

WORDS OF HOPE

A Devotional Series by Carrie Bare

WORDS OF HOPE

In the Midst of Uncertainty

*Be Thou my Vision, O Lord of my heart
Naught be all else to me, save that Thou art
Thou my best Thought, by day or by night
Waking or sleeping, Thy presence my light*

In times of uncertainty and confusion, it is so good to remember what we know, what is true.

And we know that God is real and God is not rattled or thrown off course by anything that may be going on in the world. God is the still point, the grounded One, in a world of turbulence.

Our God is our rock and our fortress, as many of the psalms remind us. God holds all of history in his hands and our God knows where all this is going. Everything under God's hand is moving redemptively to a good end. So, God can be, God is "our best Thought, by day or by night" and God is our vision, his presence is our light.

God is light and in him there is no darkness at all.
— 1 John 1:5 (NRSV)

WORDS OF HOPE

In the Midst of Anxiety

*Unless the Lord had given me help,
I would soon have dwelt in the silence of death.
When I said, "My foot is slipping,"
your unfailing love, Lord, supported me.
When anxiety was great within me,
your consolation brought me joy.*
— Psalm 94:17-19 (NIV)

When we really need help and our feet are slipping and our anxiety is taking over, we discover how much we need help. It is when we cannot save, fix, or rescue ourselves that some things become very clear: we are limited; we need others; our resources don't cover every contingency.

These can be the times when certain truths snap into focus: we remember that God offers, always and daily, God's lovingkindness and tender mercy that is new every morning. God gives help, God supports, God reaches out to us. And when we receive his unfailing love and his support, as the psalmist says, his consolation brings joy. At first, joy can seem to be a very long way off, but after the presence of God comes to make our feet stop slipping so much, joy has a chance to come to us, and this, it seems, is the will of God. It is as if God is saying to us: Receive me. Do it. And joy will come.

Lord, may we open ourselves to the help you are offering us. Open our eyes to the reality of your nearness and your strong presence. Amen.

WORDS OF HOPE

In the Midst of Fear

Be not afraid. Fear not.

These words occur so often throughout Scripture. Angels say them to humans. Jesus says them to his disciples. It happens so often in Scripture that we might ponder this: why is it so important to God that we “be not afraid?” One reason might be that when fear takes over, as one devotional writer put it, “fear starts making its own suggestions about reality.” In other words, our clarity of vision becomes clouded and any decisions that follow may not be good ones. We have all seen people who have been driven by fear.

But we are people to whom God says: “Fear not.” How can God possibly say that? Because we are the people who belong to the One who has conquered death. We do not need to fear what has been conquered. And we have been told there is nothing that can separate us from the love of God. So, what is left that can crush or destroy us in any ultimate sense? God has seen to that.

*The Lord is my light and my salvation—
whom shall I fear?*

*The Lord is the stronghold of my life—
of whom shall I be afraid?*

— Psalm 27:1 (NIV)

Though the earth shakes and the sea roars and the mountains fall into the sea, we will not fear because God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in times of trouble, we are told in Psalm 46.

O God, you are above all and your strength is endless, as well as your love. Help us to put our trust in you completely and to walk in the peace you want to give us. Amen.

WORDS OF HOPE

In the Midst of Change

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore, the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God." Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.
— Luke 1:26-38 (NRSV)

It turns out, whether we wanted it to be true or not, we all have a pretty well-developed sense of entitlement. We want to be safe. And healthy. And free of anxiety. Comfortable, happy, and on goes the list. For this reason, Mary's response is breath-taking: "Here am I...let it be with me according to your word." How can Mary say this? How can I say this? It can only happen if I trust the One who brings the message. If God asks, I want to say, "Yes, Lord." If God asks, I hope I can say yes without hesitating too long.

But here's the thing — would we want our lives to be unfolding other than according to God's word? Where else would we go? Mary did not have it easy after saying yes, but it was good. It was right. She became an essential and beautiful part of God's story. May we, also, do that. May we respond in simple trust that God knows what he is doing with us, no matter what the landscape looks like and how unstable everything might feel. The essential question is: What does God want me to do in all of this, today? And can I know that God is trustworthy so that I can say "yes" pretty quickly when God asks something of me that I did not see coming?

O God, may we join Mary and say "yes" to you. We put ourselves in your good hands. Amen.

WORDS OF HOPE

In the Midst of Crisis

What is your only hope in life and death?

*That I am not my own,
but belong with body and soul,
both in life and in death,
to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ.*

*He has fully paid for all my sins
with his precious blood,
and has set me free*

*from all the power of the devil.
He also preserves me in such a way
that without the will of my heavenly Father
not a hair can fall from my head;
indeed, all things must work together
for my salvation.*

*Therefore, by his Holy Spirit
he also assures me
of eternal life
and makes me heartily willing and ready
from now on to live for him.*

— from the Heidelberg Catechism

A crisis is an opportunity to consider what we were doing before it hit and to decide if we were really happy about the way we were doing things, back before we had this shock come upon us. It is an excellent time for clarity about what really matters. If we know and love Jesus, it can be good to look very directly at the truth that this One — this Jesus — is our only hope in life and death. It can be good to remember that we are not our own but have been “bought with a price” and now we really do belong,

body and soul, in life and in death, to this One, our faithful savior. This is very good news. We are held, “preserved” as the confession says, by him, the One who loves us so much and knows us so well.

Of course, we subscribe to this as we go through our days — but the truth of it can become crystal clear in times like this. We can also become aware of what other things we may have been putting a lot of stock in prior to the shock of the crisis. With the threat of all that we have been leaning on being removed, we need to see what we are left with. Followers of Jesus are left with this: My only hope, in life and in death, is that I am being held every day by the One who is both able to hold and preserve me and by the One who wants to hold and preserve me! How wonderful is this!

O God, may our eyes be opened to how wonderful it is to be in your care in every circumstance. May we be able to fully appreciate what we are being given. Thank you. Amen.

WORDS OF HOPE

In the Midst of Grief

We grieve, but not as those who have no hope.

— 1 Thessalonians 4:13b

You have turned my mourning into dancing for me;

You have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy.

— Psalm 30:11

It is not as though there is nothing to grieve when a crisis comes. Even if we are not sick or not among those who have lost jobs, we have losses. We can't be together as we would wish. We can't plan, gather, celebrate, even work as we want to. We can't think about the world the way we used to. We can't stop knowing that people have died, are dying, will die. And so, we grieve. But not without hope. We know that even Jesus wept when his friend, Lazarus, died, even though Jesus knew he himself would raise Lazarus up again! Still he wept. If Jesus grieved, we know it is not wrong to do so. It means we have loved; we have cared about the things that are lost. But, again, we are not without hope. Loss and even death do not have the last word. We are an Easter people, which means we are a people who know about the resurrection and that death has been conquered. This is why we can ask death: where is your sting? Because death was conquered. Life has won! And so, though we weep and are sad, the place of great sadness is not where we stay. We move through to a place of joy again. This is why the psalmist can say: you have turned my mourning into dancing. God is masterful at moving redemptively through great suffering and into the hopeful places of joy and gladness. When we abide in God, this will be the direction of our lives — moving through the dark night into the gladness of the morning.

Lord God, please help us to remember that you are the God of resurrection, that after death comes life. Thank you that all sorrow comes to an end and we can always live in hope. Amen.

WORDS OF HOPE

In the Midst of Darkness

The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has never put it out.

— John 1:5

"I said to the man who stood at the Gate of the Year, 'Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown.' And he replied, 'Go out into the darkness, and put your hand into the Hand of God. That shall be better than light, and safer than a known way.'"

— Quoted by King George, in an address to the nation, 1939

taken from a poem by Minnie Haskins

When we live in dark times, we become hungry for light. We want lighter moments, we want clarity, we want direction, we want to see our way home. The world can be a dark place. Our world is filled with brokenness and things are not as they ought to be. C.S. Lewis calls earth "the dark planet" in some of his fictional writing. We are people who, when we encounter darkness, long for the light.

God comes to us as light — there are many references to this in Scripture. Jesus himself says: "I am the light of the world." Yes! We need a light in the world and Jesus has come to do that. When John writes about this in his gospel he tells us that this light — this Son, Jesus — shines in the darkness and the darkness has never put it out! That is because the darkness is not strong enough to put out the light. Other versions speak of this by saying the darkness cannot overcome it. Light is too strong. You might think of one small match flame piercing darkness, but can one small bit of darkness do that to light? Darkness does not break through light in the same way. So light is a great picture for us of who God is and how he works in the world. He overcomes darkness. We don't need to be afraid of

the darkness or the unknown because God will guide us through any darkness we may encounter and bring us home.

O God, grant that we may trust you, that we may put our hand into your hand and allow you to lead us to places of safety and peace. Amen.