

# Hope for the Future

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# Hope for the Future

*Answering God's Call to Justice for Our Children*

Shannon Daley-Harris

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*For Micah and Sophie  
and for all children—beloved by God, entrusted to our care*

Thus says the LORD:

A voice is heard in Ramah,  
lamentation and bitter weeping.

Rachel is weeping for her children;  
she refuses to be comforted for her children,  
because they are no more.

Thus says the LORD:

Keep your voice from weeping  
and your eyes from tears;  
for there is a reward for your work,

says the LORD;  
they shall come back from the land of the enemy;  
there is hope for your future,

says the LORD;  
your children shall come back to their own country.

(Jer. 31:15–17)

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## Foreword

I am a child of the church. From my earliest days, there was never a separation between the church and the calling to care for and seek justice for children. My daddy was a Baptist preacher (as was his father and, later, my brother Harry). My mother welcomed countless children into our home, providing whatever was needed whether it was a pair of shoes or a safe place to stay. Together, my parents and the other adults in the church preached and lived a message that each of us was a beloved and precious child of God—bulwark against the racism of our segregated Southern town. There was no division between what was preached on Sunday and proclaimed during the week, between the worship on Sunday and the weekday work to care for and speak up for those who were poor, elderly, young, or vulnerable.

Of the countless gifts my parents gave me, the enduring sense of God's call to child advocacy has shaped my life and every breath. We cannot claim to be followers of Jesus, the most famous poor child in history, if we do not see Christ in the face of every poor child today and respond with faithful acts of compassion and justice.

When we look at any of the great social movements for systemic justice in our nation—from the abolition of slavery to the end of child labor to civil rights—the faith community was at the forefront (although in each instance there was also a segment of

the religious community that worked against those just causes). We will not create the change we need to make America just for children without the leadership and involvement of the faith community. And so children—especially the poorest and most vulnerable—need the work and witness of the faith community. At the same time, I believe that without seeking justice for children, the faith community can't fulfill its calling and charge from Jesus who said, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me," and the prophets who proclaimed that what God requires of us is to do justice and love kindness and walk humbly with God. And so the faith community needs the work and witness of child advocacy for its own sake, to live most fully its faith.

From its inception, the Children's Defense Fund has worked with people like you who want to connect their faith with their concern for children and respond to God's call to love, protect, and seek justice for children. For more than a quarter century, Shannon Daley-Harris has guided CDF's partnership with the faith community as we have engaged faithful individuals, places of worship, denominations, and organizations across the religious spectrum to raise a strong and effective voice for the children of our nation. Shannon launched the National Observance of Children's Sabbath in 1992 to coalesce the diverse voices of religious organizations and denominations into a united call for justice on behalf of children—a call that is raised each October and reverberates through ongoing efforts throughout the year.

In 1995, Shannon launched CDF's Samuel DeWitt Proctor Institute for Child Advocacy Ministry held at CDF Haley Farm each July. There, hundreds of clergy, Christian educators, young adults, child advocates, and those serving children directly gather for inspiring preaching, insightful teaching, empowering workshops, and sustaining connections. This intergenerational, interracial, ecumenical gathering is a profound experience of Beloved Community as we seek the vision, information, strategies, and sustenance to continue building a mighty movement for justice for children.

Shannon began an annual tradition of a January women's spiritual retreat in 1997. Many of the meditations in this collection

that you are about to read were first preached at one of those annual gatherings of a few dozen women leaders. I hope that you will be inspired and sustained by them as we were and that you will hear afresh God's call to put your faith into action, God's promise of strength to meet the challenges, and God's promise of presence to sustain you.

We have so much work to do to make our world safe for children. We don't have a minute to wait or a child to waste. CDF's logo is a child's drawing of the fisherman's prayer, "Dear Lord, be good to me. The sea is so wide, and my boat is so small." Our children are overwhelmed by an ocean of troubles—rising poverty, gun violence, abuse and neglect, and so much more that threatens to drown them. The chapel at CDF Haley Farm—where so many of these meditations were first preached—is shaped like an ark. Our calling is to provide a safe ark of protection for our children and to work against the floodwaters of poverty and other harm. We are God's hands and feet and voices here on earth, and we need to answer that child's prayer by doing all we can to rescue our children—*God's* beloved children. May you find hope, courage, and persistence to answer that call.

In hope and faith—

Marian Wright Edelman  
Epiphany 2016

## Preface

Most of us, whether in the pew or in the pulpit, have heard young ones sing, “Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the world.” We’ve read well-worn pages of Scripture that urge us to “suffer the little ones” and remind us what God requires of us: to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with God. We have, for the most part, seen the children of our congregations loved, nurtured, blessed.

Yet many of us, in our lives beyond the church, are aware of children who are not welcomed, who are not loved and protected, who don’t experience kindness and justice. Whether they are the children whose lives we touch through our professional or volunteer work, the children for whom we advocate, or the children that we hear about in the news, we recognize that many children *don’t* experience the love and justice God intends for each and every one. And so we yearn for more inspiration, more guidance, more sustenance from our faith so that we can begin to close this gap between the world God intends and the one we know, between our Sunday worship and our weekday work for children who suffer injustice.

What is God’s word to us in the tension between the vision and the reality? What resources can we draw on in Scripture, story, and statistic? What lessons can we learn from biblical times, historic movements for justice, and our own day? Theologian Karl

Barth is said to have instructed us to read with the Bible in one hand and newspaper in the other. The meditations in this book invite you to go further—as you read, hold not only the Bible and newspaper but also children on your lap, figuratively, as well as the reports that document the crises confronting our nation’s children, history books chronicling earlier movements for justice, and photographs of unsung heroes who made a difference.

The four meditations in part 1, “Called,” invite us to listen for how God is calling us to love and seek justice for children. Can we hear the charge to move from weeping to work to restore our children to community? What “new song” are we called to sing that will build a movement for change? How will we respond to the call to remove stumbling blocks of poverty, violence, and other forms of injustice and replace them with a cornerstone for which justice is the measure? Do we believe that the few of us can rout mighty forces of oppression? How can we organize to answer that call and then call others to join us?

The four meditations in part 2, “Challenged,” offer perspectives on facing the difficulties in this calling of faithful child advocacy. Will we answer God’s call to the next challenging mission even if it seems too huge, hostile, hopeless, or hard? Can we envision a day when opponents work together, when you can lose and still win? How do we decide when to compromise and when to stand firm for the justice our children deserve? Will we abandon our responsibilities in the face of chaos and challenge, or will we live into the vision of a community that protects its children? What does it look like when we hold before us a clear vision of what God intends—communities working together for the sake of every child, not just “heir own”?

Draw on the final four meditations in part 3, “Sustained,” to keep yourself going as you love, protect, and seek justice for children. We need persistence to keep at this calling of child advocacy. Draw inspiration from parables of persistence in Scripture, history, and our own day. We cannot shrink back; hear words of comfort and courage to press ahead and vigilantly ensure that our children are safe from harm. Knowing that every single child matters to God can keep us going even when we are discouraged;

the examples of those who embody the tenacious love of the Good Shepherd can inspire us not to give up and to leave no child behind. Finally, we are sent to pursue justice with urgency and persistence, recalling that “Godspeed” is a prayer that God will speed us on our way for a successful journey until we—and all children—are safely home.

Each of these meditations originated as a sermon prepared for and preached to a particular community. One was preached from the pulpit to a large, multiethnic urban congregation on the National Observance of Children’s Sabbath weekend; another was delivered in a small seminary chapel for Children’s Sabbath. Many were preached at the annual women’s spiritual retreat at CDF Haley Farm, offered while seated in a circle alongside a few dozen women leaders, many of whom came up through the civil rights movement and all of whom have devoted their lives to justice and working for children. In every instance, these meditations were preached to those who are not only “hearers of the word” but also “doers of the word.” Those who first heard these words didn’t need to be convinced to care about children facing an ocean of troubles—they already did. No, what those hearers and long-time doers yearned for was fresh inspiration, another perspective on facing challenges, a deeper drink of the sustenance that faith can provide for this journey toward justice.

I believe the same is true for you. It is why you hold this book in your hands: you already care deeply about the problems so many children face; you may already have worked long and faithfully to improve the lives of children; and you long for a fresh word from God to help you make a difference. My hope and prayer is that for you, too, these meditations will be inspiration, affirmation, and sustenance as you seek to continue to be a doer of God’s word and to move from weeping to the work that will help usher in the return of all our children to safety.

Questions for Faithful Response are offered after each meditation. Perhaps you will use them as you prepare for your own preaching. Or they may deepen your devotional time. You can use them in a Bible study discussion or as a prompt for conversation in a social action committee meeting or gathering of parents



Even in the midst of the enormous problems our children face—poverty, gun violence, abuse, neglect, lack of health care, and more—I do believe there is hope for our future, that we can bring all children to an experience of safety, love, and justice. It will take more than weeping, God reminds us, it will take work—and to keep at that work we need to stay close to God. May these meditations offer you anew the inspiration of God’s calling, God’s guidance for the challenges you encounter, and sustenance to continue to pursue justice with urgency, persistence, and faith.

# Acknowledgments

I am profoundly grateful to Marian Wright Edelman, CDF's founder and president, who has inspired me with her vision, commitment, and life of putting faith into action for children. It is a blessing to serve this cause with her leadership and extraordinary example. CDF is made up of incredibly dedicated staff members past and present; their teamwork to build the movement for children makes it impossible to single out just a few, but I trust they know that I count myself incredibly lucky to be partners with them in this work.

My deep thanks also to the extraordinary faculty-in-residence of CDF's Samuel DeWitt Proctor Institute for Child Advocacy Ministry for their generosity, prophetic and pastoral ministry, and the gift of serving alongside and learning from them: the late Dr. Fred Craddock; Rev. Will Gipson; Dr. Don Lewis; Dr. Otis Moss, Jr.; Dr. Otis Moss III; the late Dr. Samuel DeWitt Proctor; Dr. Frederick J. Streets; Dr. Eli Wilson; and Dr. Janet Wolf. The longest serving faculty-in-residence at Proctor, Dr. Eileen W. Lindner, has been a mentor and friend in ministry from my earliest days at CDF, and I learned first from her the power of story in preaching; I owe her a special debt of thanks.

I've been blessed to worship in the black-church tradition over the past twenty-six years, and one of the many gifts has been experiencing preaching as a collaboration between preacher and

congregation, with the congregation's engagement and response an inextricable part of the sermon. These meditations wouldn't exist without the generous response, engagement, and witness of the community of (mostly) women for whom and with whom they came to be, and so to them I owe deep gratitude.

I am grateful to Dr. Jacq Lapsley, associate professor of Old Testament at Princeton Theological Seminary, for her generous and knowledgeable feedback on this manuscript. Any errors that remain are of course mine. Thanks also to Carol Wehrheim for her thoughtful review of the Questions for Faithful Response.

Working with the tremendous Westminster John Knox team has been wonderful, and this book has benefitted greatly from the editorial insights of Jessica Miller Kelley and David Dobson, Frances Purifoy's careful copyediting, and Kerri Daly's work to spread the word and get it into many hands.

My parents, the Revs. Patti and Eliot Daley, are both Presbyterian clergy and child advocates in their own ways. I am grateful for their life-long example of ministering—with and without the collar—to improve the lives of children and for their love of the Word and words that have shaped my life and are reflected in this book. I am blessed to be their child.

My husband, Sam, has been a sounding board and champion as I wrote this book and throughout our two decades of marriage. I am profoundly grateful for the bedrock of his love and support.

Micah and Sophie are the greatest blessing and joy of my life. They remind me every day of the preciousness of every child's life and fuel my determination to work so that *every* child has the love, protection, and opportunities to live in the fullness of life that God intends.

Part I

Called

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*Chapter One*

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## From Weeping to Work

### Jeremiah 31

Thus says the LORD:

A voice is heard in Ramah,

lamentation and bitter weeping.

Rachel is weeping for her children;

she refuses to be comforted for her children,

because they are no more.

Thus says the LORD:

Keep your voice from weeping

and your eyes from tears;

for there is a reward for your work,

says the LORD:

they shall come back from the land of the enemy;

there is hope for your future,

says the LORD:

your children shall come back to their own country.

(Jer. 31:15–17)

It was a beautiful October morning, and I stood in line at the neighborhood Starbucks, thinking about my half-caf, iced, venti, skim, two-pump, no-whip mocha. The line was long and moved slowly as the baristas made other people's equally high-maintenance

orders, so I picked up a copy of the *New York Times* and began to read. I read, that is, until the print began to swim in front of my tear-filled eyes. This is as far as I got:

Kete Krachi, Ghana—Just before 5 a.m., with the sky still dark over Lake Volta, Mark Kwadwo was roused from his spot on the damp dirt floor. It was time for work.

Shivering in the predawn chill, he helped paddle a canoe a mile out from shore. For five more hours, as his co-workers yanked up a fishing net, Mark bailed water to keep the canoe from swamping.

He had last eaten the day before. His broken wooden paddle was so heavy he could barely lift it. But he raptly followed each command from Kwadwo Takyi, the powerfully built 31-year-old in the back of the canoe who freely deals out beatings.

Mark Kwadwo is 6 years old. About 30 pounds, dressed in a pair of blue and red underpants and a Little Mermaid T-shirt, he looks more like an oversized toddler than a boat hand.

He is too young to understand why he has ended up in this fishing village, a two-day trek from his home.

But the three older boys who work with him know why. Like Mark, they are indentured servants, leased by their impoverished parents to Takyi for as little as \$20 a year.<sup>1</sup>

### Weeping

I stood there in line at the Starbucks weeping, overcome by such a painful sense of despair and helplessness at changing the child's circumstances, at bringing him home to his family, that I could read no more.

I wasn't the only one who wept over Mark Kwadwo. The *New York Times* got many letters in response to the article, including this one from a teacher. She wrote, in part,

There are moments when there is value in simply feeling the deep pain of another's situation. But in an age when most of us . . . already feel powerless about what happens in the world, a little bit of guidance toward action—anything to hang on to—would have been both kind and potentially helpful for all.<sup>2</sup>

Have you ever felt that way? That you cannot bear to let yourself feel another's pain when you feel helpless to ease it?

It is not just the suffering of a six-year-old half a world away that is cause for weeping and lament today. Here, even here in our nation, more than fifteen million children live in poverty and suffer undeserved deprivation and limitations and obstacles.<sup>3</sup>

Here, even here, more than four and a half million children don't have health coverage and may not be able to see a doctor when needed.<sup>4</sup>

Here, even here, children—especially black and Latino boys—are being pushed along a cradle-to-prison pipeline so that a black boy still in elementary school today faces a one-in-three risk of incarceration in his lifetime.<sup>5</sup>

Here, yes, even here, there are children facing enormous odds against them—poverty and violence and lost childhood—with only their faith and their families to cling to. Children like eight-year-old Gail, who was asked to write an essay about her Chicago neighborhood for a contest sponsored by a bank. The bank had expected to receive essays telling of friendly postmen and games of hopscotch; instead they received essays like this one from Gail:

In my neighborhood there is a lot of shooting and three people got shot. On the next day when I was going to school I saw a little stream of blood on the ground. One day after school me and my mother had to dodge bullets—I was not scared. There is a church and a school that I go to in my neighborhood. There are a lot of stores in my neighborhood also. There are robbers that live in my building, they broke into our house twice. There are rowhouses in

my neighborhood and a man got shot and he was dead. By King High School Susan Harris got shot and she died. It was in the newspaper. When me and my mother was going to church we could see the fire from the guns being shot in 4414 building. I was not scared. In my neighborhood there are too many fights. I have never been in a fight before. There are many trees in my neighborhood. God is going to come back one day and judge the whole world. Not just my neighborhood. I know these are really, really bad things, but I have some good things in my neighborhood. Like sometimes my neighborhood is peaceful and quiet and there is no shooting. When me and my mother and some of my friends go to the lake we have a lot of fun. Sometimes the children in my building go to Sunday School with me and my mother. Also the building I live in is so tall I can see downtown and the lake. It looks so pretty. I believe in God and I know one day we will be in a gooder place than we are now.<sup>6</sup>

Sometimes the stories are so sad and the pain is so great that we turn away. Have you ever felt that way? Sometimes the numbers are simply numbing, and we can't even cry. Have you ever felt that way? And then sometimes we let ourselves feel that pain and let our hearts weep. Have you ever felt that way? God has and God knows; the God who became incarnate and suffered the depths of human pain hears us and weeps with us and with our children.

### **From Weeping to Work**

Yet that God of compassion is also a God of action and a God of justice, and so it is not enough merely to sit dissolved in compassionate tears. "Keep your voice from weeping and your eyes from tears," says our God. "There is a reward for your work" (Jer. 31:16).

While God hears our grief and pain at circumstances of injustice that demand change, God's response is to call on God's people to create the change that is needed. It is not enough to cry out

and be heard. Rachel is told that the change will come as a reward for her *work*.

For her work? For our work? Yes, we are called to work: the real work of restoring justice, returning to covenant community that protects the children, those who are poor, and the strangers, loving our God with all our heart and mind and strength and our neighbors as ourselves—our neighbors like Mark in Ghana, our neighbors like Gail in Chicago, our neighbors even in our own communities.

*The Women's Bible Commentary* reflects on the “return” that God promises as a reward for our work:

The transformed society imagined in these poems provides a social vision that includes everyone not only in worship but also at the banquet of material life. . . . The society will satisfy the basic human needs of all, and it will be characterized by justice, harmony, and peace. . . . The comforting of Rachel, mother of Israel, symbolizes that new society.<sup>7</sup>

The hopeful future that is promised, for which we must work, is one in which justice is restored, compassion is practiced, and the community has rededicated itself to living in right relationship with God and with one another.

### **There is Hope for Your Future; Your Children Shall Come Back**

We are summoned out of grief to this work with a promise to sustain us in that difficult calling. The promise isn't vague or otherworldly—it's not the “gooder place” that Gail believes is her only hope. No, God's promise is embodied in the very real well-being and restoration of our children. The promise to Rachel is that the children will come back to their own country; *that* is the “hope for your future.”

*There is hope for your future, says our God.* True, more than fifteen million children in our rich nation are living in poverty, but we know what to do to bring a better tomorrow. Children can't

move out of poverty on their own, but there are effective ways that we as a nation can lift children and their families out of poverty or at least protect them from poverty's worst effects. We know what works. Programs that reduce poverty by providing cash or near-cash assistance—such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, commonly known as food stamps), the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Program (commonly called welfare), and the Earned Income Tax Credit—can ease the worst effects of poverty for millions of children. Government safety-net programs lifted nine million children from poverty in 2012. Child poverty would have been 57 percent higher without government tax credits and food, housing, and energy benefits, and extreme poverty would have been 240 percent higher.<sup>8</sup> Still, *no* child deserves to live in poverty, so there is more work to be done so that every family has the job training, living wage, health care, child care, and other supports they need to keep children out of poverty and ready to thrive.

*There is hope for your future, says our God.* Four and a half million children may lack health coverage today, but we have the real opportunity to ensure that every child in our nation has health coverage if we join our voices to demand justice through affordable, available coverage and reach out to ensure that families get enrolled in the coverage that is available. There's no mystery: children need regular health care for their developing minds and bodies. They need timely treatment for illness and injury. It will save our nation money in the long run, but more importantly it will save lives and is the right thing to do. Imagine the better tomorrow when every child has the benefit of health coverage and a shot at good health.

*There is hope for your future, says our God.* It is true that a black boy born in 2001 faces a one-in-three risk of imprisonment in his lifetime, but we can *change* the odds. We can work to provide a better tomorrow for boys of color and for us all. What is currently painting such a grim picture for young boys of color, pushing them along the pipeline to prison? Poverty, racism, lack of health and mental-health care, abuse and neglect, failing schools,

dangerous neighborhoods. But we know how to address and solve those problems; we know what works. CDF Freedom Schools® sites have welcomed children who might have traveled through the pipeline to prison, touching the lives of more than 137,000 pre-K-12 children since 1995, and more than sixteen thousand college students and recent graduates have been trained by CDF to deliver this empowering model with reading and other enrichment, parent involvement, and community-building skills and experiences.<sup>9</sup> Head Start programs have demonstrated that investing in early childhood development saves us financial and human costs, as Head Start graduates do better in school and are more likely to stay out of trouble. Innovative schools have shown how high expectations, excellent teaching, and comprehensive support can fill graduation stages instead of prison cells with black, Latino, poor, and at-risk students. Even something as simple as mentoring a young person as a Big Brother or Big Sister can transform his or her life . . . and ours, too.

*There is hope for your future, says our God. Your children shall return to their own country.* As for Mark Kwadwo, the six-year-old boat hand in Ghana—someone read about his story and didn't just weep but got to work. In Missouri, Pam and Randy Cope read the *New York Times* story about Mark and wanted to help. The parents of four had suffered a devastating loss when their fifteen-year-old son, Jantsen, died suddenly from an undetected heart defect in 1999. After weeping, they got to work. In Jantsen's memory, Pam and Randy launched Touch a Life Ministries, an organization helping children in dire situations in Cambodia, Vietnam, Nicaragua, and elsewhere. "Their grief—and hope—have led them on a journey to try to care for hurting children of the world," said Randy's brother, the Rev. Mike Cope.<sup>10</sup>

After learning of Mark Kwadwo's plight, Pam teamed up with a small nonprofit in Ghana, Pacodep, run by a Kete Krachi school teacher and a Dutch volunteer. Together, they rescued not only Mark but the other children indentured to the same master, "paying for new nets, boat repairs, and other needs in exchange for the children's freedom." The freed children, whose destitute

parents could not provide for them at home, now enjoy the security of shelter, meals, schooling, and recreation in a Christian-run orphanage.<sup>11</sup>

A staff member who works at the orphanage prays for the children still in bondage—and for their masters. “For slavery to end, the people who exploit children also must be changed, the missionary said. ‘There are many more children,’ he said, ‘and God is working through a lot of people to show us what to do next.’”<sup>12</sup>

The name of Mark’s new school? The Village of Hope. *There is hope for your future, says our God.* We are called by the God of hope to embody a village, nation, and world of hope. We are called to this ministry by God, who created every child in God’s own image. We are called to this ministry by Jesus, who told us that whenever we welcome one such child in his name we welcome him and not only him but the one who sent him. We are sustained in this ministry by the Holy Spirit, the Advocate, who calls us into community and sends us out to work for justice.

*There is hope for your future.* You, whose voice God has heard weeping, how will you make your voice heard as you call for justice and for change? You, whose eyes have been full of tears: what new opportunities for action do you see before you? You who have wept for the suffering of children: what is the work you are called to do? You who have lamented the children who are lost: what is the hope for their future that will sustain you?

A voice is heard in Ramah, in Washington, in your community: what will you proclaim?

### Questions for Faithful Response

1. Who are the children for whom you weep?
2. When have you felt such sadness, pain, or numbness at the suffering of children that you have turned away? When have you let yourself feel that pain at children’s suffering? What has made the difference between the two experiences?
3. God’s promise is embodied in the very real well-being and restoration of our children. The promise to Rachel is that

the children will come back to their own country; *that* is the “hope for your future.” Close your eyes and envision what the promise of children restored to their community would look like for us in our day. What does “hope for your future” look like to you?

4. Rachel is told that change will come as a reward for her *work*. “There are many more children,” the Village of Hope worker said, “and God is working through a lot of people to show us what to do next.” What work do you feel that you are being led to do next? How will you make your voice heard as you call for justice and for change? What new opportunities for action do you see before you?
5. ***For parents and other caregivers:*** Often our desire is to shield our children from news stories or information that would make them sad or anxious, especially when it concerns other children. Children have a natural well-spring of empathy. How have or how could you connect your child’s empathy with real problems facing other children in a way that is empowering, hopeful, and helpful?

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