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# Hope in the Key of Chōra<sup>1</sup>

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*Where might we look for hope outside of promise?  
Where might we find hope for an agnostic church,  
and for those of us who find it hard to believe?*

I have turned to many interlocutors in search of satisfying responses to these questions. In a sense, it was Vitor Westhelle who first gifted these questions to me, offering space for them to emerge in a wonderful classroom that he curated with Kadi Billman several years ago at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago.<sup>2</sup> They named the course “Fostering Narratives of Hope.”

Not surprisingly, one response to these questions that has remained with me as meaningful was found in Westhelle’s own work. Indeed, it was written on nearly every page, infused into the melodies and meanings of his words.

## Unpromising and apocalyptic hope

Vitor Westhelle’s apocalyptic and liminal hope, a hope that is born of the chōra, open, shaped by space and motion is *unpromising* (in the desired sense). Whatever expectant joy may be born there, it is always a “hopeless birth of hope.”<sup>3</sup> In the crossing, the flood and the Christ traverse the same matrix. In the crossing, anticipated destruction and anticipated salvation are each *at hand*—so close that we can touch them. In Westhelle, this is the meaning of *apocalyptic* as the apocalyptic inhabits our bodies and the world around us.<sup>4</sup> Hope that desires from the space of the chōra has neither promise nor guarantee. There is only proximity and uncertainty. Nonetheless, such hope hopes *against* hope (Rom 4:18). It desires with and yet against the fears that threaten to consume and annihilate.<sup>5</sup>

Here in the crossing, we may meet God the Other. Here in

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the crossing, an encounter with an “other” might be the end of our lives. Here we may find our voice. Here we may have our words appropriated or taken away. Beauty and biodegradation, the banquet and the threat of non-being are all always nearby, so close you can touch them, so close they can touch you. The path toward them, the threshold over which to step, the border to transgress, the crossing, the choratic space itself is not of a promise. It is a risk—a holy risk, and yet a risk. It is a risk taken with a heart full of fear and uncertainty and longing.<sup>6</sup> It is a hopeful risk with no promise attached.

Hope, expectant emotion, hunger that moves the body is a risk. Nonetheless, perhaps out of desperation, perhaps out of fear, perhaps for threat of death or desire for life, we make the crossing. Or, perhaps (more Westhellenic yet) we do not choose by reason or by instinct, desperation or desire. Perhaps, rather, we simply find ourselves here, in the midst of the crossing, in the choratic regions, Golgotha, Gehenna, the valley of the shadow of death.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps it is not so much by choice as it is by accident, by grace, by chance, by blessing, by curse . . . Yet here we are: in the wilderness. In the church. Drowning in or floating upon the flood. We have built our boats.<sup>8</sup> Still, it is possible that here, eating stale manna,

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1. The following is an excerpt modified from a larger chapter titled, “Hope in the Key of Chōra,” taken from the book, *An Unpromising Hope*, scheduled for release in 2021. It is used by permission of Wipf and Stock Publishers, [www.wipfandstock.com](http://www.wipfandstock.com).

2. Kathleen D. Billman, “Classrooms and Choratic Spaces: A Meditation on Seminary Teaching,” in *Churrasco: A Theological Feast in Honor of Vitor Westhelle*, ed. Mary Philip, John Nunes, and Charles M. Collier, (Eugene, Ore.: Pickwick Publications, 2013), 150–159.

3. Vitor Westhelle, *Eschatology and Space: The Lost Dimension in Theology Past and Present*, 1st ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 132.

4. Westhelle, *Eschatology and Space*, 25.

5. Westhelle, 132.

6. Dom Helder Camara, *Hoping Against All Hope*, trans.

Matthew J. O’Connell (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1984), 4.

7. Westhelle, *Eschatology and Space*, 123.

8. The quotation (having to do with praxis and desire) that Westhelle chose for the header of his website was the following. “If you want to build a boat, you don’t go herd people together to collect wood and then assign them tasks. Rather, you teach them to long for the endless immensity of the sea.” Interestingly, many churches built

singing praises stuck upon the mountain top, we may never be saved. Sending doves from the deck, we may never see dry land.

### Embodying the choratic in the end

Near the end of his life, Westhelle wrote clearly of another encounter he was having, this time with an unwelcome other. It was an encounter that could only be described as apocalyptic. An end was at hand. Westhelle's body had become a home for cancer. He was asked to reflect on his experience (perhaps appropriately in the choratic season of Advent). In reflection, he invoked a film which had fixated his interest for decades, and which had, at this end, taken on new meaning. In *The Seventh Seal*, a knight returns home from a crusade, and becomes engaged in a battle with death. The battle is depicted as a game played upon a chessboard. Revisiting the film, Westhelle offers his remarks.

Cancer patients do not identify with any of the players, but with the chessboard and the pieces that keep on falling in moves being made on either side. We are the neutral ground over which a battle for life or death is being fought. This allegory of the chess game with death, a classic medieval motif, is quite depressing when one identifies oneself with an inert component of it, a chess board with its pieces. But it is realistic. It is not about the drama and search for a meaningful life. And it is not even about death and its stratagems either. It is about us, patients. Patients that do not have a scheduled release date, let alone the very idea of a release. Elusive remission, perhaps.

Except for some moments in which we are presented with an option for treatment (happens only at critical moments in which the physician will not take full responsibility, and one has to sign a pile of documents that exempt everyone of responsibility if things turn out bad), we as patients, are not subjects, just chessboards over which the game of life and death is being played.<sup>9</sup>

This was the sense of the end Westhelle lifted up near to his own. No longer do we inhabit the choratic (not as we are patients), but we become the chessboard, the space of the crossing. We become the eschatological opening, the board upon which the apocalypse takes place. We become the *third* hybrid space between life and death, adjacent to each. Perhaps this is what we were all along.

So, in the process of preparing papers and reflections, we

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by Scandinavians are shaped as boats, boats having been popular metaphors for church by seafaring immigrant populations in the U.S. Vitor Westhelle, "Westhelle Turf—Vitor Westhelle's Home on the Web," accessed November 26, 2019, <http://www.vitorw.com/>.

9. Vitor Westhelle, "On Advent, Cancer, and Christmas – A Re-Posting in Honor of the Rev. Dr. Vitor Westhelle," We Talk. We Listen. (blog), May 14, 2018, <https://wetalkwelisten.wordpress.com/2018/05/14/on-advent-cancer-and-christmas-prof-vitor-westhelle-2/>.

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his students have continued to move our eyes across his works, his loving words meant for the joy and healing and voicing of the eschatoi, the hopeless, those stuck between spaces, falling between cracks in societies and economies, meant for those who administer the eschaton despite the risk.<sup>10</sup> His pages for us become a space of crossing, eyes glancing, pens that underline, making marks adjacent to sites on the pages where epiphanies took place. Though Westhelle is gone, his work remains a chōra, an opening, an invitation, a reminder that we are to approach the other, the abyss, the unknown; a reminder that here we hear a weak call: to hope against hope for the sake of the hopeless, to claim a desire for a better next place and a radical reorientation of what is, knowing neither what the next place, nor the next hour, nor the next other might bring, but risking, nonetheless, on the side of an anxious hope.

### Postlude: An unpromising ministry

My instinct is to stop writing here, leaving with a gesture of love and admiration for my teacher, who I miss dearly. However, I have been invited to write a just a few paragraphs about the spaces in which hope in a choratic key and the work of pastoral ministry might intersect. I am uncertain about how to approach this task without a story, so I will use one that I know Westhelle enjoyed.

### Xenodoxeion

More than once, Westhelle recalls a story about Saint John Chrysostom. In the story, John is invited to deliver a homily. He climbs the stairs to the pulpit. He peers out at his gathered flock below. It is a proud day. The assembly is celebrating the birth of the first Christian Charities.<sup>11</sup> The first xenodoxeion, as they were called,

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10. Westhelle, *Eschatology and Space*, 122.

11. I am speaking hyperbolically to illustrate a point here. The Church had been charitable for quite some time, including Paul's congregations who were urged to remember the poor at the church in Jerusalem and to contribute to them (Acts 11:29, Romans 15:25-32,

very lovely little houses that were commissioned and made “to deal with the homeless problem.” Today, they had finally been constructed. In fact, as the people settled in for John’s homily, in honor of the celebration of this solution, several families had already been settled into the developments.

As John begins to speak, in the midst of the congregation’s anticipated reception of praise, he makes eye contact with each—perhaps especially with the richest among them—and he asks a holy question to the gathering. First: a breath. And then: “What have you done?” He *said* the question, rather than asking. “What have you done?” John confronts his church-goers, gifting them admonition in place of their anticipated laud. “What have you done?” “In hiding away, these least of these, you have hidden away Christ himself, who calls you to encounter him in each one.”<sup>12</sup> In hiding away the poor (and in calling “the homeless,” rather than the system that produces homelessness, a problem), the Christians are hiding away Christ who claims that where two or more gather he will be present, and who claims that he is present always in “the least of these” (Matthew 18, 25). In the name of the first charities, these well-intended Christians have created ghettos.<sup>13</sup>

### In the ends

An *eschaton* in Westhelle’s work generally refers to an end or a limit, as the term *eschatology* etymologically suggests. Moving beyond time-bound eschatologies and into spatial/geographical realms, in Westhelle’s conception, *eschaton* points to other *ends*: physical boundaries, geographic borders, societal margins, city limits, and the like. As these are plural, they are called (using the Greek language) *eschata*. These are spaces often represented (but simultaneously “crossed out”) on paper by cartographical delineations.<sup>14</sup>

For example, from where I am sitting, these include the gray dotted line that separates Illinois from Indiana on Google maps, or the solid gray line that separates the United States from Mexico. In biblical narratives, these spaces are often sites of crucifixion, places of skulls, the spaces where Jesus is lynched by Rome. They are often spaces where garbage and waste are heaped up, Gahennas and Golgothas, where we put the items and the people we choose to discard.<sup>15</sup>

Galatians 2:10, etc.).

12. The sermon to which Westhelle refers is Chrysostom’s Homily 45 on the Acts of the Apostles. Westhelle, *The Church Event*, 134; Westhelle, *Transfiguring Luther*, 152.

13. In his reading of Chrysostom, as well as elsewhere, Westhelle relies heavily on Segundo’s interpretation of Matthew 25. Segundo argues that unlike much of the world who may not know that kindness to others is kindness to God (represented by the questions in verses 37-39, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink?’) Christians, the community called *church* are those who actually do know. The Church is “those who already know,” and therefore should respond to Christ the o/Other accordingly. Juan Luis Segundo, *The Community Called Church*, Segundo, Juan Luis. *Teología Abierta Para El Laico Adulto*. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1973), 63.

14. Westhelle, *Eschatology and Space*, 55–56.

15. Vitor Westhelle, *Transfiguring Luther : The Planetary Promise*

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At the edge of Chicago, these include our own county dumps. They include the spaces where people live under bridges and viaducts, on Lower Wacker (beneath the city), and under the Stevenson Expressway, near Archer and Lock. They include coal-ash sites in South Chicago and unremediated coal-fired power plant sites on the river between Pilsen and Bridgeport, and at the riverbank in Little Village. Each exists at/as a border, a margin, an end. They include the Dan Ryan expressway, placed to separate Black and white communities. They include the displaced spaces of Palestine, barbed wire, security guards, and checkpoints. In Brazil, for Westhelle, these include the spaces into which displaced (and therefore landless) people are forced—neither the new plantation nor the highway, but that space in-between where displaced people squat. We tarry in these spaces a while, at least until the aldermen or ICE agents or Streets and Sanitation kick us out. *Eschata* include our prisons and our concentration camps, spaces where people remain unheard by power—and unseen, either intentionally or unintentionally, trapped or silenced behind bars, iron, concrete, guards, walls.

The physical boundaries that are often constructed at, in, or around *eschata* serve as roadblocks to our senses. They keep us from perceiving those others who are relegated to such spaces. Westhelle calls these those who dwell at the *eschata* of the world, the *eschatoi*.<sup>16</sup> In the story of John’s congregation, the poor homeless (and subsequently housed) are the *eschatoi*, the particular *eschaton* in which they dwell is the literal margin of town. They are covered by walls constructed by Christian charity and Christian builders. The xenodoxeion are shelters. They protect and give cover from the elements. Yet they also serve to hide. They cover up the

*of Luther’s Theology* (Eugene, Ore.: Cascade Books, 2016), 114; Vitor Westhelle, *The Scandalous God : The Use and Abuse of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), x; Vitor Westhelle, *The Church Event : Call and Challenge of a Church Protestant* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 116-118.

16. The *eschatoi*, are those whom the epistle to Romans notes are without *ousia* (aousia), without being, but that God calls into being, as God “calls into being those who have none (Romans 4:17).” John D. Caputo, *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 78–82.

eschatoi. In building these covers, the Christians house people. However, simultaneously, and “by virtue of [their] wealth [they shield themselves, knowingly or not] from the unpleasant reality of the o/Other.”<sup>17</sup> So there, at the eschata, the eschatoi remained, unencountered, housed, hidden, and tucked away.

### Voicing choratic hope as pastoral solidarity

As described above, in Westhelle’s theology—his eschatology, his theology of the cross, his ecclesiology of the event called church, and so on—it is in the crossing, on the way to and from the eschata, in and around the sites of the crosses, in and among the crucified people, that both church and something of the divine take place.

I am convinced that the emotions of the in-between were important for Westhelle because the people he worked with found themselves in choratic spaces and sought to name something of the divine in them. His eschatological descriptions are less an invitation for those already compromised to go deeper into the desert sand, but rather a language for those who find themselves in the crossing to name the sacredness and the terror of their crossing space—to name the apocalyptic, salvation and damnation lingering, at hand. This is the beauty of choratic eschatology. It is not *prescriptive*—a solution for John’s community, a pastoral balm, or a blueprint for new xenodoxeion. Rather, it is *descriptive*—it gives voice to the everyday experience of those who dwell at the eschaton—the eschatoi—and those who linger nearby, sometimes in spaces called church.<sup>18</sup>

I am drawn to the ambiguity of Westhelle’s choratic hope, born of proximity, not only because it is physical and geographical, but also because it is unpromising (it promises nothing). It is not tied neither to a theological “guarantee,” offered to those who struggle and suffer, nor to the in-breaking future of God or the fulfillment of a utopian anticipation. When one dwells at or alongside the eschata of the world, one comes to doubt the promises of politicians and priests. A better future may be a beautiful dream, but it does not describe the hope that one finds in such a place. *Where might we look for hope outside of promise? Where might we find hope*

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*for an agnostic church; and for those of us who find it hard to believe?* “There it is!” says Westhelle, at the eschata, in the crossing.

Hope here is apocalyptic, uncertain. Each visitor may be the devil. Each may be angels we have yet to entertain. We do not know until we cross the chōra whether we will be demolished or saved.

This is the unpromising, uncertain, agnostic, experience of hope that those who dwell in or near the eschata experience every day. If disciples, ministers, or religious institutions find themselves there in the eschata, uncertain how to speak, they would do well to receive Westhelle’s words as they serve to give voice to sacred hopes on apocalyptic terrain.

17. Vitor Westhelle, *Transfiguring Luther: The Planetary Promise of Luther’s Theology* (Eugene, Ore.: Cascade Books, 2016), 152.

18. Here, Westhelle finds resonance with Emilie Townes, who assigns the church task of “voicing” those who have been erased, stereotyped, caricatured, or rendered speechless by that which she identifies as the fantastic hegemonic imagination. There is tension in applying this task to theologians whose theorizing may take place in a sequestered location, far from geographic eschata. Pastor Westhelle’s life and work, however, locates him in solidaritous proximity, and, as complex or strange as his theological language may at first seem to the newcomer, it is clear that its intent is to amplify the experience and articulation of those with whom he dwelled and served. Emilie M. Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 79. Interestingly, for bell hooks, the task of “voicing” or fostering a “coming to voice” is also the work of the teacher in spaces such as classrooms. This was in no way lost in Professor Westhelle, who fostered becoming and the coming-to-voice of many. bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 2.