

# Our Hope for Years to Come

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**John Wilkinson**  
**Third Presbyterian Church**  
**December 3, 2017 (Stewardship Sunday)**  
**Romans 15:4-6**

The Apostle Paul says to a small, just established, church in Rome, that “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.***” Paul says that we have hope in this present day because of the encouragement of the former days, that our past provides encouragement for the present and future. And he says that that hope and that encouragement is lived out in community.

Because we are marking Third Church’s 190<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year, your favorite Stewardship Committee chose “Our Hope for Years to Come” as our theme. That theme echoes a line from the hymn we will sing as we present our pledge cards, “Our God, Our Help in Ages Past.” That hymn underscores Paul’s encouragement, the encouragement of our former days, that from our past we find hope for our present, and future.

I looked in the past, in our archives, to see how we have thought about stewardship. Some of the words are inspirational; some are cringeworthy.

- There are some consistent, and familiar, themes, including gratitude for all who participate and the hope and expectation that more will.
- There is some guilt – which I think neither to be very faithful nor very effective.
- There were various ways to provide information on how the budget works and where money is used.
- There is, of course, the overriding sense of joyful responsibility, that we have been blessed here with a great abundance – setting, vision, building, people – and that not only is it our great duty to support it, but our great privilege.

Fifty years ago, in 1967, we adopted a kind of “you are there” theme, using photographic images. We spoke of “the gospel in the ghetto” and our “inner city” ministries; “let the children come to me” and Christian education and nurture; and “hands that heal” as we care for people afflicted in body, mind and spirit. We might tweak the language 50 years later, but the themes of outreach and education and caring continue.

In 1992, 25 years ago, we focused on the centennial anniversary of the sanctuary. Our theme was “Cherish the Past/Celebrate the Future,” foreshadowing “Our God Our Help in Ages Past, Our Hope for Years to Come.” And it certainly reminds us that while the church is not a building, but a people, that this building *and* its people *and* its ministry are profoundly and inextricably linked, that we couldn’t imagine being who we are and doing what we do – service and learning and worship – without this place, chapel and sanctuary and kitchen and rooms to eat and learn and gather.

We find encouragement from our past as we pivot toward our future.

And just as we have in the past, we find hope when we look around, and we find hope when we fix our vision to the future, for years to come. One stewardship theme of several decades ago was “Now It’s Our Turn,” which is right, I think, if not quite direct, for this moment, as we ponder what our Third Church forbears have handed on to us in terms of vision and legacy and resources.

But it’s also right as we consider doing the same for the generations that will follow us. They will do some things very differently, of course. Or at least they better! But I also like to think that there will be important continuity – worship with music and prayer and preaching, education for all ages that stretches the mind and nurtures the soul, service to those in need in our city and beyond. Past and present and for years to come.

Hope. It is not our hope. It is God’s hope. Our task is to be stewards of it – to celebrate it, cherish it, invest in it, share it.

Church is not only place to find hope, of course, but it’s a pretty good place – in the faith we embrace, the songs we sing, the prayers we utter, the work we share, all in community.

And Third Church is not the only place where we invest our money, in hope. But it’s a pretty good place.

We have attempted, over the fall, to articulate the need, to make the case, even as the case is made every day in countless ways. We have emphasized the need to increase our giving by \$100,000, a big lift, but an achievable one, so that we can stabilize our financial picture as we cast our vision on the future. We have also emphasized expanding our base. All we can do now is hope that you respond prayerfully, that you stretch yourself and challenge yourself, and that if you’ve not pledged, you will.

Keep hope alive, as an old political slogan emphasized. Again, not our hope, but God’s. And God’s hope *does* happen here. Just yesterday, as people met to study, as children came to audition for our children’s musical, as workers banged away on the bell tower renovation, as a

hot meal was shared with our neighbors, as prayers were uttered at a hospital bedside, as we gathered once again to cling to the promises of our faith at a memorial service.

Hope was found here, and in the many places each of you took that hope. This church and its ministry served as a platform and vehicle and channel for hope, whether in the struggles of our lives or the struggles of our conflicted world.

Hope is finally, why we pledge. It's why we show up at all.

Hope is not wishful thinking. It is not mindless optimism, nor even pie in the sky faith. Kathleen Norris writes: "...hope has an astonishing resilience and strength. Its very persistence in our hearts indicates that it is not a tonic for wishful thinkers but the ground on which realists stand." (*Acedia & Me*)

Augustine famously wrote some 1500 years ago: "Hope has two beautiful daughters. Their names are anger and courage; anger at the way things are, and courage to see that they do not remain the way they are."

I wondered if it was odd that we are receiving pledges at the beginning of Advent. It was a scheduling necessity, mostly so we could have a wonderful Youth Sunday two weeks ago. Then I decided it was not odd, that to connect what we give and what we believe and the themes of Advent makes perfect sense.

Anne Lamott wrote that "Hope begins in the dark, the stubborn hope that if you just show up and try to do the right thing, the dawn will come. You wait and watch and work: you don't give up."

That is Advent, and that is hope. Again, not ours, but God's.

"For Christians," Frederick Buechner wrote in words that will launch us on our Advent journey and serve as a kind of dedication as we come forward now to share our gifts, "hope is ultimately hope in Christ. The hope that he really is what for centuries we have been claiming he is. The hope that despite the fact that sin and death still rule the world, he somehow conquered them. The hope that in him and through him all of us stand a chance of somehow conquering them too. The hope that at some unforeseeable time and in some unimaginable way he will return with healing in his wings."

That is Advent. That is why we give. That is why we are here. That is why we have hope. Amen.