

## **A Hope Set in God**

**Scriptures: Psalm 78: 1-7**

**I Thessalonians 4: 13-18**

Do you remember the days when we used to receive interesting First Class mail in our mailboxes? Do you remember when we'd come home from work and actually look forward to opening the mail? There was that letter from a friend, that note from your long-lost college roommate, that check from your parents just to help you make it through the week with a little less financial strain. Yes, it was fun getting the mail, something to look forward to!

Well, that's all changed now. Nobody has enough time to write letters anymore, nobody that is, except maybe for some of you retired people. Letter writing is fast becoming a lost art form among my own generation and younger. We now use e-mail, texting and tweets. If we communicate at all with each other nowadays, it's by Facebook or by texting, or with Face Time on our I-Phones, or with a few hurriedly typed lines of e-mail on the computer screen. It used to be when those of us who had A.O.L. as our internet server logged on to our computers a little voice would come on saying "*You've got mail!*" with the little icon showing us an old-fashioned mailbox stuffed with inviting looking letters hanging out of it. But even A.O.L is now passe, with its nostalgic throw back to those former times in which our mailboxes used to be stuffed to overflowing with meaningful mail. Even our e-mail in-boxes are now becoming just the repository of cyber junk mail and automatically generated list-serves.

This is not to say, however, that our old, low-tech, "snail" mailboxes are empty these days. These past weeks mine has been stuffed every day with holiday gift catalogues, advertising circulars, credit card offers and line of credit applications. And we can look forward to the next six weeks until December 31<sup>st</sup>, when we'll probably also be getting at least three mailings a day soliciting us for funds for this worthy cause or that. It's November, and non-profit agencies are all hoping to cash in on year-end giving that's so crucial to their financial bottom line. None of us seem to be able to escape the solicitation phenomenon that's become so characteristic of 21st Century America.

But if you actually checked your mail box during the past three weeks, you probably found a letter that looked like this in there along with all the other solicitations and offers. It's the Presbyterian Church in Sudbury's annual stewardship appeal. That's right. Along with all the other organizations seeking your money, this church is also hoping you'll see your way clear to not only continuing to give money in the Year 2018, but to increasing your annual pledge contribution. And if you somehow missed the stewardship letter with pledge card, we've got more of them right here on the table by the sanctuary entrance.

So why should you pay any more attention to our church appeal than to any of the countless others finding their way into your mailbox? What is it that makes a church unique among all the other organizations you have the opportunity to support?

Well, for one, we've demonstrated our staying power. We've been around a lot longer than most all the other organizations out there. This congregation has been an integral part of Sudbury for 56 years, and as part of the Christian church universal, we're part of a much larger institution tracing it's story back 2,000 years, and claiming a lineage stemming directly from Jesus Christ himself. Countless millions of people have been a part of this institution, the Church, people living in former times and generations, here and around the globe.

Two weeks ago on All Saints Sunday we remembered the lives and witness of people of faith who've gone before us in former times: our parents, grandparents, ancestors, and people whom we never knew, but who by their lives of faith paved the way for us to be here in worship today. Each of us who calls this congregation our spiritual home is the beneficiary of these former saints' investment of faith. They've entrusted us with the maintenance and advancement of a tradition and heritage sacred in a way no other organization can claim. They've passed on to us a sacred trust given to them originally by Jesus Christ, who called them and us along with them to be his disciples and to do his work in the world. But let's go back even further. Let's go back to Old Testament times, to around 1000 B.C., and listen to the admonition of the psalmist in Psalm 78:

*“Give ear, O my people, to my teaching. Incline your ears to the words of my mouth. I will utter dark sayings from of old... things we have heard and known that our ancestors have told us. We will tell to the coming generation the glorious deeds of the Lord, and his might and the wonders he has done... that the next generation might know them, the children yet unborn, and rise up and tell them to their children, so that they should set their hope in God, and not forget the works of God...”*

*“So that they should set their hope in God...”* This is why the church is different than any other organization asking for your support. In a depressing, discouraging world so bent on violence and its own destruction, the Church puts us in touch with an alternative vision of peace and wholeness, and connects us with the most powerful source of hope.

Even with all our technological changes and advancements, 21<sup>st</sup> Century society is struggling to find some sense of hope. We've gradually become disconnected over the years with what used to give our society its sense of meaning... a sacred story infused with morals, altruism and a sense of the common good. We seem to suffer from a collective amnesia, not remembering the lessons of history lived and experienced first-hand by many of us sitting in this room this morning.

In this 21<sup>st</sup> Century age of entitlement, how many of our kids realize that it wasn't so long ago that large segments of the American population didn't enjoy equal rights with one another? How many of our young people know that it shouldn't ever be taken for granted that we all are to be treated equally as children of God and citizens of the United States? That you might have been legally discriminated against because of your race, gender, physical handicap, or sexual orientation.... such things are mostly unimaginable

to our kids today. Yet many of us here can remember when it was the law of the land that Black people couldn't get real estate loans to live in neighborhoods they wanted to or drink from the same water fountain as Whites in some states, that women's place was considered to be in the home and not in the public arena or at work, and that if you were in a wheel chair, tough luck, you just couldn't go to lots of public places because they weren't required to make accessibility provisions for you. And it's been only since a Supreme Court ruling in June 2015 that there were still 18 states in the USA where you couldn't marry the person of your choice if that person was of your same gender.

Yet how many of us remember that in many of these issues of equality and civil rights, it was the church that led the way toward change, beginning with the civil rights movement in the 1950's? Rosa Parks wasn't just a small, tired Black woman who commuted to work in the back of a bus. She was a devoted churchgoer, who got the support not only of her own congregation, but eventually of a young preacher in town named Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., who was catapulted to national prominence when he agreed to serve as the president of the church-based organization that took on her cause and organized the Montgomery, Alabama bus boycott. Now 60 years later, our kids rarely are told that it was the church that provided the hope and impetus to the civil rights movements because of its belief that God loves us all, regardless of our differences. Because of its sacred story that God takes the side of the oppressed and is the guarantor of justice, the Church has led the way in many of the social justice movements of our lifetime. It also has a staying power unmatched by any other organization, because of its belief in the power of redemption and resurrection, as embodied in its founder, Jesus Christ.

The Church is a fount of hope. If we believe that Jesus Christ is God's revelation of love and truth for all times and all people, then like our forbearers in the faith, our task is to ensure the survival of the church and that we the Church of today transfer that sacred story of hopeful expectation from our generation to the next, and so on and so on, until Christ comes again.

Originally Christians thought this would be only a matter of one generation. Earliest Christians thought that they'd live to see the Second Coming of Christ. They expected it to happen any day. Paul's writings to the church at Thessalonica, which serve as our New Testament lesson for today, are an example of the apocalyptic thought typical of the earliest Christians. First Thessalonians is the earliest written book included in the New Testament, and presents us with a window into a First Century Christian worldview. Those early Christians were concerned when the Second Coming hadn't happened as expected, and didn't know what to make of Christians dying prior to Christ's coming. Would those who had died be saved along with those who were still alive to meet that day? Paul assures them that the faithful dead are very much a part of the saved community, that in fact those who have "*fallen asleep in the Lord*" will be raised first to new life, and that those who are still living at Christ's coming will then be "*caught up*" with them to be with the Lord forever in eternity.

This is all very strange sounding stuff to our ears twenty centuries later. Here we

are, still alive 2,000 years later, and Christ has not yet come. We're still waiting for that day Paul speaks of, and generation after generation of our forbearers in faith have passed away after lifetimes of anticipation. We are in an extended period of waiting, and in the meantime, the faith has needed to be transferred from one generation to the next. But what's good about this extended wait is that Christians have made the most of where they are, working to make this world resemble more closely the longed-for Kingdom of Heaven, trying to do what Christ would have us do in this world as we wait patiently, expectantly and hopefully for the next.

*"Do not grieve as others do who have no hope,"* writes Paul to the Thessalonian Christians. This is the same message that comes through the Church to us today. The Church is a message of hope to those who believe, for it conveys to us the promise of the Resurrection. *"Therefore encourage one another with these words,"* wrote Paul 2,000 years ago. Today we are encouraged by the very same words, by the very same message that death and destruction are not the final words to life, but that through the power of Resurrection, we too are offered the gift of eternal life.

*"Jesus' resurrection,"* writes Biblical commentator Charles Cousar, *"is not a private miracle, a magic act performed simply in order to secure belief in his unique individual powers. It is, instead, the first stage in God's final triumph over death itself."*<sup>1</sup> This is the good news which the Church conveys to every generation that has come along since the First Century. This is the good news that you and I are gathering here to remember today and to share with our children and their children and with generations of believers who will come between now and the day when Christ comes again.

That's why, I think, the Church is different than any other organization out there today. That's why, I think, you should respond to the stewardship letter you found in your mailbox and make a pledge to the Presbyterian Church in Sudbury, a congregation of faithful people living out our calling together to be God's messengers of the Resurrection. We're involved in reaching out with the good news of God's love from Sudbury to Dumagete City in the Philippines, and to so many places in between. Yet we face a challenge before us, to keep on being a community of faith in this very troubled world. We need to encourage one another, to realize that we're not in this alone. For we're accompanied by a great cloud of witnesses who've lived and believed and gone on before us. And we're empowered by God's spirit, who joins us to their efforts, and makes us capable of doing so much more than we could simply do on our own.

Yes, occasionally there's some good news in that mailbox of yours, news of how *you* can make a difference, as a Christian, as a member of this congregation, the Presbyterian Church in Sudbury, and as a forbearer of faith to generations yet to come... a person whose hope is set in God.

Amen.

---

1. Charles Cousar, *Texts for Preaching: A Commentary on the NRSV, Year A*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, c. 1995, p. 559