

## Steadfast In Hope

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The Second Sunday of Advent  
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Isaiah 11:1-10; Romans 15:4-13; Matthew 3:1-12

“For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope.” --  
Romans 15:4

Every now and then, as the world bumbles and stumbles its way into and out of one crisis after another, a human being comes along who sheds a bit more light on the path and points us, again, in the direction that leads toward God.

Such persons embody the text for this morning’s sermon, which comes from Paul’s letter to the Romans and says this: “For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope.”

If the world ever needed an example of someone who was steadfast in hope, it received it in Nelson Mandela. Imprisoned as a terrorist for twenty-seven years, Mandela refused to give up the hope that the white minority government in South Africa would one day be replaced by a democracy representing all the people in his native land, a land colonized by Europeans centuries earlier, who used their mental and technological skills to exploit and oppress native South Africans. British and Dutch colonists constructed a system of injustice – all quite legal, of course, just immoral – that protected the power, wealth, and privilege of a tiny few at the expense of a great many. That system, given the name apartheid, was simply a more explicit form of government that has been repeated again and again and again.

It would be very easy for students of history, who know the tedious story of repeated oppression and exploitation, to lose hope that human nature will ever change and that we will, eventually, find a way to live together where there are not the few that have and the many that have not. We haven’t found that way yet, but people like Mandela – and Desmond Tutu and Dorothy Day and Wendell Berry and a handful of blessed others – continue to convince us, even in their exceptional ways of life, that it is possible for the exceptional to become the norm.

And stories of the exceptional commended to us as the norm is what scripture is filled with. I think that’s what Paul was pointing out to the Romans when he said that whatever was written in former days – that is, whatever was written by their religious ancestors and deposited as scripture – was written for our instruction – that is, to tell us that there are examples of ways of doing things differently than the same old dreary same old.

And I believe Paul was also telling the Roman church that the presence of those stories, if we tell them, preserve them, share them, pass them on, and – miracle of miracles – try to live them – can make a difference in our lives and in the world. Stories can make a difference.

And it’s not just we in the church who believe this, but the world itself believes in

the power of stories. If the world didn't believe in the power of stories, why would even our most secular friends be wrapped up in the frenzy of this season, which is based on a story? That's what the Christmas season really comes down to: the story we Jews and Christians first told about two thousand years ago and have been retelling ever since.

We Jews and Christians are called by our Muslim sisters and brothers "people of the book" because we have a written deposit of stories that we believe reveal God's will for the world. It's always tempting to become rigid and thoughtless in our handling of these stories – we call that fundamentalism – and that way of handling those stories is attractive to a lot of people. Tell us what the story says. Tell us what to believe. Tell us how to act. Tell us whom we should love. Tell us whom we should hate. Tell us what will save us.

And there are plenty of people in my position who are more than happy to oblige. There are plenty of pastors and priests and rabbis and imams who are more than willing to hold up a version of their community's sacred stories and say they mean this and not that, and that you must think this about that and not that about the other thing, and if you want to go to heaven and avoid hell don't ever do that.

That's the old-time religion that does not keep me steadfast in hope. What keeps me and, I hope, you steadfast in hope is not suiting ourselves in the armor of orthodoxy, but rather returning to those stories – what was written for our instruction in former days – to discern how God might still be speaking to us through them. There is no "once for all" meaning to those stories; were that the case, we would have found that meaning long ago, and those stories would be lifeless fossils today, the dead remains of someone else's religion.

What brings those stories to life – what keeps the Christian faith alive – is how we hear those stories now and how we attempt to live them now. And all those stories, in their great variety and complexity, can be summarized in one story that is quite simple and unspeakably profound. It's the story found in one verse of the Gospel of John and it goes like this: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him might not perish but have everlasting life."

Ultimately, that's our story and we're sticking to it, steadfast in hope.