

Seeds of Hope

- *3rd Sunday of Advent*
- *December 12, 2010*
- *Stephen V. Sundborg, S.J.*

A most blessed Advent and Christmas to all of you our alumni and our friends! We love having this Mass and then a party with you in this most beautiful liturgical season and joyous time of year. It's all about hope. And that too is what your Seattle University is all about; we are all about planting seeds of hope through our education and mission.

I think each of us has those times when we wonder whether all we have done, worked at, is worth it, will result in what we have hoped. We may wonder this as a parent caring for, sacrificing, and having such great hopes for our children. We may wonder when we grow older whether all we've given our lives to is worth it. We may at times ponder in what we have committed ourselves to in service, in community, in business, in generous giving, whether it is really worth it, will issue in the result we dream and hope for. Certainly at Seattle University, with all we do with 1,300 faculty and staff, across 103 degrees and 8 colleges and schools, and the creation of a beautiful campus and wonderful programs, we too wonder at times whether our hopes will be fulfilled in the lives of each one of our current 7,800 students whom we love and serve. In all of these instances it is never obvious; the future is hidden from us; we can be in both dark and doubt about the seeds of hope we have planted.

Listen to what the word of God today says to all of us in those times when hope is dim and confidence is thin.

The people of Israel were in long years of exile in Babylon, far from Jerusalem, when the word of God was spoken to them by the prophet Isaiah:

- the desert will exult;
- the dry plateau will bloom;
- the glory of Lebanon and of Carmel will be given you;
- you will see the glory of God and will rejoice with joyful song;
- so strengthen the feeble hands of the old;
- make weak knees firm for walking;
- say to the frightened, be strong, fear not;
- here is your God who comes to save you;

- the lord will take you back to Jerusalem singing, crowned with joy;
- the blind, the deaf, the lame, the mute will be healed and will march in the lead with God out of exile to Zion.

Here is the encouraging, strengthening message God speaks to each and all of us in our exile from our promised land, our exile from what God has promised us and from what we have hoped in God for our children, for ourselves in our older years, for those we serve who are poor, needy, or suffering injustice, for our students. This is encouraging, but we need some sign.

The sign is given in the gospel. John the Baptist is in Herod's prison and he needs a sign. He wonders whether all he has done to prepare for the Messiah has been worth it, whether the one he has hoped in is showing himself as God's anointed, as Savior. John sits in darkness, captivity, doubt—how like us that is when we wonder if the work of our lives has been worth it—and sends messengers to find out. Jesus tells those messengers to go back to John in prison and report to him what they themselves have seen and heard:

- the blind are regaining their sight;
- the lame are walking;
- the lepers are being cleansed;
- the deaf are now hearing;
- the dead are being raised from the dead;
- the poor are having the good news proclaimed to them;
- and you John, in captivity, do not need to wonder about me, and whether your work in preparing the way for me was worth it;
- no one born up to now is greater than you, John, my friend, but the least of these new disciples of the kingdom are greater than you because of what I am bringing about different from and beyond what you hoped for.

Here is the sign that John needed, that the people in exile needed, and that we need when we wonder if it is all worth it and whether our hopes will be fulfilled. Indeed, they will be fulfilled and more so and better than we hoped for they will be realized in God's ways. The sign of our hopes' fulfillment is Jesus Christ and the powerful ways he is bringing about God's kingdom.

Seattle University is all about hope. We work in hope; we live in hope for each of our students and what they will do with their lives. Most of the time we don't know; we cannot know; we live with the promise, the seeds of hope, as we get to know our students and work with them. These seeds of hope come to us from afar and we scatter them across the world:

- There's Khaled the Palestinian Catholic, the one who lost his arm in an accident and learned the gift of his compassion, now here with us at Seattle U. learning how to establish a school for traumatized children in Bethlehem.
- Then there's Dler from Kurdistan, fleeing persecution, serving as a soldier from the age of 14, fulfilling his responsibility as youngest son to provide a house for his parents, and now studying electrical engineering with us in dreams of supporting an autonomous Kurdish people.
- Or "Hernando" an undocumented college student originally from Mexico, who almost single-handedly made it possible that 27 out of 32 Latino high school classmates of his would graduate and go to college. He is a leading student among us, studying business and putting his hope to be able to work in America, and pleading that a compassionate and just America will pass the DREAM Act.
- Or a student who told me her story just yesterday, Hajer, a senior wearing her Muslim headscarf, whose family fled death at the hands of the one she calls "crazy Sadam Hussein" when she was nine, who wrote the most difficult paper of her life recently on how Muslims from within their own religion can promote a secular state supportive of all religions. Hajer is headed to Chicago to graduate studies in Islamic Studies to see how she can help bring about this reform of her own people.
- Or finally Anthony, our boy soldier from Sudan, a soldier from the age of 12 fighting a civil war, then kicked about Africa for years, but who says his hardest year was the one lived on the streets of Seattle, rescued by the Matt Talbott Center and Discovery Café and brought to us, supported by one of our donors, now able to be an American citizen because he was a political refugee, going back again to Sudan next week to see his mother and siblings whom he has not seen for 28 years, but first making his way to my office because he needs some money because in his culture he must bring a cow back to his mother when he returns after all these years—or else what good is he as a son?! Then he will come back to finish his studies so that he can open a sports center in Sudan so kids there don't give up hope. (By the way, I found a donor to get Anthony back to his village and to buy the needed cow!)

Now these students are some seeds of hope in just five of our 7,800 Seattle U. students! As for the exiles in Babylon, or John in prison, or you wondering about your own children, or your own life's commitments, or we educating, and supporting, and forming students like these, the only sure sign that our hopes can safely be placed in God and will find God's way of fulfilling them, is the sign of Jesus Christ. We need to do all we possibly can, and we are allowed to wonder as much as naturally we will, but God's pledge, God's sign, and God's fulfillment of our hopes—transformed into his hopes for us—was given and is here in Jesus Christ.

This is why the first chapter in the liturgical year, Advent, is precisely the season of hope, in order to teach us to place all our hopes in God's way of fulfilling them in Jesus Christ. Perhaps Anthony's need to bring a cow to his mother in Sudan, is not so funny and so foreign to what the first worshippers brought to the cave in Bethlehem, and what we need to come anew with to Jesus Christ, bearing the kind of gift from us which alone God needs and wants of us as his daughters and sons—our trust—in order to bring to life our seeds of hope.