

*Based on the Christmas Story.*

*I am not an optimist*, says Desmond Tutu, retired archbishop of Cape Town, South Africa, and architect of that nation's post-apartheid Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

*I am a prisoner of hope.*

In hindsight, these many decades after the end of apartheid, Desmond Tutu's words ring true. Victorious, in fact. In hindsight, we know Nelson Mandela was released from prison. In hindsight, we know free and fair elections come to pass in South Africa. In hindsight, we know a new country, with the most progressive constitutional protections of human rights on the planet - far exceeding our own - is born. In hindsight, we applaud Desmond Tutu's hope as truly *assured*.

But Desmond Tutu does not speak these words of hope in hindsight. He speaks them right in the heart of the most horrendous days of the anti-apartheid movement, when progress delayed for far too many means progress denied. Bombs are still exploding when Tutu speaks these words of hope. Revolutionaries are still dying. Oil fields are still burning. Hope – or at least optimism – as these words are spoken is most emphatically *not* assured.

For many of us gathered here tonight, in this beautiful sanctuary of hope, and through our hope-filled online live stream, progress delayed in the heart of the omicron wave of COVID-19 does not mean anything close to the progress denied for those living in the height of apartheid South Africa. For many of us gathered here tonight omicron simply mean we will hunker down – *again*. We will weather this storm – *again*. We will tighten up our protocols or cancel Christmas plans altogether just to be safe – *again*. For many of us gathered here tonight, in-person and online, this omicron wave, too, shall pass. And we will figure out how to move on – *again*.

For others of us, though, worshiping tonight, perhaps here in this congregation, but for sure throughout the world, progress delayed may very well mean progress denied. Our very own Administrative Assistant, fully vaccinated and boosted, was sent to the emergency room by her doctor yesterday because her COVID symptoms sounded just too scary for a patient with an underlying high risk condition. [As of this moment, she is back at home, resting comfortably, but sicker than she ever remembers being in her life.]

Just this morning, my husband stumbled upon two large immigrant families desperate for food, their breadwinning fathers and husbands having succumbed to COVID just last week. For them and for so many others, progress delayed is, indeed, progress denied.

On top of it all, our valiant efforts to advocate legislative hope in the midst of a climate crisis that elected officials *from this state* have the power to resolve have fallen short.

Where in the world do we find our hope?!

In a February 1985 interview with the Christian social justice magazine, *Sojourners*, Desmond Tutu said, *If it weren't for faith, I would have given up long ago. [But] in the middle of our faith is the death and resurrection. Nothing could have been more hopeless than Good Friday - but then Easter happened, and forever we have to become prisoners of hope.*

Our faith *compels* us to hope, Tutu says! Not the other way around.

On Christmas Eve we do not focus so much on Good Friday, and for good reason. That is just too much blood and guts for this Holy Night. But the truth is, even on Christmas Eve, Mother Mary has every reason to give up hope. Even on Christmas Eve, Step-Dad Joseph has every reason to give up hope. The Shepherds, the Wise Guys, and even Jesus, himself, thirty years later, crying out on the cross, all of them have every reason to give up hope. Desmond Tutu, in the height of apartheid South Africa, has every reason to give up hope.

Still, they labor on.

*It is a tremendous thing*, Desmond Tutu says in that 1985 interview, in the height of South African apartheid, *to come to the church and be upheld by the love and caring of our [siblings] throughout the world. ... It means a great deal to those who are oppressed to know that they aren't alone. ... We have the wonderful privilege of being fellow workers with God.*

We, you and I, this glorious Christmas Eve 2021, here in the height of a global pandemic without end, we find our hope in the wonderful privilege of laboring with God. Whether it is through our ongoing advocacy with our legislators, or our gifts of time and talent and treasure with the Shepherdstown Shares Food Pantry and the Coalfield Development Corporation and our international mission partner in Nicaragua, or the mound of get well cards I urge us to send to our convalescing Administrative Assistant, we find our hope the privilege of prayer *in action*.

*The sea is made up of drops of water*, Desmond Tutu concludes in his interview those many years ago. *Never, never let anyone tell you that what you are doing is insignificant. ... Love must always prevail over hate. Therefore, we are part of an enterprises that can never fail.*

In hindsight, again, we know Desmond Tutu is right. Every drop of water, every labor of love around the world advocating against apartheid, does, in the end, prevail against hate. But even if it had not, therein lies the true hope of Christmas in the heart of an ongoing pandemic. Our hope is not found in any particular outcome according to any particular timeline. Our hope is certainly not found in any form of pollyanna optimism.

Our hope, in the end, is found in the choice we make to trust that every single labor of love that you and I offer in the face of despair *matters*. Even when we cannot yet see the fruits of that labor.

It always has. And it always will.