

AUDEMUS

To Members of the Board of Trustees and Close Friends of San Francisco Theological Seminary

DECEMBER 2016

Dear Friends,

This week I got an email from a friend of SFTS with four words: “You must not quit!” That’s all he said.

But the email also contained a link to a sermon by Dr. Alyn Waller, senior pastor of the 15,000 member Enon Tabernacle Baptist Church in Philadelphia, PA. That sermon helped me understand my friend’s cryptic message.

Dr. Waller was preaching on John 19, Jesus’ crucifixion. His point? There is very little distance between Jesus’ words “I thirst” and “It is finished.” It’s a thin moment between Jesus’ experience of the depths of despair and his affirmation of the fulfillment of God’s greater purpose. Dr. Waller was exhorting his congregation to never give up, even when things seem to be falling apart and out of control, when life is difficult and the deck seems stacked against us. Never give up.

It was a sermon on hope. I think that’s why my friend sent it to me.

My friend’s email reminded me that hope is the quintessential theme of Advent. The work of Advent is above all to rekindle hope. Advent is the time to renew and enlarge our hopes by reflecting on the God of hope, whose love for the world has been, and continues to be, steadfast and strong. Hope is the word we need to hear right now in our world because, as William Sloane Coffin said, “it’s hope that helps us keep the faith, despite the evidence, knowing that only in so doing has the evidence any chance of changing.”¹

Dr. Alyn’s sermon makes no sense to most people. How can a pastor be talking about hope when he is referring to a person dying on a cross at the hands of callous, self-serving political authorities? Why should anyone feel hopeful amid hate, cruelty, scapegoating, wanton disregard for the truth, mockery, torture, and violence?

What the world does not understand is that hope rests in the hands of God. It does not depend on the present circumstances. Hope resounds from the heart of God. No human being, no political party, no point of view can contain or constrain hope.

Hope is more than wishing and has nothing to do with optimism. Hope springs up in us from what we know about God. And what we know about God is what we learn from Scripture, what we experience in prayer, what we discover in community, what we glimpse in acts of compassion, forgiveness and justice. Hope propels us into a future that is open because it is God’s.

Even when things go wrong, when tragedy strikes, when it seems like it’s the scoundrels and the scalawags that are in charge, it’s good to be reminded that God has other plans, bigger plans, better plans; and God has purposes in mind for us and for this world that no problem, no misfortune, no obstacle, whatever its size, whatever its genesis, can put an end to. The God of love, who came to us in Jesus Christ, is the Lord of history and beckons us onward.

The Apostle Paul tells us to “abound in hope.” “Abound” is a strong word. It’s derived from the same word as abundance, and it means to be inundated as though a wave had surged over you, to become full to overflowing. For Paul, hope is no small thing. It is big and bold.

1. William Sloane Coffin, *Credo*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 19.

Marty Haugen is one of the church's finest composers of contemporary hymns. Here is one of his Advent carols that abounds in hope:²

Awake! Awake, and greet the new morn, for angels herald its dawning.
Sing out your joy for soon he is born, behold! The Child of our longing.
Come as a baby weak and poor, to bring all hearts together,
he opens wide the heavenly door and lives now inside us forever.

To us, to all in sorrow and fear, Emmanuel comes asinging;
his humble song is quiet and near, yet fills the earth with its ringing;
music to heal the broken soul and hymns of lovingkindness.
The thunder of his anthems rolls to shatter all hatred and violence.

In darkest night his coming shall be, when all the world is despairing,
As morning light so quiet and free, so warm and gentle and caring.
Then shall the mute break forth in song, the lame shall leap in wonder,
The weak be raised above the strong, and weapons broken asunder.

Rejoice, rejoice, take heart in the night. Though dark the winter and cheerless,
The rising sun shall crown you with light; be strong and loving and fearless.
Love be our song and love our prayer and love our endless story;
May God fill every day we share and bring us at last into glory.

San Francisco Theological Seminary is grounded in God's hope. Hope abides here, is nurtured here, nourished here, cherished here. At SFTS, students learn a deeper hope, one that can sustain them through the vagaries and vulnerabilities of ministry — and human history.

May your Advent preparations bless you with the gift of hope in abundance — for your life, your relationships, your ministry, and our world.

Merry Christmas!



Rev. Dr. James L. McDonald, President and Professor of Faith in Public Life

P.S. – A wonderful group of SFTS trustees has stepped forward with a commitment to match dollar for dollar every new gift or increase in giving for SFTS this year. I hope you will prayerfully consider how much you might be able to contribute to strengthen our capacity to bring the compassion of Jesus Christ to a hurting world. Thank you!

2. "Awake! Awake, and Greet the New Morn,"

Text and music by Marty Haugen, in *Glory to God: The Presbyterian Hymnal* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013.), 107.



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In Christ. A New Creation.