



# FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

## “A SPRIG OF HOPE”

Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 11;1-10; Romans 15:4-13; Matthew 3:1-12

*This sermon was preached by Dr. Joseph S. Harvard III on Sunday, December 4, 2015  
at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina.*

*Dear God, in this Advent season, we come here again to hear the promise of your coming into the world you created and love so much you sent Christ to save and restore it. We come again to hear the promise that you will come again this year into our own lives, this city, this congregation. Open our minds and our hearts that we may wait for your coming in confidence that you are faithful. Come to us; speak to our anxieties and our fears; speak to our disappointments and our failures; speak your word of hope to us. Startle us by your nearness, your presence, your amazing love made known in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Let me confess that I have a certain ambivalence this time of year. I love all the excitement, the decorations. But, there is an expectation that every good preacher will be a little disgruntled this time of year about the way in which we practice Christmas, about what we call conspicuous consumerism.

If you want to know what I am talking about go to one of the malls. I am supposed to tell you how difficult it is to be a Christian in the culture in which we live. A part of me believes this and struggles against it. Yet every time I live through an Advent and Christmas season, I sense that along with all of the activity, with all of the “conspicuous consumerism,” all the cries for instant gratification, there is a deep longing within us to hear a message of hope.

I sense a longing for hope in all the lights. A lot of time people overdo it, but in those lights I sense something going on that we don't fully understand, something that is very important.

Let me tell you about an experience I had a number of years ago when I lived in Decatur, Georgia. I was driving by Agnes Scott College which is across the street from the railroad tracks. Just across the tracks is a motel, a modest motel, not fancy, not a place you would choose for a vacation. As I drove by I noticed that in one of the windows someone had placed a single electric candle. “What is that all about?” I thought. Somebody who rents a cheap room probably by the week in a motel by the railroad tracks and they put a candle in the window. What kind of statement of a longing for hope is that all about?

Not long ago, a number of noted theologians, church leaders in various fields came together and they began to reflect on the mood of the world. “What is the outstanding issue to which the gospel of Jesus Christ should be addressed?” they asked. There were lots of answers that they could have given and that you and I might have given, but they said, “We live in an age of despair.” They said despair is the mood of our time. It is not just a mood of the disadvantaged, not just the mood of those who live on the margins of life. Despair is also the mood of the affluent.

Do you ever get the feeling that despite our affluence, our sophistication, our independence, we like every little child want a light to shine into the darkness of our lives. It is dark out there. Living in darkness leads to despair.

Despair is defined as the absence of hope, and it is Hell to live in despair. All of you know that famous line from *Dante's Inferno*: Over the gates of Hell is a sign that says, "Abandon hope, all ye who enter here." It is Hell to live in a world without hope, but to say that is the dominant mood does not make sense.

Listen as the poet Isaiah addresses this sense of being tossed around and this sense of longing for some assurance that the world has not gone out of control:

*"There shall come forth from the shoot of Jesse, a stump and the spirit of the Lord shall rest on him."*

The prophet was calling for the taking of an axe to the root, just like John the Baptist did, to cut down all the trees of injustice and unrighteousness. An axe to chop down the greedy where self-righteous behavior was destructive to the community so they knew no goal except to get all they could get for themselves. We're often under an orange alert to say there's danger out there.

But the hope Isaiah addresses and presents to us today, begins with a stump. A stump is what is left after the tree has been cut down. We often say to someone, "Well, you stumped me," meaning, I am at a dead end.

My friends, it is precisely there when we are stumped, when we are at a dead end that the Spirit of the Lord begins to work among us, to bring about hope. It is when we are trapped in a small room, in a dingy motel that we have the audacity to believe that we can light a candle in the window.

So this morning on this second Sunday of Advent, I want to offer you a sprig of hope. I want to offer it to you particularly if you feel stumped. For hope lives in tension with reality no matter how difficult and challenging that reality may be. Hope comes to us precisely when we are at a dead end. That is exactly when hope emerges.

If you are living in some kind of darkness, be careful, for that is precisely where hope shows up. If you are faced with what seems to be insurmountable challenges in your work, in your relationships, in your hopes and dreams that is precisely where hope goes to work.

Hope is not optimism. It is not the belief that things will get better and better, or that we can make things better. Hope, in the Christian context, is founded on the promises of God. It is the belief that when all else fails, God can be trusted. It is the belief that the end is in God's hands. It is not simply optimism, for optimism believes that things will get better and better.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a martyr for the Christian faith. During the Nazis period he was jailed by the Nazis. He wrote a letter to his fiancée, Maria von Wedemeyer. This is what he wrote:

My dearest Maria,

By the time you receive this letter it will probably be Advent, a time especially dear to me. A prison cell like this, in which one watches and hopes and performs this or that ultimately insignificant task, and in which one is wholly dependent on the door's being opened from the outside, is far from an inappropriate metaphor for Advent. (21 November 1943, *Love Letters from Cell 92*, p. 118)

Opening the doors from the outside. That's what God does. That's what God did when he came to us in Jesus Christ. John the Baptist said get ready. "Repent!" Put aside those things that get in your way.

On Friday, many of us went to Mepkin Abbey and saw a number of amazing crèche scenes from all over the world. That is a beautiful scene that captures God's love. Sometimes I think we take it for granted. Remember, it was just a sprig of hope, a little child being born to a peasant couple, a vulnerable, young woman and her husband, traveling a long distance because the most powerful government in the world, was ruling over them. And this baby is born in the night. He was born into a world in many ways like our ours: nations are at war, injustices flourishing, human beings afraid of what is coming tomorrow, people living in pain and suffering. Yet into this world, there came a hope, a sprig in the form of a child, born to deliver God's people, born to speak to us to us and for us.

The old African-American hymn puts it the best when it says that God knows how "to make a way out of no way." This new baby just baptized will need this hope. You and I will need this hope.

I found an image this week that helped me with this, what this Advent hope is like and how you prepare for the coming of God in this world.

*A former colleague of mine, Marilyn Hedgepeth, tells of an experience she had recently. She is a grandmother and a pastor in Durham, NC. Her daughter and husband live in Charlotte. Marilyn and her husband keep the highway from Durham and Charlotte warm. One day recently she was on her way to visit her grandson. There is construction on I85 between Durham and Charlotte so she was delayed. Her daughter called her on her cell phone, "Mom what time do you think you'll get here? Your three year old grandson wants to know. He is standing on the bench by the window with the blinds draped over his back and refuses to come down until he sees your car pull into the driveway. He wants you to get here, Mom." Hopeful anticipation.*

One of my heroes in the academic world was a former novelist and poet, Doris Betts. She taught at the University of North Carolina and was chair of the English Department. She was also an Elder and Clerk of Session in the Pittsburgh Presbyterian Church. She told a story about her husband contracting Parkinson's disease. "Where had he gone," she asked, "my husband of fifty-five years, this father and grandfather, lawyer and judge, this lover and logician, reader and chess player, the durable companion who meant to retire and go world-traveling with me?" At such a time she said, "I realized that God was supporting me and carrying me even through these darkest days. In my seventh decade, faith seems to me not certainty, but a commitment, a renewable vow" (Image, no. 55, pp. 63-66).

Halford Luccock, who taught for many years at Yale University, wrote the essay, "Living on Tiptoe": "Nothing really great ever happened without a great many lives being lived in expectation. Those are the kind of folk by which the world moves forward, always standing on tiptoe" (pp. 46-48).

I leave you with an image of a young boy standing on a table waiting for his grandmother in hopeful expectation, or a woman supporting and taking care of her husband of over fifty years with a hope they're all in God's hands.

To live out of this hope is not to sit back and wait to see what God is going to do next. But it is to throw ourselves into the struggle for the realization of a new reality, to hope for justice and peace, to work for it, to live our lives for it.

We live in a society of much affluence but we also live in a hungry society. There are opportunities all around you to help those who need food. There is also another hunger, a hunger for hope, and we are called to get involved in this struggle.

I saw a bumper sticker a number of years ago. You may have seen it. The sticker says, "Jesus is coming. Look busy." I think if you are God's hopeful people you do not look busy, you are busy about God's kingdom.

Friends, as people of faith, we read the Bible, we know how the story ends. It ends with God, and God's creation complete, healed, fulfilled, and reconciled because of the One who came among us as a babe, who lived and died and was raised again so that we might have hope.

In a few minutes, I will ask you to join me at the Table of our Lord to place your pledge card, your time and talent sheet. But it is more than that. It is a Sprig of Hope- faith that God will take what we give and use it to inspire hope in McKenzie and all our children in this church.

So friends, will you join me, in waiting for hope, standing on our tiptoes, standing on our table. We know how the story ends. And we know that the God we love, the God we serve has the power to open the door from the outside. Thanks be to God! Amen.