks death in the eye, and tells it plain; a hope that doesn't hide from despair, or cover it up, but faces it.

I can't tell you what the world looks like beyond climate change, or if there even is a world. Right now, the smog is too thick. But I can say, because of Christ, that it doesn't have the power to take from us what matters most.

There was an article recently published in *The New Yorker* by noted author Jonathan Franzen titled "What If We Stopped Pretending?"<sup>3</sup>

He writes, "If you care about the planet, and about the people and animals who live on it, there are two ways to think about [climate change]. You can keep on hoping that catastrophe is preventable, and feel ever more frustrated or enraged by the world's inaction. Or you can accept that disaster is coming, and begin to rethink what it means to have hope."

So let's rethink. What if hope isn't believing that we'll be saved from climate change in some last minute Hail Mary, but rather hope is trusting that the manner in which we love and are loved today matters, in spite of climate change—matters more than climate change? What if hope is insisting that we are still that child who belongs in the woods, who belongs to a defiant, scarred grace that turns death into life?

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<sup>2</sup> Actually, the author of 1 Timothy is most likely a student of Paul's writing in Paul's voice, a common and acceptable practice in that day.

<sup>3</sup> September 8, 2019

It means that no matter the disaster, no matter the cross, what we are, and whose we are, cannot be taken from us. We know that it's all going to change, but we choose to love anyway. We choose to hug our children and teach them kindness anyway. We work for justice, confront racism, feed the hungry, welcome the refugee. We change our eating habits, ride a bike, labor for better energy policies, fight to save a little piece of earth right here. Not because it's going to avert climate change, but because it's who we are, and whose we are: it's the love that faced the cross and came out on the other side.

That's hope. It's when all you can see is what's right in front of you, and it's all fire and smoke, and you love anyway. **Amen.**