Transcript

Climate Changed BTS Episode 2: Hope? It's Complicated

Jessica David: What does it mean to be hopeful in this world right now? How do we change hearts and behaviors, starting with mine? And how do I talk about climate catastrophe at my next social gathering without scaring people away? I'm Jessica David, a Harvard Divinity School student. I'm an intern at The BTS Center, which basically means I ask a lot of questions. I'm really curious about The BTS Center's mission to cultivate spiritual leadership for a climate changed world because it seems so worthy and necessary. So I asked a huge question. Can I take over the podcast for a few months to learn more about what you do here? And, well, here we are.

Welcome to the Climate Change Podcast Behind the Scenes edition with me, Jessica David. Listeners, I have a confession. I have been looking forward to diving into today's topic for a long time. As a self-proclaimed possibility oriented pessimist, hope is, well, complicated to me, which is why I'm so excited to be here today with two members of The BTS Center's team.

Ben Yosua-Davis: Hi, everyone. I'm Ben Yosua Davis, The BTS Center's Director of Applied Research and also the regular co-host of this podcast. I'm also an Islander, a nascent homesteader, and a father of three young children.

Madeline Bugeau-Heartt: And I'm Madeline Bugeau-Heartt. I'm the Program Associate at The BTS Center. And beyond these walls, I'm also a theater maker as well as a community organizer.

Jessica David: Welcome, Madeline and Ben. I'm so happy to be here with you today.

Ben Yosua-Davis: Yeah, it's great to be here with you, Jessica.

Jessica David: So we're talking about a topic that feels particularly perilous when it comes to a spiritual approach to climate change, and that is hope. So generally speaking, before we get into how this relates to The BTS Center's work, Ben and Madeline, do you consider yourself hopeful people?

Madeline Bugeau-Heartt: Yes, but I'm not sure in the way that everyone thinks or what you'd necessarily expect. And I'm sure we'll get into that. I'm not hopeful, for example, that life as we know it is going to continue. And I also don't believe that hope is an antidote to despair as it's so often presented. But I am hopeful that the mystery of the day and the spontaneous beauty of the moment and the love between people can always be found.

Ben Yosua-Davis: So, Madeline, I love your response. Yes, yes and yes. And yeah, I find myself in a very similar place. If by hope you mean am I hopeful that there is a technological or political solution that will fix climate change, which is so often the language that I encounter in these spaces, the answer is no. I am not hopeful at all. But if you talk about, do I believe that life, regardless of what happens, can be full of meaning and beauty and joy, and that there are ways actually to make that the guiding framework of my life, the answer is yes, absolutely. I'm very hopeful. And, when people ask me this question, as they have in other settings, I often find I have to answer just like this. Where I have to go, yes. And then I have to define what hope means to me, because our cultural definitions of hope are often very unclear and often extremely contested.

Jessica David: Okay, so it's complicated.

Madeline Bugeau-Heartt: Yes.

Jessica David: You are not decomplicating it for me. Not that I expected you to. So let's talk about climate change. When it comes to climate change, do you have hope? Because I've got to say, when I read the data, the science, the news, I do not feel hopeful at all. Should I be?

Madeline Bugeau-Heartt: I really like what Ben said about reorienting hope in a way that isn't like, solar panels are going to save us. And in almost every single conversation about climate that I have beyond the walls of The BTS Center, the pattern goes as such. Like, doom, clothes, gloom. It's not good. But, like, we're hopeful. That honestly, always a conversation ender. And so in a climate change capacity, where I find hope is — and this is kind of a far reach, but maybe we can back ourselves up from this de-centering. Is in de centering humanity. What? Whoa. I know I said it. It's so taboo. But Ben pointed to this. I'm going there. I'm going there. Coming in hot. Ben said this life will continue. That hope of life continuing. And so when I decenter this narrative of, like, humans must prevail, I get a lot more hopeful that something beyond humanity and hopefully including humanity, I love our species, is emerging and wanting to be born.

Ben Yosua-Davis: So, Madeline, this reminds me of a conversation that the two of us had on my porch on the island. I don't know if you remember this. You came out a couple summers ago and had lunch with my family, and then we sat and we're like, okay, let's talk about the scary stuff. Uh, what do we think about hope and climate and collapse and all these things. One of the things that came for me out of the conversation is this idea, this narrative that you were just talking about that, you know, things are really bad. But there's like, this new solar panel that's going to come out and save us all, there's always another rabbit to be pulled out of the hat metaphor that I find often used in modern climate discourse. There are some things that are

good about this because, like, solar panels are important. In about six weeks, we're getting solar panels on our house because we are concerned about how we can show up to this present moment. But one thing that this mindset can't do is it can't face problems that can't be solved. So when we face something like climate, which is a problem that is geologic in scale, so big it almost defies comprehension if we can't hope in solar panels, it often seems like the other option is to go towards nihilism and despair. That is not awesome. That is not helpful for anyone. When I come back to hope, I think about not what do I think the outcome is going to be, because that's connecting my identity to power, something that white folk like myself like to do a lot. Like, my hope is connected with my agency to change the world. And rather I try to connect it back to meaning. To say, even if all this stuff goes, quote, badly, can I still understand that my life has meaning? That's something that is not just an intellectual conviction, but for me at least, it's a practice that I try to cultivate on a daily basis.

Madeline Bugeau-Heartt: I would love to jump in. Dear listener, you're feeling how I felt a couple years ago when I visited Ben on the island. As he was alluding to, I thought I was like, visiting the collapse Wizard. I was like, I have some questions for thee. And yes, did come away feeling both overwhelmed, but also really validated that we were actually having the conversation that was steeped and based in truth and meaning. So often hope is placed temporarily in the future, where I do want to get into longing, because I think that's an important ingredient for me in this soup of hope. Temporally. Hope lives in the present for me as well. And I had a dear professor at the Harvard Divinity School, where Jessica is now, who told this story of being a hospital chaplain and watching patient after patient throughout his term there get diagnosed with terminal illnesses. And he said, what was so interesting about it for me, and he was talking specifically about hope, was that despite the outcome being the outcome, the unavoidable outcome of a terminal illness, it's not like people stopped choosing the next right thing, the next act of meaning. And that's just what I hear Ben saying too. And I couldn't agree more of, like, it's a Present moment. It's a practice. It's a choosing the next right thing in order to bring more abundant meaning into this world.

Ben Yosua-Davis: The very practical structures that undergird our lives feel like they are slipping out of our grasp. And we keep trying new and often more extreme interventions, which is often kind of the dialogue that happens with those who are in hospice. Like, at what point do we say enough is enough? Oftentimes my experience was when people hit the point, they were like, okay, I'm ready for hospice. There was this sense of peace and release and joy that actually led to hope because people said, now that I've given up on the idea that I have to keep surviving, I can actually focus on living, enjoying, and appreciating those people who are closest and most important to me. I can engage in grief so that my goodbye can be one that is peaceful and actually hopeful and generative for the people who are saying goodbye to me as well. Vaclav

Havel says hope is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something is worth doing no matter how it turns out.

Jessica David: Hmm. I love that quote so much, Ben. I actually, I have a small business. I do consulting. And the name of my business, which I took from a Seamus Heaney quote, very similar is Good Worth Working For. The quote is that hope is the conviction that there is good worth working for. So, big fan of that. I have to say, despite the collapse wizard being part of this conversation, and Madeline bringing doom in within the first few minutes, I actually think this is really reassuring. I react very negatively to this notion that it's all going to be okay. And I think part of the problem in our culture is that that's our standard reaction to everything. So when someone gets sick, you know, they're expected to fight it. And, we don't really know what. How to respond when things may actually not be okay. But at the same time, I don't really know what to do with my pessimism. Like Ben said, it's a really easy slide for me from reality to hopelessness to apathy to nihilism. What do I do with that? How do I prevent that slide?

Madeline Bugeau-Heartt: Something that Ben just lifted that I want to yes. But that might speak to this pessimism, Jessica, because I've certainly, and I still do have flows and ebbs in pessimism as well. And despair. Despair like pessimism on a light day. This word of hospicing for me indicates a kind of closing or a death or an ending too. But I also feel like, with conviction, that something else is getting born. I don't know what that is. I only get glimmers of it. I think whatever it is will be unlike anything we have ever seen. So, yes, this hospicing, as we were saying to life as we know it, which is frightening and there's a lot of grief to be had as well. But rather than, and you're pointing to when people say, oh, it's all gonna be fine, that used to be inadequate for me because it felt like it wasn't nuanced enough, but now it's almost like too boring for me.

Jessica David: Hmm.

Madeline Bugeau-Heartt: I'm like,yeah, it just doesn't get me there because I also think that there's like, we're on precipice. This question of hope lifts for me the question of what are we choosing to hospice and what are we choosing to midwife into being one more layer onto it. Sorry, I can't help myself. That sort of implies some kind of control and this like, outcome orientedness. So rather like, what parts of the hospicing that's already happening do we want to partake in and what parts of the midwifing that the world is already doing beyond our control do we want to partake in and be a participant in? It feels strange, it feels necessarily mysterious to me, but that starts to like, sweeten up any despair I might have. I don't know if I'll even be there to see that, but it sweetens the pessimism, it sweetens the despair with a whiff of mystery for me.

Ben Yosua-Davis: I love that actually. It makes me think back to some of the research we've been doing with leaders and congregations and members of congregations who are asking what is our church's calling for community and watershed in a climate changed world? And one of the shifts that we notice happens from the beginning to the end of our programming. In the beginning of our programming, people tend to talk in grandiose, abstract terms. We need to go out and solve climate change. Like solve climate change is a thing people say. Even at a local level, people will list 10, 12, like, these are the things we're going to do to change our community. Kristina Lizardy-Hajbi, who's one of our research advisors, who is looking at some of this stuff with us, was pointing out, well, that's actually also a function of whiteness. One of the conditions of whiteness and privilege is you think you can do your way out of a crisis. You move towards things that are universal rather than place based, that are abstract rather than relational. One of the things that we notice happens in a lot of our programming, when people come out the other side, they're actually talking in terms that are often humble, where oftentimes when they respond to these questions, at the end they'll be like, well, I don't know, I just want to talk about how I'm going to show up. Or they'll talk about the people or the specific organizations that they work with. Taking care of our chickens is an act of hope. Hosting potlucks at our house so people who are feeling isolated and despairing can just be together and eat food is an act of hope. Preventing myself from sliding into that place of resigned despair is not actually about some sort of grand cognitive shift, though those have happened for me. But it's about the daily practices I try to engage in that pull myself out of my own head and pull myself back into the world and back into living relationship with the people and the beings that are not human that I need to be engaged with in this current moment.

Madeline Bugeau-Heartt: Ben, I just love what you said about this, right-sizing perspective of like, we're going to solve climate change to like, oh my gosh, I'm going to host a potluck at my house. I had, in my climate organizing circle, I have a friend who's doing protest singing. That's like their thing that they're doing. It's so beautiful. They go every Saturday. And he said to me recently, he said, you know, we're all working on our little tile. 50 years from now, we're going to look back and see the mosaic that it's made and realize that we were part of a part. And that was so beautiful to me. And I think to your point, what I find hopeful is being a part of, you said, living relationships. Being in these community organizing circles and watching and being a part of people practicing into their longing. Like we're all longing for this better world to emerge. Or rather like a world in which it is easier to love, I think is the language I often use. And that in and of itself feels so hopeful.

Jessica David: Yeah, I'm thinking, I don't know how the listeners would respond to this, but when you use the word mystery, for me there was a bit of a shift there, because thinking about something as the mystery that it is allows that humility that Ben was talking about. And it allows me to engage in a very different way than when I'm looking for solutions. I love hearing Ben talk

about the —is it the Ministry of the potluck? The Ministry of the potluck. I love it. I love it. I'm also bringing that back into my life. So thank you for that. Here's a question for you. Is hope a noun? Is it a verb? Is it an adjective? What is it?

Madeline Bugeau-Heartt: I think it's a verb. Ben, do you think it's a verb?

Ben Yosua-Davis: Goodness. Um, you're asking me about grammar at this time in the morning? I don't think, Jessica, your question is probably primarily about grammar.

Jessica David: Not at all.

Ben Yosua-Davis: I think about hope either as a practice or as a living virtue which we cultivate. Like we might cultivate a seedling as we're ready for spring to come.

Jessica David: A living virtue which we cultivate. Ooh, I like that.

Madeline Bugeau-Heartt: Chef's kiss. I love that. That's beautiful.

Jessica David: Does hope look different if you practice it individually versus in community?

Madeline Bugeau-Heartt: Yeah. Ben?

Ben Yosua-Davis: Yeah, I. I don't think you can practice hope individually.

Jessica David: Ooh, same.

Ben Yosua-Davis: This is part of our modern Western individualism. We think of these virtues in these practices. We atomize them down to the level of self, because those are our cultural biases. But I find it really hard to kind of ramp myself up into a head trip of sufficient power to maintain hope when I'm not in relationship with others. This is one of the big shifts, Madeline, coming back to what you were talking about, paying attention to what's being birthed or midwifed is we're again realizing we can't be human without other beings, both the human and the other than human. And I don't think we can be hopeful unless we're in community. The humans were not built to be hopeful without community, because sometimes even during really difficult moments, one of the ways you can tell that a community is healthy is how good the funerals are.

Madeline Bugeau-Heartt: Wow.

Ben Yosua-Davis: I live on an island with incredible funerals and have watched this community bear together through unimaginable tragedies. I mean, just horrible, horrible things that have happened to beloved members of the community. The community is doing fine. And the reason

is they all show up together. That's like 90% of what's going on is they show up together. And for me, that's what hope is about as well. When we are together, that makes me more hopeful.

Jessica David: Mhm. Lovely.

Madeline Bugeau-Heartt: I would second that. I think anything done in communion and in community, hope is starting to feel like an act of communion for me throughout this conversation just gains muscle. I think of myself when I'm like alone. And then in community, though, like, there's an amplification, and it's not like we're trying to be better or more. Or get more productivity involved, but there is sort of a muscle that comes in when we're doing things necessarily together. I would add, I hope for different things when I'm in the collective than when I'm by myself. So, like, Madeline hopes for true love and like Madeline hopes for, like, her car not to break down. The list goes on. But when I'm in a collective, I'm longing and I'm hoping for different things that are way beyond that. Absolutely include me and have nothing to do with me at the same time. And that feels.

Ben Yosua-Davis: I love that.

Madeline Bugeau-Heartt: Do you like it, Ben?

Ben Yosua-Davis: I love that. I love true love and a functioning car. Yeah, well, you know, those are good things. I hope for both true love and a functioning car, having ridden in your pickup truck.

Madeline Bugeau-Heartt: Until we have no more cars.

Ben Yosua-Davis: Until we have no more cars. Um, but like, the idea that actually hope is not something we hold individually, but shaped collectively. And so actually, we together, collectively shape the boundaries and the imagination of our hope, which means it brings into our field of view things that we might not otherwise be hoping for.

Jessica David: I really made this connection between longing and hope for me right there, Madeline, that I was struggling with in the beginning of this conversation. But now thinking about longing as how hope, one of the ways hope can show up in community and in relationship. We could talk about this for a long time. We do talk about this a lot at The BTS Center.

But I have to come to my last question, which is, not surprisingly, a complicated one. But I started today talking about how I struggle with hope. And I also recognize with humility that I am not experiencing the worst impacts of climate change. I am not in a position where it is impacting me directly. It's very much an emotional exercise, an intellectual exercise. But there

are so many people who are dealing directly with climate disasters, oppression, poverty, health, the things that are intertwined with climate. What would you say to them about hope?

Madeline Bugeau-Heartt: I have a strong response to this question. It's such a good question. Um, and I think I want to hearken back to what I mentioned earlier in the conversation. Whereas hope is usually lifted as an antidote, it's almost like offering Tylenol and someone's leg is falling off, and it's like, uh, this doesn't work. And I don't think I would talk. I don't know if this is the answer you want, Jessica, but I don't think it would be appropriate for me to offer any comments about hope. Certainly not antidotally. And the people I've known who have suffered a great deal. It's never the time for me to be like, oh, but here's a little nugget of hope for you. It's about listening and listening and maybe, maybe asking them. But even that feels like a step too far. Just like I don't. Like I had a family member go through their own personal tragedy this past year. I wasn't talking about God with them. Wasn't talking about, well, God has a plan. No, no, no, no. I might think that for myself, but I think this question is so important. And I also, yeah, I think listening is my answer and not talking about hope feels like the right response in terms of your question, Ben, I'm curious what you think about that.

Ben Yosua-Davis: So there are two things that come to mind. And the first thing I want to say, I think to you, Jessica, and also maybe to many of our listeners who struggle with the well, I'm in a position of privilege. So do I have a right to feel anxious? Do I have a right to feel like I'm suffering? And I think this is a reminder we are not in the Suffering Olympics. We are not ranking each other's sufferings. We're not in a competition. And so the first thing to say is, if you are feeling these deep feelings of anxiety and despair, those are legitimate and have their own inner integrity and do not need to be compared to anyone else's. There are ways that this suffering gets shaped differently depending on our social and cultural context. And it is okay, even in a privileged context like ours, to feel anxiety and depression and despair and to say those things are real without having to compare them and find them wanting to anyone else. The second thing I'll say is this. My experience is that oftentimes I learn the most about hope from people who are in positions of intense poverty, poor health, oppression and suffering. My experience is they are the people who have taught me the most about hope. So oftentimes I find when I come into those moments, I would just want to ask them in the face of such suffering, if it was me, my whole meaning making systems would have completely broken down. And my experiences, and this was often my experience when I had friends who were refugees seeking asylum in this country, is they were able to hold together hope and grief, joy, and pain in a way that I didn't even have in my field of reference. So oftentimes with the people you're talking about, Jessica, I want to sit at their feet and say, teach me about hope. Because oftentimes I find they are holding it in a way that, um, I am not yet capable of doing.

Jessica David: Yes. And I find it so helpful to acknowledge that hope can exist. It can coexist with these other things, with despair, with suffering, with grief, with other emotions. And that sometimes, you know, we don't have to force ourselves into it, which is another thing. I think that often in society, we're expected to be hopeful.

Madeline Bugeau-Heartt: Yeah. It's a part of, um. I love that, Jessica. It's a part of this wild stew that we're all stewing in together that is life at this moment. This is a serious life.

Ben Yosua-Davis: Well, and in fact, all our ancient religious traditions tell us that hope comes from suffering. Not in spite of suffering, not alongside suffering, but hope actually comes from suffering. And that's a reframing I am still getting my head around.

Jessica David: Indeed. Yeah.

Madeline Bugeau-Heartt: Cliffhanger, Ben, leaving us.

Ben Yosua-Davis: Cliffhanger.

Madeline Bugeau-Heartt: Cliffhanger.

Jessica David: Well, we have to end it there. Even though I don't really want to, I want to keep going. Thank you so much, Madeline and Ben, for this really important conversation, which was just as unhinged as I expected it to be. So thank you.

Madeline Bugeau-Heartt: There's more where that came from.

Jessica David: No, thank you for bringing us through it.

So, listeners, it's your turn now. Where do you fall on the hope spectrum? What are the practices you use to cultivate hope? Or maybe you don't? I hope you will share with us by emailing us podcast@thebtscenter.org or calling and leaving us a voicemail at 207-200-6986. Thank you for listening to the Climate Changed Podcast Behind the Scenes Edition with me, Jessica David. Coming up in our next episode, we're going to talk about grief and lament. Yep, that's right. We're going there. I would love to hear from you listeners. Please contact me about this episode or with any questions or feedback you want to offer. You can call, text, or email us. We leave a voice message at 207-200-6986. That's 207-200-6-9861. If you are calling from outside the U.S. you can also text that number at 207-200-6986. Or if you prefer, you can email us the email address again is podcast@thebtscenter.org that's podcast@thebtscenter.org and visit climatechangedpodcast.org for show notes, a transcript, and more. That website again is climatechangedpodcast.org Many thanks to my guests Ben Yosua-Davis and Madeline Bugeau-Heartt. Also thanks to producer Peterson Toscano for producing this episode and Nicole

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