

**“And Hope Will Abound!” (Homily)**

Deacon John Fulton, St. Kevin Roman Catholic Church, Warwick, Rhode Island  
December 11, 2016 – Third Sunday of Advent (Lectionary: 7; Reading 1; Isaiah 35:1-6A, 10)

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Strengthen the hands that are feeble,  
make firm the knees that are weak,  
say to those whose hearts are frightened:  
Be strong, fear not! Here is your God!  
He comes with vindication;  
with divine recompense he comes to save you.

Then the eyes of the blind will be opened,  
the ears of the deaf will be cleared;  
then will the lame leap like a stag,  
then the tongue of the dumb will sing.

They will meet with joy and gladness,  
sorrow and mourning will flee.

Isaiah 35:3-6A;10B

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Today is Gaudete Sunday, when the Church pauses to sing the prophet Isaiah’s great ode to hope, an ode sung by our Lord himself, to the disciples of John, to us, and to the ages.

Hope. Such an elusive virtue!

Saint Paul tells us, “So faith, hope, love remain, these three; but the greatest of these is love.”

Indeed! And the most elusive of these is hope.

Look out from this sanctuary, out into the world, and what do you see? Despair. Despair and its false antidotes: alcohol and drugs, pornography and easy, emotionless sex, and piles and piles of possessions.

Indeed, there is nothing new under the sun! As they were in the time of Isaiah, hands are still feeble, knees are still weak, hearts are still frightened, and despair abounds.

Where is hope?

Hope is in the heart of every Christian, every one of us, even if in the dark moments of a dark season, we despair of ever feeling hope again. And we unbind that hope--we set it free--when we tend to the wounds of others.

So simple, even a child can do it. I know, because I did it as a child, unwittingly, but nonetheless effectively.

It was back in '69 – 1969. I was 19 years old. At that time I was an active member of my parish, a parish in the Protestant Episcopal Church, the tradition in which I had been raised from birth. I was especially close to Father Steven Parker, a young Curate who befriended me, Mentored me, and helped me discern an emerging vocation.

Steve, as he was called by the kids of the parish--we Protestants being rather casual in the 60s--was a good and holy priest who loved us kids. And so, one day when the parish was informed that one of us had landed in the hospital, Steve responded--and quickly.

It was Lynn Greason, a young lady I knew casually from activities at church and in school. Lynn was a wee bit younger than I, a lovely young lady, quiet, but full of life, with a smile that could warm the coldest heart, light the darkest room.

Lynn, as it turned out, had broken her leg. Crossing the street in front of Grand Central, she had been hit by a taxi and knocked to the street.

At first, we were relieved to hear the news of her injuries: only a broken leg and scrapes and bruises. But relief became concern as Lynn stayed in the hospital: first, it seemed, for observation, then, longer...

Steve went back, and back again, at first, bringing us news, then, asking us to pray. Something had gone terribly wrong: either during the injury itself or with the setting of the bone, we never knew. But something called a fat embolism did its ugly work, choking off breath, then life.

We were devastated, we kids, and Lynn's Dad, not long widowed, and Steve.

Memory of Lynn's funeral fails, or I have too long suppressed it, but I remember encountering Steve outside our church right around that time. He was subdued, somber, broken. He looked right through me at first, then caught himself, and said "Hello." I told him how sorry I was for Lynn, for her Father--and for Steve.

He was silent. Tears welled up in his eyes. It broke my heart. I said, "She's with the angels."

Steve turned to me and said, "*What?*"

I said, "She's with the angels, Steve. I can *see* her."

"*You can?*"

"*Yes, of course*, Steve. I've had dreams about Lynn." (I had: I hadn't slept well since Lynn's death, and consequently, had had many dreams.) "Steve, I dreamed of her in heaven. She was with God, and with the angels. She was beautiful, and smiling."

Steve looked puzzled. He looked intently into my eyes and asked, "*Angels?*"

"*Yes, Steve. Angels.*"

I will never forget what he did next. He smiled. He smiled, touched my arm gently, and said, "Thanks, John. See you in Church."

Next Sunday came, and as usual, I went to church. As the procession began, I looked back and saw Steve. It was our 10 o'clock Eucharist service, "the main service," as we called it, and it was unusual for a curate to be the only priest. But there he was, just Steve, walking behind the choir.

After the Gospel reading, Steve looked up and began his sermon. He spoke of Lynn's death, of what her life and death had meant to him. My mind wandered. I thought of Lynn, and her grieving father.

Suddenly, I heard my own name, my first *and* last name. "John Fulton."

I looked up, and Steve was looking right at me. He was speaking of grief, confusion, and despair.

And then, of hope.

"John Fulton," he said, "told me he had seen Lynn with the angels, that Lynn's death had strengthened his belief in heaven and the angels. His words gave me hope."

*Hope is in the heart of every Christian, every one of us, even if, sometimes, we cannot feel it. And we unbind that hope--we set it free--when we tend to the wounds of others.*

So simple, even a child can do it. I did. And you can do it, too.

Listen to Isaiah. Heed his words:

Strengthen the hands that are feeble,  
make firm the knees that are weak,  
say to those whose hearts are frightened:  
Be strong, fear not! Here is your God!  
He comes with vindication;  
with divine recompense he comes to save you.

*And hope will abound!*

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Isaiah 35:1-6A, 10 (Reading 1)

The desert and the parched land will exult;  
the steppe will rejoice and bloom.  
They will bloom with abundant flowers,  
and rejoice with joyful song.  
The glory of Lebanon will be given to them,  
the splendor of Carmel and Sharon;  
they will see the glory of the LORD,  
the splendor of our God.  
Strengthen the hands that are feeble,  
make firm the knees that are weak,  
say to those whose hearts are frightened:  
Be strong, fear not!  
Here is your God,  
he comes with vindication;  
with divine recompense  
he comes to save you.  
Then will the eyes of the blind be opened,  
the ears of the deaf be cleared;  
then will the lame leap like a stag,  
then the tongue of the mute will sing.

Those whom the LORD has ransomed will return  
and enter Zion singing,  
crowned with everlasting joy;  
they will meet with joy and gladness,  
sorrow and mourning will flee.