

## Advent Hope

- *2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Advent*  
- *December 8, 2019*  
- *Stephen V. Sundborg, S.J.*

Here we are gathered within this chapel of many lights on this evening when it is already dark in the city which has earned among the fifty largest cities of our country recognition as the number one city for being gloomy. Ah this is the perfect time and setting for entering into Advent!

In Advent we are meant to start very quietly, start from the beginning, hear the ancient prophet Isaiah predict a shoot sprouting from a dead stump, hear Paul say that all we have learned from the scriptures is meant to encourage us to hope, and go out to a solitary figure, John the Baptist, crying out in the desert to make straight the paths for one who is coming to bring the kingdom to all. We begin the liturgical year, the whole sweep of salvation, where we need to begin, with hope. These four weeks before Christmas, these four doors of the Sundays of Advent, have one word written above them: “hope”. In order to take in, to accept, the salvation that the whole year rolls out, we need to start with hope, be opened by hope, be expanded in our hearts and souls by hope.

Could it be that we are living in an era with a more intense need for hope than at other times? I know our students here at Seattle U. need hope more than anything else. So many people in our shrinking middle class in order to overcome despair need hope. Our church, so shaken, so quickly being abandoned, needs to hope to be the People of God and light to the world it is meant to be. All of us in a country more divided and hostile than ever need hope. A world of greater and greater inequity even as globalization increases needs hope. All of us on our planet need hope that our very planet can be healed from its exhaustion and can survive.

We live less in a time of crisis of faith than in a time of crisis of hope. Our challenge is not “Can I experience hope personally?” nor “Can I feel confident and safe and assured in the midst of all around me?” Rather the challenge is “Can we hope, we as a faith community, we as Christians, we together as the American people, we as stewards of our common home of the earth?” It is to this “we”, rather than to “me” that Advent addresses its message of hope in darkness. It is not “Can I as an individual be hopeful?” but “Can we as people of God, people of a common humanity, country, and people of the earth be filled with hope?”

Perhaps the most famous poem about hope is by Emily Dickinson, written at Amherst during the Civil War. You know this poem:

“Hope” is the thing with feathers -  
That perches in the soul -  
And sings the tune without the words -  
And never stops - at all -

And sweetest – in the Gale – is heard –  
And sore must be the storm –  
That could abash the little Bird

That kept so many warm –

I've heard it in the chillest land –  
 And on the strangest Sea –  
 Yet, never, in Extremity,  
 It asked a crumb – of Me.

What a beautiful poem, justly famous, and so right about hope as a small tune of the soul as if sung by a bird regardless of any storm of life. Each of us know this hope as “the thing with feathers that perches in the soul”. It’s like the pilot light of the gas range, always ready when given the spark to light up, to burn. How much in order to live a human life we need this hope; how dire in consequences if the light goes out, if the “feathered thing perches in the soul” is not heard?

Yet, for all its beauty this is not the hope of Isaiah, or Paul, or John the Baptist, or of Advent; not the hope we are called to in this season of the door to salvation opening toward Christmas and the life of Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit. The hope of Advent, the Christian hope, is about being one of a hopeful people, together hoping that all are included, the poor, the afflicted, the Gentiles, i.e. the peoples of all nations. It is a crazy hope for what God alone can bring about for a “holy mountain on which there is no harm” and “the earth filled with the knowledge of the Lord as waters cover the sea”, both a high and a deep hope of God’s salvation offered not just to me but to all people, with me one with that people.

When Archbishop Desmond Tutu received an honorary doctorate here at Seattle U., I still remember as he warmed to his subject and got into the rhythm of the gospel preacher that he proclaimed ever more insistently that we are all sisters and brothers and that maybe God does not save us individually but only when at last he can save us all together since we all belong to one another. That’s a vision of a prophet. That’s a possible, theological, further reach of the hope of Isaiah, Paul, Jesus, the Spirit—the hope of Advent.

Perhaps this year we can live this Advent leading to Christmas less by stirring up the privacy of our hope within ourselves, and more by making ourselves by intention and by action more grounded in, one with, the “all are welcomed” people to whom God brings salvation and whom he calls as a people to hope in Him and to hope for one another in Him. Not “the feathered thing that perches in the soul”, but perhaps “the soul that is tethered to all God’s people”.

May we all as alumni and friends—and may our students—have an Advent blessed with this hope for one another and for all which God in Christ brings us.