

ALL SHALL BE WELL

*Awakening to God's Presence
in His Messy, Abundant World*

CATHERINE MCNIEL

In this hurried life, we can become so indifferent to and unmoved by God's glory all around us. We race from here to there, missing the beauty of his works. In *All Shall Be Well*, Catherine McNiel slows us down and takes us on a journey of seeing and believing. God is found in the beauty and the pain, the flowers and the thistles. His goodness to us is enjoyed by pondering his wonders.

KYLE IDLEMAN, bestselling author of *Not a Fan* and *Don't Give Up*

This book has done more than *teach* me: It has *nourished* me. *All Shall Be Well*, rich in imagery, theological depth, and soulful introspection, is exactly the kind of book I like to read and recommend. McNiel grapples insightfully with the paradoxes of being human and loving this beautiful, broken world. I want more and more people to read her valuable work.

JEN POLLOCK MICHEL, author of *Surprised by Paradox*

All Shall Be Well beautifully and poetically reveals the seasons of life. From the dead of winter to the promise of spring, Catherine McNiel teaches us that our God is present and listening, calling and leading no matter what our circumstances are. She reminds us that our faith is a journey of spiritual formation, a character-shaping relationship with the Creator God. Nature calls; read this book.

CALEB KALTENBACH, author of *Messy Grace* and *God of Tomorrow*

With her trademark insight and beautiful writing style, Catherine McNiel leads readers like she's our personal spiritual director. She invites us to wonder at God's mysterious presence, while continually pointing her readers to God's renewal of all things—to the spring in our winters. If you're longing to connect deeply with God and with his messy, abundant creation, you will find those longings expressed—and met—in these pages.

AUBREY SAMPSON, author of *The Louder Song* and *Overcomer*

“Our God is not far off. From the very beginning, Christians have declared that the Creator is not only *transcendent* but *immanent*.” With these words, Catherine McNiel plants the foundation for an ingrained display of God's beauty and goodness among us. While we often wonder where he is amidst the thorns and weeds, *All Shall Be Well* reminds us that God is still here, tending his garden . . . for us.

ALAN NOBLE, award-winning author of *Disruptive Witness*

If you enjoy Barbara Brown Taylor, you'll love Catherine McNiel. She awakens us to the cathedral of the everyday, the altar that calls us to worship.

TRICIA LOTT WILLIFORD, author of *You Can Do This* and *Just. You. Wait.*

I want to write like Catherine McNiel when I grow up! With rich insight and delicious turn of phrase, this book

gently replants the reader's soul in the seasons. This is a truly helpful work for those of us who don't know what to do with our anxiety, restlessness, and creative yearnings. McNiel gives us the ground from which to say, "All shall be well," regardless of the season of soul in which we currently reside.

CASEY TYGRET, author of *As I Recall* and *Becoming Curious*; host of the *otherWISE* podcast

Grounding, lyrical, and rich with meditation and metaphors, McNiel turns our eyes to the wonders of God all around us and invites us to cultivate simple practices of awareness.

ED CYZEWSKI, author of *Flee, Be Silent, Pray*

With vibrant and poetic words that touch all the senses, Catherine invites us into an intimate connection with our creator, no matter the season in which we find ourselves—even the dark days of winter. Then, not wanting to leave us without practical tips, she provides simple yet profound disciplines to cultivate life in the Kingdom now. This is a book I'll return to again and again.

KELLYE FABIAN, author of *Sacred Questions*

I am the weary traveler McNiel is writing to, and her book is such a tender invitation to trust, to rest, and to embrace whatever season I find myself in. Through prose saturated with kindness and clarity, she provides a much-needed

reminder that the life I'm seeking is not found in the busyness, or the chaos, or the things that overwhelm me, but in the beauty of nature and the goodness of God. The "Cultivating" sections at the end of each chapter provide practical steps that feel less like a to-do list and more like mile-markers on a path to the divine.

SHAWN SMUCKER, author of *Once We Were Strangers* and *Light from Distant Stars*

Catherine McNiel's prose is, itself, further evidence of the abounding beauty of a world touched by God's presence. *All Shall Be Well* will open your eyes to the lush and lively wonder of his redemption in every season and every situation.

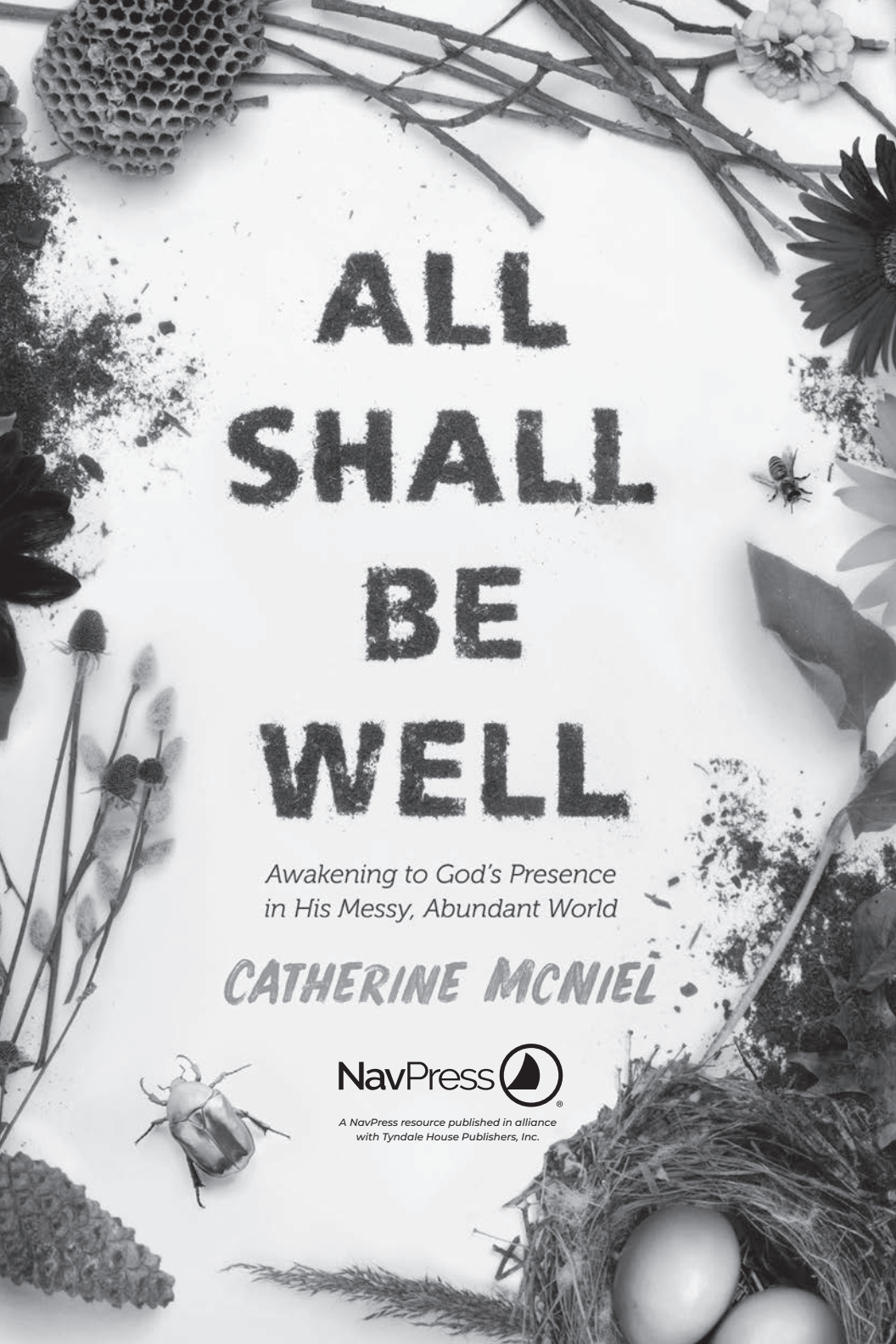
JASON HAGUE, author of *Aching Joy*

Catherine's writing is more than beautiful. It is transcendent. Seen through her eyes, the everydayness of living bursts forth with abundance, spiritual meaning, and God himself. Catherine is a wise soul, and her readers will enjoy this journey with her through the spiritual seasons of life. I greatly appreciate and highly recommend this book.

VALERIE BELL, CEO of Awana

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in His Messy, Abundant World*

CATHERINE MCNIEL

NavPress 

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Instructions for living a life:

Pay attention.

Be astonished.

Tell about it.

MARY OLIVER

To live is so startling it leaves little time for anything else.

EMILY DICKINSON

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FOREWORD

CATHERINE MCNIEL'S *All Shall Be Well* is a fresh, visionary work about an ongoing life of faith that breathes and grows in us organically—a garden of beauty and contrast that allows the senses to fully and joyfully play, echoing the fervor of a Creator who displays a profound satisfaction with the universe he has spoken into being. God saw the beauty he had performed in the creation as it came to be, concluding with this remarkable statement on the final day: “This is more than ‘good.’ It is ‘very good,’” an expression that might well be expressed as divine enthusiasm: “This is truly glorious!”

All. Shall. Be. Well. Four simple yet profound syllables form a comprehensive, declarative statement spoken with such emphasis and conviction that it captures our attention. Readers often value these words recorded among the sayings of Julian of Norwich, the fourteenth-century cloistered visionary who heard such reassurance from God in direct but mystical “showings” that her certainty has comforted

generations of troubled and doubting souls ever since. In anxious times, when fear takes over, we are heartened to believe that all shall indeed be well under the loving, over-arching hand of our God. This is an act of faith. This is what trust looks like.

Catherine brings this theme to life by echoing the words of some of our most celebrated poets and writers—Mary Oliver, Emily Dickinson, the church fathers, and other theologians and philosophers—whose words gain new life and light as they reflect each other’s wisdom. She has suffused her soul with the rude stuff of creation—the soil and the stars. Beauty but also bane, a viridian green but also the faded brown of decayed organic matter that ends up being humus, a fertile cultivar for new growth. Vivid color, along with brilliant light and startling contrast, brings this theme into our reach in fresh and vital ways. Our souls respond. Our lives expand with this new challenge.

Catherine also offers a soul-warming dose of *shalom*, that word that encompasses the idea of wholeness, health, peace. And then she shatters the mirror and presents the contrasting chill of doubt and unknowing, where our faith is in a God beyond and above us, a God we cannot fully understand, but who proves himself to us, even in trial, by supplying divine strength and sustenance that carry us again into a place of blessing and safety—where again All. Shall. Be. Well.

Luci Shaw
Bellingham, Washington

OPENING

THE GARDEN

Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Don't be afraid.

FREDERICK BUECHNER, *WISHFUL THINKING*

Then the LORD God planted a garden . . .

GENESIS 2:8, NLT

WHEN THE CURTAIN rises for the very first time, the Gardener is alone on the stage. He's wearing dungarees, as they used to call them; overalls. He's kneeling in the dirt, digging hands into the soil. Planting a garden.

He's muddy, of course. Gardening is full-body, hands-on work, and the Gardener is covered in soil past his elbows and knees. When he stands up to stretch, his muddy arm smears earth across his brow.

Taking a moment to survey his accomplishments, he nods with delight—*yes, this is good*—then kneels and continues planting. He works carefully, lovingly, intentionally. He hums and whistles unself-consciously, for this is his joy, his creation. This is on purpose. This is good. This is *his*.

With a final pat of the ground, the garden is in.
And now, something else.

Turning away from his burgeoning garden, he approaches a fresh piece of earth. Lifting clay out of the ground, he molds it, forms it. Again—lovingly, carefully, joyfully—he fashions the dirt into the shape of his design, his own image. He stands back to admire the work.

Yes, this is good. This is *very* good.

Then something incredible happens.

The Gardener lifts the finished work in his arms and leans down, placing his face on its face, his eyes to its eyes, his mouth to its mouth—and breathes. He breathes his own sacred, holy, living breath into the image he fashioned from the dust.

And it becomes a living thing.

Seek and Find

Friend, this is our origin story, our family tree.¹ *We* are what the Gardener formed so long ago—you and me and folks ten thousand miles away, the mountains and oceans and prairies, the mosquitoes buzzing around my porch light, the dandelions growing through the cracks in your sidewalk. His garden covers the earth; his breath fills the universe. It has become you and me and all living things.

Psalms 19 says that creation proclaims the truth about the Creator—day after day, night after night.² Without speech or sound or words, this voice carries to the end of the world, and in this noiseless declaration, God teaches us, right here among the earth and sky, trees and flowers, neighbors,

children, and creepy-crawlies. The Gardener entreats us to step into the world he made and walk with him, to receive from his hand the daily bread our bodies, minds, and hearts so deeply crave. We are the clay that God is still molding, still nurturing, through the repetition of cycles and seasons, in the mess and abundance of our daily lives.

But there is a problem, a foil: We modern humans rarely look for truth in the soil and stars. In fact, we scarcely spend time outside. I live in a factory-made world of concrete and central heating, buying processed food and clothes with little idea how to trace these shrink-wrapped items back to their origins in the ground. Since we think of truth as residing in words and ideas, we tend to limit seeking God to such things, seldom even noticing the cycles of living and dying that govern our lives—or receiving the wisdom he offers through them.

I wonder about the spiritual atrophy³ we experience by living cut off from the earth. In how many countless ways have we lost the ability to seek and find our Creator? We've worked so hard to isolate ourselves from the realities of creatureliness, but have we also removed ourselves from God's provision, the wisdom and sustenance he offers? We desperately thirst for something more but have grown unseeing, unhearing, unable to absorb the truth and glory always proclaimed by earth and sky.

People sometimes describe themselves as “spiritual but not religious,” but in my circles we often show symptoms of the opposite ailment: We memorize verses and learn facts, and we're prepared to defend them; our doctrinal statements

are read and signed. Sometimes it seems we'd rather categorize God than *be with him*. We opt for merely signing off on God's résumé.

But faith is a journey of spiritual formation, a character-shaping relationship with the living God. Robert K. Johnston describes our dilemma perfectly:

In the vestibule of an auditorium there were two doors. Above the one door was a sign labeled "heaven." Above the other door was a sign labeled "lecture about heaven." And people flocked through the door labeled "lecture."⁴

Even back in the Garden, Adam and Eve fell into trouble when they adopted the habit of talking *about* God rather than speaking *to* him. Suddenly, the Gardener began to appear not quite as life-giving and intimate, perhaps not entirely trustworthy. From there, the relationship was all-too-easily broken.

We do this still, losing intimacy and trust when we avoid talking *to* someone and instead talk *about* them. How much more so with the one who made us and knows us inside out? Time and again, we slide into this pattern, speculating and debating about God rather than searching for him.

But he is here.

Our God is not far off. From the very beginning, Christians have declared that the Creator is not only *transcendent* but *immanent*. In his transcendence, God is perfect, whole, other. This means we cannot grasp or tame him,

we cannot overpower or domesticate him. Yet God is also immanent: crucially, palpably present. Wherever we go, all we must do is lift our faces, hold out our hands, or take in a breath—and find him here with us.

Can you imagine the trouble we'd be in if God were only one of these? If God was near but not sovereign, our hope would be frail, like second-brew tea or weak coffee. If he were transcendent but not present—well, isn't that the actual definition of hell?

He has promised to meet us, he has promised to be found—if we can open our distracted, weary, frightened eyes and *see*.

Flower and Thorn

But there's good reason for our hesitancy; we know all too well that where there are flowers, there are thorns. There's suffering here, and death. Injustice and pain churn around us, blinding and disorienting us like swirling snow. That's the thing about this garden, and we must acknowledge it straight away: There is beauty so brilliant and penetrating it can break your heart—but there is every bit as much struggle, pain, despair, and death. We get bogged down, overwhelmed, encompassed by the unrelenting darkness. How could a world so full of trouble and pain warrant careful attention, be worth lingering in?

Yet I'm convinced that God can be found in both: the beauty and the pain.

Today it's cold with freezing rain where I live—December 21, the winter solstice. We've been weaving our way toward darkness and chill since late June, the pinnacle of light and warmth. Even at noon, with the curtains thrown back, there isn't enough natural light to read or work by. Dim lightbulbs attempt to compensate, but the coziness they lend to winter evenings is simply depressing in midday. The chill in the air reminds me of last chances, last stands, out of time, out of hope.

Yet these are my favorite hours of the year. The winter solstice is a sacred day, when hope imperceptibly strikes the fatal blow to despair. On the darkest day, during the longest night, we turn the corner. Something happens that cannot be perceived: The light is coming, and though we see or feel nothing at all, what *will be* is certain and cannot be undone. Like so many victories, it is silent, "already-not-yet."

To me, the solstice is a message for weary travelers, a sign embedded into creation pointing the way to the truth—again and again, year after year. There's a reason Christians celebrate the coming of God as a baby during the week of solstice. Holding Christmas candles in the dark, we declare: "The true light that gives light to everyone [is] coming into the world."⁵ And while the cycling seasons could never convey the incredible story that *God was born* and pitched his tent among us, the good news I read in the Bible comes alive in my mind and heart while watching the light break into darkness each December. I need this annual lesson to sink

deeply into my spirit and take root there, for the garden we live in is not just flowers and sun.

Years ago, during a season peppered with confusion and despair, I somehow heard God coaxing me, calling me to come outside and meet him. And so I did, walking into a grassy field littered with wildflowers. Closing my eyes, I heard him asking me to rejoice, to take off my shoes, to run and dance with joy.

But I refused. No, I couldn't, I wouldn't. Instead, I sat down, paralyzed. I showed him—or rather, he showed me—my heart: that I was so afraid. I knew from years of experience that hidden among the beautiful flowers and grasses were sharp thorns, angry wasps, blunt rocks. If I threw restraint to the wind and rejoiced here, in this meadow, I would find myself crippled with pain, falling, bleeding.

Surely, I countered, you cannot ask me to do *that*. Surely, this rejoicing-with-abandon is for the naive, for those who have not yet been scarred by the reality hidden beneath the beauty.

But his voice was gentle and firm—he *did* ask this of me. To stand and worship without restraint, fully and entirely aware that this life holds both beauty and pain, joy and suffering. *Because he is here.*

In light and dark, in life and death, in joy and sorrow, *he is present, and we can find him.* We can listen for that still, small voice in the rustling of leaves or the crashing of waves, not idolizing creation but delighting in the Creator. Waking up to his presence in the beauty of early morning or the chaos

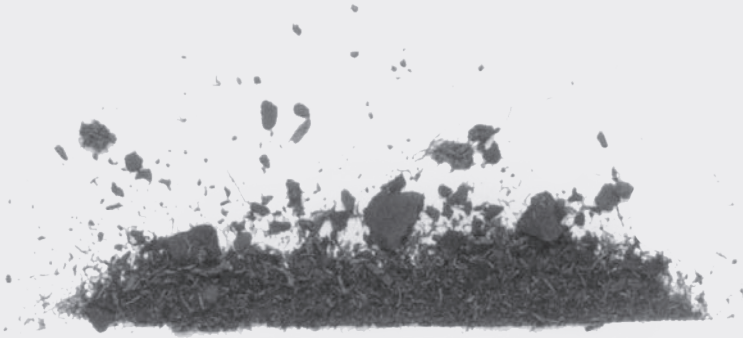
of life is *worship*, the joyful practice the Gardener invited us to live by when he fashioned this world by hand. We humans have always learned best through repetition, and God's lessons replay themselves for us day after day, year after year.

So now, in these pages, I extend this invitation to you: Will you wake up, step outside, look around yourself, and ask, *Where am I today? Where is God in the midst of it all, and what creative, redemptive work is he doing here? What is he teaching me, how is he feeding and forming me, in this season?*

With our hearts firmly rooted in his words and our feet firmly planted on the ground, let us walk courageously into this garden, this messy, abundant world—with all its beauty and all its thorns—and find the nourishment we crave. At the end of each chapter, I suggest a few practices you might bring along as you step out of these words and back into your own life; a few tasks that may help these ideas imprint on you. If you find one that is rewarding, I encourage you to return to it as a regular practice.

His hand is outstretched, coaxing you today, friend. Knowing what you know—of the flowers and the thorns, of life and death, of joy and pain—will you open your eyes, stand up, and accept his invitation? In everything God made, there is something we need that will point us to him. In every season, there is something we need to learn. Will you awaken and receive the provision he placed upon this earth?

He is right here, waiting.



SPRING



1.

*the earliest, usually the most attractive,
period of the existence of something¹*

2.

to grow as a plant

3.

to issue by birth or descent

4.

to come into being: arise²

CHAPTER 1

THAWING

Hope

Hope is a path on the mountainside. At first there is no path. But then there are people passing that way. And there is a path.

LU XUN, CHINESE ESSAYIST, 1921

Hope is being able to see that there is light despite all of the darkness.

DESMOND TUTU, IN AN INTERVIEW WITH
THE NEW YORK TIMES

WINTER HOLDS ON tight, this early-March morning; I'm beginning to despair that it will ever end. But today is Ash Wednesday, the first day of Lent. My family and I crowd the church aisle, jostling each other a bit as we stand in line. We came here to mark a sign of early spring: the cross of ash etched on our foreheads.

This season of spiritual preparation reflects our current reality precisely. *Lenten* means “springtime” in Middle English, which itself comes from the word *lengthen*.¹ The sun arches back toward us, leaning in to life, sunlight hours growing longer each day. The darkness has not won; the world *will* thaw again. It is time to prepare for new life. The ashes on

my head are the charred remains of last year's Palm Sunday branches, declaring that we have gone around the cycle once more: Life retreated to death, now doubling back toward life.

But not yet.

Hope comes bundled with endurance and long waits in ambiguity. We have been barren and cold, but life was not entirely snuffed out. We endured and held on for the thaw to come. Hope builds the bridge that pulls us out of suffering and points us toward the path—the arduous, winding, uphill climb—leading, eventually, to joy. Hope steps out boldly and brings an umbrella.

Leaving the church, we encounter the most amazing surprise: a breath of warm, fresh air. Sunshine. Mountains of snow dissolve everywhere, shrinking, dripping, soaking, forming trickles running headlong into babbling brooks along my street curb. Bundled in my coat and boots, I drink in every drop of this miracle. Have we made it? Did we survive the darkness and cold? Is it time to come alive again?

Then I see it, the sign I have been waiting for: a sliver of green, peeking through the crystals of melting snow. The first shoot of the first spring flower.

In the early morning light of this new day, fresh air fills my lungs, defrosting my winterized body as newly formed rivulets dancing over the ground fill my ears. Plenty of ebbs and flows lie ahead as the days lengthen toward warmth and light; plenty more ice and cold will come before springtime wins out.

But today, there is something new. Our dripping, melting, now-muddy yard turns my thoughts toward life and fullness. The ashes on my forehead remind me, long before Resurrection Day, to begin, to prepare the way. What was alive is now dead—from the brown, withered leaves in my yard to last year's celebration palms, now ashes on my skin. We step outside to gather the decaying flora not because of grief but because of hope.

Life is coming.

Shalom

Since time began, the earth has spun its inhabitants through a yearlong drama of life and death and life again. The spring-time chapter of this drama hints at the ultimate redemption: *shalom*. This ancient Hebrew word means *wholeness*, and it describes a world where everything is put right.² Not just one or two things settled and lovely but all creation in harmony. One author describes it like this:

The webbing together of God, humans, and all creation in justice, fulfillment, and delight is what the Hebrew prophets call *shalom*. We call it peace, but it means far more than mere peace of mind or a cease-fire between enemies. In the Bible, *shalom* means *universal flourishing, wholeness, and delight*—a rich state of affairs in which natural needs are satisfied and natural gifts fruitfully employed, a state of affairs that inspires joyful wonder as its Creator and Savior opens doors and welcomes the creatures in whom he delights. *Shalom*, in other words, is the way things ought to be.³

This is what the Gardener was singing about as he nurtured each tiny seedling in his garden, as he breathed life into all living things. Shalom has been our destination all along, the shape God has in mind as he molds and forms us.

But our world clearly doesn't overflow with wholeness just now. From our most intimate relationships to the most global affairs—and everything in between—we are at war. Conflict and catastrophe pervade every community, group, and interaction between you and me, us and them, people and nature, children and parents, future and past.

Yet we believe the days are lengthening. From the garden beginning to the eternal city of light at the end, the Christian account of the world is a story of hope. We are a people of eschatology, citizens of a Kingdom that has been promised and begun, but not yet seen. We journey through darkness, bearing crushing burdens and devastating realities, but we have heard the notes of a beautiful song. As Jürgen Moltmann says: “From first to last, and not merely in the epilogue, Christianity is eschatology, is hope . . . the glow that suffuses everything here in the dawn of an expected new day.”⁴

But do not mistake hope for *safety*. Hope breaks us open. Hope is never naive to suffering, is synonymous not with optimism but with courage. Hope knows with certainty that life overflows with both beauty and pain, and we cannot know which will rise to meet us. Trembling with possibility, hope sidles up boldly to despair, nestles close,

and puts down roots. These two—hope and despair—stand always side by side, each determined to outlast the other. If we choose hope, we must join the standoff, with hearts and hands wide open, fighting the urge to fade into despair.

Not all that comes to life in spring will survive. All the most precious things are vulnerable; one new life will die quickly, suddenly, while another thrives and grows. Others will lie dormant, blossoming only after hope has faded. Life offers no guarantees. Except, perhaps, this one: We will, all of us, encounter beauty and pain, both so gripping and vast they will rock us to the core. These are the terms, the facts of life. And in full realization, we open our eyes and hearts to another year of what-may-be. There is no alternate way forward.

It's so much easier for us to keep our hearts closed and hardened, isn't it? When our eyes open to the pain, the danger, the trouble, it takes courage to pry our hearts open long enough to come alive. But when we live closed off and hardened, we pave over the garden with concrete; we shut the door to possibility, to coming alive.

The apostle Paul was well acquainted with this ever-present tension between hope and despair. He exhorts his readers to hang on to hope, to find our courage in the undying love of God even as the world offers no protection against death. As he says, "In this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have?"⁵

ALL SHALL BE WELL

Then,

If God is for us, who can be against us? . . . Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? . . . No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.⁶

Yes, darkness looms, palpable. The groaning is real, and despair always whispers at our backs. But the Christian faith centers itself, from first to last, in the hope of shalom, that redemption will come not only for you and me but *for all creation*. That the guarantor of this promise is none other than the Creator himself. That “creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.”⁷

And so, we begin. In spring, we declare that light and shalom are gaining ground. That ultimately, the Creator will breathe new life into the dead bones piled all around us. Fully aware of the fine print on life’s binding contract, we carry on, one step in front of the next, pouring ourselves into the void, into the future. Into hope.

On the heels of winter, born out of the broken shell of death, new life bursts forth. We are so vulnerable, so fragile; the risk is high, the chances uncertain. Surely floods and

drought, weeds and pests will assail us. Openhearted, we tenaciously offer everything we are to the same world notorious for its fierce tendency to utterly destroy.

We believe that in the end, every bit of creation shall be caught up and made new.

The Facts of Life

When you live in the north, as I do, *thawing* can take your breath away. We have made it through months of bitterly cold dark days and nights. We speak of “surviving” winter without exaggeration: even now, the shelter, food, heat, and immune system required to endure these months cannot be taken for granted; not everyone makes it through. Death comes in winter. We see it all around.

But then, almost imperceptibly, springtime invites us to come alive. Green grass reaches up from black soil, birds sit determinedly on nests, the first brave daffodils burst forth, and if you look closely enough, you can see tiny buds on the trees. Kids strip down to T-shirts and shorts and start running—I’ve been known to join them myself. It’s as though our own tenacious desire to *live again* flings open the season, as though in our spirits, we’re all cooped-up children along with the birds and buds. We will find redemption here if it kills us. We scramble to get out of the house and let our spirits soar in the almost-warmth like a newly born colt stretching long legs for the first time. Nature faithfully continues the gorgeous, spellbinding drama of life and death it

has cycled through for unfathomable ages—and we humans are every bit included.

As the northern ground comes alive from months of frozen death, my family and I dig up the soil. We plant tiny, microscopic seeds and tentative, fragile seedlings. Buried in the elements, they begin to open, to take root, to come alive. Soil is the mother of all life.

But soil itself is death.

The rich black layers of compost that we spread over the garden each spring are the grass cuttings, table scraps, and rotten tomatoes of last year. Collected over months, foul and decayed, this life-giving substance embodies life turned to death—ready now to receive and give, ready to become the womb of new life.

On this Earth, there are no exceptions. We were formed from the dust, and to dust we will return—as Ecclesiastes reminds us.⁸ We are fashioned and every day sustained from life that has died and only through death was transformed to become the womb of another living being. Eventually we, too, will be put in the ground to nourish and nurture new life.

I'll be the first to admit: It is hard to accept these terms. When it comes to life, I am greedy, insatiable. I want the life side of the coin without the death side. I want to dance without paying the piper. I know I'm not alone in this. We push against the reality of death, hardly believing that our allotted turn will come swiftly and surely to an end, that everyone we love is like the grass of the fields.⁹

And yet, death *itself* is not the enemy.

From my vantage point—where my loved ones and I form the center of the universe—death certainly appears dressed to kill, the limiting factor in my greed for life. But when I step outside my own desires, I see something much bigger and more beautiful at play, a drama of creation and redemption as unfathomably vast and long-standing as the universe. A dance set in motion by God himself.

Death and life, together as one, form the great paradox. They introduce themselves as opposites yet come to us always intermingled. Neither can exist alone. Within this paradox, we live out every day given us. The irony is that, if we could in our greed destroy death, we would not open the doors to everlasting life, but rather to the *cessation* of life. One cannot exist without the other.

And yet . . .

Christians believe that two thousand years ago, the Creator entered this world as *part of creation*. He was born and lived as any human does. And then, in Jesus, God walked all the way up to death and surrendered, allowing himself to be consumed.

Consumed, but not contained.

The boundaries could not confine him, the center could not hold. Death began to explode, unravel, become undone. By dying, our Creator destroyed the reality of death.

Jesus became the firstfruits of hope, of a new harvest, a harbinger of a new world—one that is not born and fed from decay. A life that does *not* end in death. An eternal thaw.

N. T. Wright says, “This is part of the point of Easter that

is very hard for us to think about: Easter commands us to think about a non-corruptible physicality, about a physical world that isn't subject to decay and death anymore."¹⁰

I read Wright's words on Easter Day to my eleven-year-old son, and he pondered them. "A garden that can grow forever, without compost? Without soil?" he asked, incredulously.

Yes. This is the incredible, astonishing hope of the Resurrection: a life without death. A garden without soil.

Can it be? This sort of earth is literally impossible, unbelievable.

And yet, as a Christian, I choose to step into this hope, into this lengthening toward shalom. I choose to believe that the Creator *can and will* release an encore that retains the beauty without the pain. I choose to stand inside the Kingdom of God and the hope of resurrection. A world where strength exists without injustice, where delight exists without poverty, where love exists without hate, and where life exists without death.

We use this word *hope* so poorly. We say, "I hope we get pizza for dinner," but this is desire, a counterfeit. *Hope* fortifies desire with trust, with faith, with desperateness and risk. Hope grows deeply rooted, with much to lose and much to gain, unafraid to look loss, disappointment, and despair in the face while still proclaiming its courageous message: The most powerful forces in the universe may yet be those of life and love.

And so, we begin. The Gardener is at work, and we are a people of eschatology, doggedly joining our Creator, kneeling in the dirt and the rubble, sorting through the broken

things with an eye for redemption. We are looking for him everywhere, dusting for his fingerprints. We are building a world brand-new on the debris of the world destroyed . . . again, and again, and again.

With our arms covered in compost, gently packing seeds into the womb of death, my family and I step into the perilous wonder of spring: the hope of a world made new.

CULTIVATING HOPE

No matter how dark and cold your life may be today, new life is beginning somewhere. Remember that hope begins before we perceive it, lying almost dormant in a season of near death. Where do you see signs of thawing? Where is hope starting to break through? What is coming to life in your home, family, community? In your heart, your mind, your spirit?

- **Walk outside and take inventory.** Whatever the season or weather in your portion of the earth, allow yourself a moment to take it in, to soak up the newness and miracle of future hope. Take a deep breath, then another. Remind yourself to *notice* this work of God in creation when you step outside, rather than just hurrying past.
- **Look inside and reflect.** God is at work, right now. What new life is God calling forth in you?
- **Develop a habit of recording signs of life.** When you peer into the darkness of your life and find a sliver of God's light, leave

ALL SHALL BE WELL

reminders for yourself (perhaps a calendar notification or a note on the mirror). Collect these and look back on them when times get hard, and remember hope dawning in the darkness, God's shalom breaking through.