**"Hope in Action"**
**by Ellen Williams Hensle, 11/16/25**

The Israelites are standing on the edge of despair. They have been exiled from their homeland for nearly sixty years, stuck in Babylon, in the center of a vast and violent foreign empire. They have been separated from their homeland, separated from their relatives who were left behind in the land when they were taken away to Babylon, and most of all, separated from the temple in Jerusalem, the heart of religious life for worshipers of the LORD, the God of Israel.

In fact, the Israelites have been in exile so long that few remain among the generation that was taken from Israel to Babylon in the first place. Now the next generation, adult children who have themselves known nothing but exile – now the children and grandchildren of those first exiles long to return to a homeland they have never seen with their own eyes. Now the children and grandchildren of those exiles long to worship in a temple whose gates they have never passed through, a temple sitting in ruins.

And so perhaps it is no surprise that these Israelites stand on the edge of despair. What do they have to hope for? And where is God, this God who is supposed to be *their* God, this God who is supposed to be mighty in power? What has this God done for them lately? Not much, it seems like. The people grumble and complain against the LORD.

Hearing them is an anonymous prophet, a prophet who takes up his pen to respond to their complaints. This anonymous prophet writes in the tradition of the great prophet Isaiah, picking up where his elder left off two centuries before, in the years of political conflict leading up to the exile. This new writer takes up Isaiah's themes of coming judgment for the people's unfaithfulness *and* promised restoration for those same people, the people God so loves.

As this anonymous prophet begins his response to the complaints of his fellow Israelites, he records their grumblings: "my road is hidden from the LORD; my justice is turned aside by my God!" In other words, the people assume that their continued exile means that, as one scholar puts it, God "knows and cares nothing for their actions, and as a result any hopes for justice from God are in vain."[1]

The anonymous prophet hears the people questioning God, and his first response is to turn the questions back on them. Sons of Jacob, why do you say that your path forward is hidden from the Lord? Children of Israel, why do you assert that God is disregarding your pleas for justice? This is not the God we know, the prophet says. All you need to do is look at the stars to be reminded: the God we know created the heavens and the earth. The God we know brings order out of chaos and provides for the needs of every creature with great care and attention. The God we know is a God of great faithfulness, a God of great power. Our God is more powerful than any earthly ruler, even the Babylonians and the Persians coming after them. What are human beings compared to our God? As impermanent as chaff, blown away easily by the wind of God's Spirit, the prophet says.

And so in grand, poetic language, the prophet calls his people to hope. God has not abandoned them or forsaken them. God is not neglecting them. God is planning to restore them to their homeland. The problem is not that God has forgotten them, the prophet says. The problem is that they have forgotten God. The prophet promises the people that if they place their trust in God – if they place their trust in God, God will give them the patience they need to keep waiting; if they place their trust in God, God will give them the strength they need to keep hoping; if they place their trust in God, God will give them the stamina they need to keep putting one foot in front of the other, day by day, until they are home.

How do you define hope? I posed this question to our elders and deacons Tuesday night at our annual joint meeting of church officers. We were discussing this year's stewardship theme, "Hope in Action." "Hope is the thing with feathers that perches in the soul," said one elder, quoting Emily Dickinson, of course. "Hope is trusting in promises not yet fulfilled," said another. "Hope comes from community," someone offered; "it's awfully hard to hope in isolation." "Hope is sturdy." "Hope requires us to remember how God has been with us in the past so we can trust that God will be with us in the future." "Hope is showing up for each other, even when times are tough." "Hope is something we pass on to one another." "Hope is not a personal outlook but a collective process." "Hope is something we do together."

Thanks be to God for our smart and insightful church officers. Because they are all right. Hope is not something we do in isolation – to have hope we need to be connected to God and connected to one another. And hope is not something we simply have, but indeed something we do. In the words of poet Mary Oliver, "Can one be passionate about the just, the / ideal, the sublime, and the holy, and yet commit / to no labor in its cause? I don't think so."[2] To believe in a future that is better than our present reality is to commit to working to make it so. And I find that when it comes to hope, action sometimes precedes feeling. I don't always *feel* hopeful when I'm sitting around contemplating the depths of the pain and

brokenness in our fallen world. But when I'm doing something together with my community in response to the needs around us – then I can *feel* the hope that I am acting out.

Like the way our church community has responded to the current food insecurity crisis in our region. The amount of food that has come into this building in the last few weeks is truly incredible, both from all of you and from our preschool community. Watching so many people leave their pews during the final hymn a few weeks ago for our monthly collection for the Crisis Ministry, watching so many of you bring forward a bag of groceries or a few dollars for the plate – your responsiveness, your faith and compassion – it brought tears to my eyes. And the generosity has just kept coming in the weeks since then. The floor of the reception room was basically a tripping hazard this week, there were so many bags of groceries in there. We may not necessarily be able to *fix* what's happening in the world around us, but we can *respond* with faithful action. We can respond with kindness and with love for our neighbors. When we do that together, it fills us with hope.

And that's what we do together when we make pledges for the year ahead. We act out our hope for this church and our hope for our community, together. We each say, I will do my part to care for my community. Though I may not be able to fix everything that's broken in the world, I will contribute what I can. Whether it's your time volunteering in the choir or serving on a committee, whether it's a few bags of groceries a year, or whether it's a significant financial commitment, your gifts matter. Because they help to inspire those around you to hope. They are part of the cycle of doing hopeful things which leads to feeling hopeful feelings, which leads to doing more hopeful things.

And when we are worn out, when we grow weary of our labors, then God is there to breathe renewed strength into our tired bodies and our heavy spirits. "Those who hope in the LORD shall renew their strength," the prophet reminds us. "They shall mount up with wings like eagles. They shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint." Even young people will get tired out eventually, Isaiah says – but those who remember God's goodness, who trust in God's everlasting love – they will receive fresh energy to keep going.

As I was musing on hope in action this week, I remembered a book I got a few years ago when I went to see writer – and Presbyterian! – Anne Lamott speak at a church in Austin. The book is her 2018 volume "Almost Everything: Notes on Hope." It's written as a letter to her grandson and niece, trying to capture the wisdom she's gathered along life's road. She begins this way: "I am stockpiling antibiotics for the apocalypse, even as I await the blossoming of paperwhites on the windowsill in the kitchen. The news of late has captured the fever dream of modern life: everything exploding, burning, being shot, or crashing to the ground all around us, while growing older has provided me with a measure of perspective and equilibrium, and a lovely, long-term romance. Towns and cities, ice fields, democracy, people – all disappear, while we rejoice and thrive in the spring and the sweetness of old friendships. There is so much going on that flattens us, that is huge, scary, or simply appalling. We're doomed, stunned, exhausted, and overcaffeinated.

"And yet, outside my window, yellow roses bloom, and little kids horse around, making a joyous racket. In general, it doesn't feel like the light is making a lot of progress. At the same time, the truth is that we are beloved, even in our current condition, by someone; we have loved, and been loved. We have also known the abyss of love lost to death or rejection, and that it somehow leads to new life. We have been redeemed and saved by love, even as a few times we have been nearly destroyed. Love has bridged the high-rises of despair we were about to fall between. Love has been a penlight in the blackest, bleakest nights. Love has been a wild animal, a poultice, a dinghy, a coat. Love is why we have hope…

"On the one hand, there is the hopelessness of people living in grinding poverty in sub-Saharan Africa, and uptown Oakland. On the other, we pour our money and time into organizations that feed and mentor people, teach in Uganda and Appalachia, show up in refugee camps with water and art supplies. People like us all over the world teach girls auto repair and electrical installation and teach boys to care for babies. Witnessing this fills me to bursting with hope. I have never witnessed both more global and national brutality and such goodness in the world's response to her own."[3]

In her own way, Anne Lamott also continues in the tradition of Isaiah. Things out there are pretty bad – there's no use denying it. But all we have to do is look at the paperwhites on the windowsill or the kids on the playground to be reminded: the God we know created the heavens and the earth. The God we know surrounds us with love that comes in many forms, love that sees us through hard times. And so in response we try to love one another. And that love flowing through us, that love we see being acted out – that love gives us hope, the hope we need to keep going.

"Those who hope in the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall soar on wings like eagles; they shall run and not grow weary; they shall walk and not faint." May it be so for us.