

Dec. 7, 2025, A Sermon by Rev. Janet Shortall titled “The Work of Hope”

The Feminist theologian Dorothee Sölle once said that hope is “a refusal to accept the world as it is.” Not a naïve wish, but a sacred defiance. Hope says no to cruelty and indifference, and yes to the slow, holy work of change. It is the power that joins imagination to action — faith to the future.

Opening Words

Welcome, friends.

In a world that asks so much of us, we gather to remember another way. We come to practice hope—not as wishful thinking, but as a steady discipline of the heart. Here, we make room for breath, for honesty, and for courage.

May our time together—sharing music, silence, and friendship—center our hearts and open us to hope’s quiet beginnings.

Please rise in body or spirit and join us in our opening hymn. Young people who would like to participate may come forward to take a basket for our Side With Love collection.

Meditation: “Tending the Flame”

Let us take a breath.

Hope is not a mood we wait for;

it is a choice we make,

a small, steady flame we tend with our hands and our courage.

Hope is the quiet refusal

to accept cruelty as normal

or indifference as inevitable.

It is the voice within that whispers,

Begin where you are.

Do what you can.

The future is shaped by moments like this.

As we breathe,

may we feel ourselves part of a long human story—

a story of compassion, defiance, imagination.

May this breath be our promise

to keep tending the flame of hope,

and to live toward the world that could be.

Reading: from “The Courage to Act” by Howard Zinn

“To be hopeful in bad times is not just foolishly romantic.

It is based on the fact that human history is a history

not only of cruelty, but also of compassion, sacrifice, courage, kindness.”

“If we see only the worst, it destroys our capacity to do something.

If we remember those times and places where people have behaved magnificently, this gives us the energy to act.”

“The future is an infinite succession of presents,

and to live now as we think human beings should live—

in defiance of all that is bad around us—

is itself a marvelous victory.”

“Small acts, when multiplied by millions of people,
can transform the world.”

The Work of Hope

Last time I spoke with you, I invited us to explore blessing—that quiet grace that steadies us in pain and keeps the spirit within us tender and awake.

Today I want to turn to its close companion: hope—the power that orients us toward the future and calls us to imagine and build what love still makes possible.

Blessing holds us.---Hope moves us.

Blessings assure us we belong.

Hope urges us to act as if renewal is still possible even when the world gives us reason to doubt.

And these days do give us reason to doubt. Our courage is tested; our imagination can feel strained. Yet right where discouragement threatens to take hold, hope refuses to surrender.

It becomes less a feeling and more a discipline—a way of remaining upright in a world that keeps trying to bend us low.

If blessing roots us in gratitude, hope draws us into creativity:
the courage to shape something new without any guarantee of outcome.

Some of you may have seen the recent interview with Jane Goodall—the one she requested be released only after her death. Long before that, she had already become an elder in the art of refusing despair. When asked whether she believed in God, she answered simply: “I believe in a deep spiritual presence because I have experienced it.”

For Goodall, “Begin where you are” wasn’t a slogan. It was a practice—simple and demanding: go to the forest.

Sit. Watch. Listen.

Let knowledge be earned through patience,
and let reverence arrive through relationship.

And so I want to ask you: Where is your forest these days—your place, your practice, your small sanctuary—where you go to remember what’s real, and to let your nervous system unclench?

That unclenching matters. Not because it solves everything, but because it makes us capable of choosing again. Hope, after all, is not just a feeling we stumble into—it’s a discipline we return to, one breath and one brave choice at a time.

Jane spoke not in the language of doctrine, but of encounter—the rustle of leaves,

the gaze of a chimpanzee,

the quiet intelligence threaded through the living earth.

And from that way of seeing, hope became a practice of fidelity:

to what is real,

to what is vulnerable,

to what is still possible.

Faith, in that sense, was not a certainty to be proven, but a relationship to be tended—a mystical hope grounded not in perfection, but in the resilience of life itself.

Because Jane had felt that presence, she said she could not give in to despair. She kept showing up for the world, trusting that the spirit that stirred in her stirs also in others—and in the earth itself.

This, I believe, is the work of hope: to sense ourselves as part of something enduring and alive. Hope, like Goodall's faith, is not a debate about truth, but a commitment to keep caring—because we belong to the life that unfolds through us. But belonging is not the same as complacency. In fact, real belonging can sharpen our moral clarity. When we learn to love what is living, we become less willing to accept what diminishes life. History shows how easily “the way things are” can be baptized as inevitable—or even holy. That is why, alongside the language of encounter, we also need the language of resistance.

The theologian Dorothee Sölle once said that hope is a refusal to accept the world as it is. She grew up in Germany during and after the Nazi era and witnessed the moral collapse of churches that blessed—or ignored—unchecked cruelty. The horrors of that time shook her faith deeply and forced her to reconsider power, evil, and what it means to speak of the sacred at all. Sölle rejected the idea of a distant, all-controlling deity watching suffering from afar. She re-imagined the sacred instead as vulnerable and relational—present where people rise together for life— what she called “love-in-process.”

Many in our Unitarian Universalist tradition can find resonance here across our varied beliefs. Whether we understand the sacred theistically, poetically, or in entirely human terms, we share Sölle's insistence that meaning, renewal, and responsibility are found not beyond the world, but within it/within ourselves

And yet, when we imagine that the world's healing depends solely on our individual endurance, a quieter despair can slip in. Our hearts grow tired under the weight of it. This is where Sölle's mystical imagination becomes helpful.

Mysticism, for her, was not supernatural intervention but widened perception— a reminder that life is still unfolding, that we are connected to something larger than our own strength or sorrow,

that every act of love participates in shaping a future we cannot yet see.

We might call this capacity imagination—not fantasy, but spiritual perception the ability to perceive more than the present moment's cruelty, and to trust that new possibilities emerge when people join their courage. Imagination broadens our moral bandwidth.

It reminds us that we draw on the resilience of community, the wisdom of ancestors, and the small solidarities that keep movements alive.

Seen this way, mysticism is not escape but deeper engagement—a refusal to let despair be the final word.

It is a quiet insistence that even in struggle, love—in us and among us—is still unfolding.

Ours is a faith that trusts the ongoing creativity of the universe, the unfinished nature of truth, and the resilience rising from relationship. Hope in this sense becomes sacred realism—

the conviction that renewal remains possible
because it is woven into the fabric of existence.
Hope begins as a holy “no”—
a refusal of cruelty, greed, and indifference.
But it must grow into a sacred “yes”:
a commitment to the slow, faithful work
of remaking the world in the image of love.
For Sölle, whose faith was shaken
by the persistence of evil,
hope was never prediction;
it was participation—
joining the world’s ongoing creation,
trusting that the divine continues to breathe
through our hands and even through our shaken hearts.
Blessing reminds us that life is holy.
Hope commits us to help it flourish.
Hope is the spiritual muscle
that keeps us leaning toward the light
even when shadows fall long.
It is how love endures—
through those who keep showing up,
one act of reverence, one act of courage at a time.
If hope begins as a refusal to accept the world as it is,
it becomes the daily practice
of building the world as it could be.
Hope asks more of us than feeling—
it asks participation.
It calls us to tend the fragile possibilities
still within reach.
But how do we sustain that hope when grief is heavy and compassion seems
outshouted by cruelty?
Hope grows where people keep showing up for one another—
where we share stories, sing through our sorrow,
lift the weary, and bear witness to goodness
even when it feels hidden.
Hope takes shape in community—
in the persistence of those who refuse to abandon justice,
in the tenderness that reaches out to help even when the heart is tired.
Like blessing, hope is renewed through practice—
small, steady disciplines that open us to possibility.
And we need all of them:
The discipline of attention—noticing beauty in an ordinary day.
The practice of gratitude—naming what remains good and trustworthy.
The courage of solidarity—standing with others in the work of repair.
These practices train the heart to resist despair.
They remind us that our small acts matter—
that together they form a constellation of light.
And when our own hope falters—as it will

the community holds it until we can take it up again.
This, too, is faith: trusting that when our light grows dim,
another will shine close enough to guide us.
In the end, hope is not something we feel—it is something we practice.
It is the long labor of love in uncertain times, sustained by grace and by one another.
It blesses the world and steadies our own hearts.
There will be days when hope feels far away—
when grief is deep and the future unclear.
On those days, remember: hope does not always begin as a feeling.
It begins as a choice—a small decision to turn again toward life,
to keep faith with what is still possible.
Hope does not deny suffering. It looks honestly at the truth of the world
and still refuses to give up on its redemption.
It is what allows us to stand in the rubble and plant a seed—to say, This, too, can grow.
Sölle taught that hope refuses to accept the world as it is.
But hope also trusts that we can help make it new—
that we are part of something larger than our endurance, a living stream of courage
flowing through every generation.
And so when despair whispers that nothing can change,
may we listen instead for the deeper voice—
the one that has carried creation forward
Throughout time.
We are not alone in this work.
We are accompanied by those who came before us,
by those who labor beside us,
and by the unseen life of the earth itself.
Hope is not ours to manufacture;
it is ours to join.
And when we join it—
when we keep faith with the sacred unfolding of life—
we discover again what Jane Goodall
and the mystics have always known:
that a deep spiritual presence still moves through this world,
renewing, connecting, calling us to serve.

Benediction

Friends, may we be people of such hope—
hope that refuses despair,
hope that labors for what love demands,
hope that rises again and again
from the heart of life itself.
And as we go,
may we be carried—
not by certainty, but by faithfulness;
not by ease, but by courage;
not by outcomes, but by the living promise
that the world is still being made whole.
Amen.