

Hope lives in K-mart parking lots.

If you had told me 20 years ago that I would find hope—or rather, that hope would find *me*—in the K-Mart parking lot at the corner of Highway Six and First Colony Boulevard in Sugar Land, Texas, I would have rolled my eyes and walked away. *I don't even like to shop.*

I was a sophomore in high school when my dad unexpectedly died. One minute he was having lunch with my sister on her visit home from college, the next minute a ventilator was breathing for him. When you're a teenager everything is a source of angst and melodrama.

But death—the death of someone who I assumed was too young to die, someone who sneaked in trips to the donut shop every morning on the way to taking my best friend and me to school, someone whose absence no longer burns but whose presence I still feel robbed of having—
well, that defies words.

And while my best friend's struggle was not one of inexplicable grief, her body and soul had been raging war with her for months, and darkness was her only companion.

About four months after life came crashing down—and not for the last time—my best friend and I decided that rather than sitting at home listening to music yet again, we'd drive around town because nothing says independence at 16 like being in the car. After about 20 minutes, a torrential downpour forced us into waiting out the worst of the storm in the nearby K-mart parking lot. Long after the rain stopped though, we remained. We cried, we sat in silence, and we talked. For two hours there was no pretense or shame about what life had wrought, only truth. And what started as an escape from rain became a weekly date with lament.

Some weeks we talked. Other times the weight of our disappointment with God and our fear that the ache wouldn't stop left us speechless. On occasion, we'd listen to music or a Christian call-in show for teens and hope that maybe someone's question would be our question and the host's answer would be the answer we wanted.

But that never happened.

If anything, it only deepened the despair as we could not recognize the God they talked about—the one of rainbows after floods and a miracle worker with loaves and fishes. Even still, after six days of crushing on guys, passing notes, melting in the Texas heat at marching band practice each day, and Friday Night Lights, Sunday afternoons were our time to exhale a little more, to be real with ourselves, life, and a God we weren't even sure we wanted to deal with.

Eighteen months after COVID-19 uprooted the ground beneath our feet, life can still feel like too much too deal with, and so can God.

We've said goodbye to family through Zoom calls and waved to parents and husbands across plexiglass dividers at nursing homes.

We've buried loved ones who deserved better than a hasty burial in the icy cold with only two or three people in attendance.

We've felt helpless as the number of kids suffering from depression and anxiety has skyrocketed.

And we've divided ourselves into various camps of ideology and practice because even though we know better, prioritizing others and the most vulnerable among us feels like a burden instead of the act of love and belonging that it is.

Whether it is the unknown of the pandemic,
a relationship that has been a harbinger of pain,
the death of someone dear,
a chronic illness, or
anything thing that has uprooted your life, who wouldn't some kind of escape, some kind of relief, some kind of hope?

That's all Job wants this morning, too.

His ten children are dead.

His livestock and land have been wiped out.

His wife has questioned his faith and his sanity, and soon his friends will, too.

It's reason enough to give up.

But Job doesn't do that—and not because he's a bulwark of steadfast trust. He does it because he does something that one theologian regards as quintessentially “un-American”¹:

¹ Karla Suomala, “Commentary on Job 1:1, 2:1-10” *Working Preacher*, accessed September 23, 2015, https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2669.

Job sits in his agony and pain.
He does not numb it or deny it.
He doesn't point fingers.
He shows up to it. Sits with it. Befriends it.

Let's be real here: this is not how our society encourages to respond to ongoing trials. Instead, we're told we ought to blame someone, sue someone, or search Google for an answer.

When that doesn't work we're told to count our blessings until we're blue in the face.

And if that fails, then we ought to compare ourselves to someone in a far-off country decimated by war, famine, and colonialism and be grateful that "at least we're not them."

Denial, indeed, takes many forms.

But nothing can be healed that is denied. As social scientist Brené Brown has proven, we cannot selectively numb our feelings or run from them: "If we numb the dark, we numb the light. If we take the edge off pain and discomfort, we are, by default, taking the edge off joy, [and] love."²

So, when life leaves us hanging by a thread the first and most faithful we can do is to show up to life as it is—not as we wish it was or how others think it should be. Everyone knows that any marriage or relationship in which the couple doesn't argue or have moments of struggle isn't a healthy relationship; it's one in which someone has stopped showing up and caring. The same can be said for our relationship with life and God. To run from our heartache or disappointment with God and life is to call it quits on a future that none of us—*none of us*—can see or know. To show up though is to acknowledge that something we expected or knew has died. And God cannot resurrect what we do not let die.

The second guidepost for life at the end of our rope is the art of lament. Lamenting, as Job does day after day, is much more courageous and faithful than saying "everything happens for a reason."

² Brené Brown, *Dare to Lead: Brave Work, Tough Conversations, Whole Hearts* (New York: Random House, 2018), 85.

To say that is to accept brokenness as God's original plan for creation when flourishing has always been the intent since the first sprout of life in the Garden of Eden.

To lament, to be honest about how disappointed and tough life is, is to know that God's justice is not at work as it should be, and God needs to show up and do something.³

Job's honesty with God makes space for him to encounter God anew as he is and not as others think life *should* be. The same is true for us; lamenting and having it out with God is not only faithful, it's essential to knowing that God loves and embraces you as you are, not as you think you *should* be.

The third guidepost for living amidst life's ashes is to practice gentleness and compassion on yourself. Sounds easy, but I can't tell you the number of times I have heard people compare their suffering to the suffering of others as though it's a zero-sum, no-holds-barred competition. It's not. You're not living someone else's life. You're living your life—and whatever you have gone through is unique to you and your history and circumstances and so will be your path to healing. God cares for us individually and not as one unidentifiable, nameless group. We must care for ourselves with the same tenderness, which in turn will make space for us to honor the divinity and brokenness in others.

So,

show up.

Lament with honesty.

Be compassionate and gentle with yourself and others.

I can't lie to you: none of this will be easy or quick. *You know that*. It won't thwart future disappointment, tragedy, or dis-ease with God. But I can promise you that, "whether it is a seed in the ground, a baby in the womb, or Jesus in the tomb, new life starts in the dark."⁴ That is the crux of what it means to claim the cross of Christ as our anchor. It doesn't mean that we will be free of suffering or emptiness. It means that it will not have the last word.

More than twenty years have passed since my best friend and I camped out in the monstrosity of her white Ford Aerostar minivan week after week for nearly two years.

³ "Proper 23B: October 11, 2015," *Pulpit Fiction*, Episode 136, accessed October 8, 2015, <http://www.pulpitfiction.us/show-notes/136-proper-23b-oct-15-2015>.

⁴ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Learning to Walk in the Dark* (San Francisco: Harper One, 2014), 129.

We didn't know it then, *couldn't have known it then*, but Sundays in the K-Mart parking were a kind of sacrament. A sacrament is an outward and visible sign of inward grace and work of God.

As the late Rachel Held Evans wrote, sacraments help us to see, to pay attention to stuff that matters, to give reverence to and be fed by all that is holy and life-giving.⁵

The seven official sacraments of the Church are baptism, communion, confirmation, anointing of the sick, confession and reconciliation, ordination, and marriage. For two years, Sundays at K-Mart were an 8th.

For it was in that van that hope showed up—not with a quick fix, but with the space to be real about what was and the invitation to keep showing up—no matter how hard and ugly and dark it was. And as Kate Bowler, a historian and theologian living with an incurable illness reminds us, ultimately hope isn't “a story about us [nor is it a story of wishful thinking.]...[I]t's a story about God that's dropped like an anchor in the future. God is pulling us toward it.”⁶ It's a story of resurrection, which begins not with victory but with defeat, in places like K-mart parking lots and in the cracks of abandoned sidewalks.

So, show up.

Lament with honesty.

Be compassionate and gentle with yourself and others.

God,

your 8th sacrament, and

your future await.

The Rev. Dr. Maria A. Kane
St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Waldorf, MD
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⁵ Rachel Held Evans, *Searching for Sunday: Loving, Leaving, and Finding the Church* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2015), 155-6.

⁶ Kate Bowler in conversation with Luke Powery, “Living and Leading from Our Mortality, *Christian Century*, <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/interview/living-and-leading-our-mortality>, accessed October 1, 2021.