

## 'The Door to Hope' | Episode 4 | "Another Bethlehem"

### Episode transcript

The phrase, the door of hope, comes from the prophet Hosea: 'therefore I will persuade her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her. From there I will give her vineyards, and make the valley of Achor a door of hope'.

I began this audio series with this image of the door. A door of hope through which God is always moving into how things are, and a door through which we can step out in God, into all that is broken apart. A door of hope, through which presence is always moving into absence.

I will make the valley of Achor a door of hope. The valley of Achor, meaning the valley of trouble, was a place of greed and violence. A follower of Joshua, Achan, had taken gold and silver from the sack of Jericho, in direct contradiction to the word of God. And there, at Achor, he was stoned to death. It's a disturbing tale, not only of human greed, but of God's seeming inclination to violence. If this is how God is answering human fallibility with the harshest of judgements, if that's how it is, then there's no place for hope here. Yet, Hosea picks Achor for the birthplace of beginning.

Here, Hosea's two children, born from an unhappy relationship receive new names. Lo-ruhamah, "The one who receives no pity", becomes "The One on whom God has compassion". And Lo-Ammi, "Not my people", becomes "You are my people". Presence, for absence. "No pity" becomes "I will have compassion". "Not my people" becomes "The one who belongs".

The valley of trouble is the door of hope. And through Hosea, God says more. "I will take you for my wife forever. I will take you for my wife in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love and in mercy. I will take you for my wife in faithfulness, and you will come to know the Lord".

The Bible wrestles with the mystery. Who are you God? How are you? The God of demand, harsh judgement, and violence, of Achan's cruel punishment. Or this other God, the God of steadfast love and mercy? Even now, there are those who invoke the name of God, the words of the Bible, to back up their ruthless use of power and lack of pity. But it won't do, because in time and in place, the door of hope opened for every time and place. "And for each one, I will take you for myself forever. You will come to know the Lord".

Bethlehem. The birth of a child. God with us. Never a time when God is not with us. God with you now, always choosing this. With you in humility. No violence here. Here, not to drive you into compliance, but to draw you into relationship. Here, not to judge you for ending up in this unpromising place, but to work with you creatively, within these very

realities. Here, with the compassion you struggle to find for yourself. Here to see you and call you, if you sit, lost and alone by the side of the road, a road you have no strength to travel. Here to go with you, should you wish it so. Here in this mess we've collectively made, where the innocent and the vulnerable suffer most. Even here, the valley of trouble is a door of hope.

This is how I experience hope within myself; a kind of stubbornness of life that will not die. A life in me and of me, though it's not wholly mine. It's very difficult to find good words. It's not optimism; hope is incarnation. Something of God in me that's also me. That God of creation whose spirit is always moving over the dark and the void.

The God who's there in every Bethlehem of our experience. The God in the pain and violence of every Good Friday where Easter morning, though hidden, is always rising. The restless, holy spirit within my human spirit. Always stirring and waking through my fears, my failings, and I don't pretend to understand it all. Yet it is so, in me, despite me, stubbornly.

Hope stubbornly sees and acts. It's not the escape from reality of wishful thinking, or the glossing over of obstacles of optimism. Hope sees what is, in all its complexity and difficulty. And the more of what this reality can be. Hope sees, in the language of the prophets, that the metal used to make swords is better used to make plowshares. There's a better way to live than tearing one another apart. The wolf shall live with the lamb. The leopard shall lie down with the kid.

“The calf and the lion and the fatling together. And a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together. And the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand in the adder's den. They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea”. They're beautiful words. But words of hope are not hope. If they don't find their Bethlehem, the word must be made flesh. For hope sees, and hope acts. In the first of these audios, I suggested that the pain that afflicts our age is the result of absence. The absence of respect and reverence for the other. The absence of compassion. The absence of justice and inclusion. The absence of the lived recognition of our interdependence with one another, and with all that is created. It's that absence of what should be there that results in things falling apart.

The bones need their sinews. The bricks their mortar. The leaves light and warmth. The season of Christmas we are now entering invites us to be presence for absence, to do or be something, where there has been nothing, to be compassion for those who have not known mercy, to embrace those who have not known belonging.

And whenever we dare to do or be something, the door of hope opens, opens for one more person, perhaps, to see and to step through. It can jar to wish one another happy and peaceful Christmas, when for so many in our valley of trouble, happiness and peace seem very far away. Yet, it is good to own, that the happiness and peace of all, is something worth living for.

Beginning in the only place that we can, that is, for each of us, where we are. Beginning in the small something we are able to be, or do, that becomes another Bethlehem, where the beautiful word of hope, most beautifully, becomes flesh.