



SERMONS THAT WORK

**Advent 1
Year C**

We Need a Little Hopefulness

[RCL]: Jeremiah 33:14-16, Psalm 25:1-9, 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13, Luke 21:25-36

On May 24, 1966, a new musical opened on Broadway. Music and lyrics by Jerry Herman, starring Angela Lansbury and Bea Arthur.

It's the story of the madcap life of eccentric Mame Dennis and how her bohemian, intellectual, arty clique is disrupted when her deceased brother's 10-year-old son Patrick is entrusted to her care. Rather than bow to convention, Mame introduces the boy to her free-wheeling lifestyle, instilling in him her favorite credo, "Life is a banquet, and most [people] are starving to death."

At one point in the course of the play, Mame and her new ward are feeling sad. Patrick is mourning the death of his father, and Mame her brother, after all.

She decides to make happy, leading into the song *We Need a Little Christmas*. In the midst of the song, Patrick protests, "But, Auntie Mame, it's one week past Thanksgiving Day now," as if to say it is *too early* to decorate or celebrate Christmas.

That was 1966, when one week *past* Thanksgiving was *too early* for Christmas.

Fast forward to 2018, barely fifty years later. In August, one could encounter Christmas decorations and trees in the local home improvement store. And by November 15th, the Singapore Airport was adorned with "Merry Christmas" banners and the PA system was blaring *Frosty, the Snowman*. (And that in a country where they recognize four official languages, and the Christians—who are mostly ethnically Chinese—represent less than a third of the population.)

In most of these United States, the stores have unleashed a frenzy of sales events, special promotions, and cheery ads featuring Santa and his reindeer.

The Hallmark Channel is advertising its Countdown to Christmas movie fest, which began on November 1st.

And now there are folks insisting that the twelve days of Christmas begin on December 14 –so they can *end* on Christmas Day. Traditionally, of course, the first day of Christmas is December 25, and at the end of the twelve days, we have the feast of the Epiphany, on January 6.

And all of this is not about the birth of a Savior, it's about spending, spending, spending. And spending a *lot*.

Remember the song *I'll Be Home for Christmas*? It's a Bing Crosby song from 1943. It speaks of "presents *on* the tree." These were just little and usually handmade trinkets. Not presents *under* the tree, huge stacks and piles of purchased merchandise—but simple little gifts that could be hung on the tree's branches.

And in the midst of all this, the church offers the season of Advent, which is definitely *not* about shopping for presents. As we heard in today's gospel story, "People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory."

This is a prophecy of the end of times, a.k.a. the apocalypse, the Omega, Armageddon, Parousia, the End Times, the promised return of Jesus to judge both the living and the dead. It makes you feel a bit Scrooge-like, doesn't it?

But perhaps you too have this odd, peculiar hope. Because we need a little hopefulness:

- Hope that the severity of our political rhetoric is precisely what we need to come out of our illusionary comfort zones into a dangerous world and stand up for what is right and good and just.
- Hope that we can rest in an unshakeable belief that we will be cared for in this life, that we will persevere in adversity, and that we will move on to life eternal.
- Hope that we will be freed from our fear and become bright beacons to the brokenhearted, even as we too face the storm, knowing that God has our back.

But, wait a minute. What about this Christ returning in glorious majesty thing? What about last judgment? When we proclaim, "He will come again in glory to judge," should that not make us quake in our boots? So—should we not be afraid that God will punish us?

Because, we need a little hopefulness, but, let's face it, we are perfectly content to demand revenge when we get hurt, to live fat and happy surrounded by poverty, and to pick fights whenever we are confronted.

We are not sinister in this, just oblivious. We see only our own materialistic, xenophobic, retaliatory image. Not the image of God, who is quite different from the powers of empire and imperialism:

- This Jesus we follow was born as a homeless traveler, whose family struggled to find welcome.
- This Jesus we follow lived and ministered in poverty, at the mercy of the generosity of others.
- This Jesus we follow offered no exceptions to his table of hospitality.
- This Jesus we follow held more power than anyone on the planet—before or since—yet never once used the force of that power in the face of oppression, or violence, or even his own torture and execution.

Jesus showed an unquenchable, confident optimism—even in seemingly dire situations. And he commanded us not to fear, but live in hope.

And we need a little hopefulness.

- Because horrors run non-stop through our news feeds, fanning our fear.
- Because merchandise is offered to make us feel better, but really only increases that fear.
- Because we fill up our lives with mostly meaningless activities, because it somehow is less frightening to keep busy.

In the relentless pursuit of acquisitions and wealth and power, we risk becoming spiritually disoriented, losing sight of anything sure and steady.

And then faith leaks out bit by bit, more and more fear seeps in, and we start sinking.

Once fear becomes the dominant force in our religion and our lives, we end up even more terrified, more desperate, more jittery. So we seek more and more stuff, we fill up more of our time with entertainment and events, and we grow more hostile to others, more contemptible of those who are different, more drawn to self-protection, mimetic violence, and even aggression.

In other words: we become less and less like Jesus. So we seriously need a little hopefulness.

The very heart of Christianity is inclusion and welcome and invitation. It is trust and contentment and hope that cannot be overtaken. It is serving and yielding and sacrificing.

It is not a scared narcissism that vilifies the other, relentlessly accumulates material goods and wealth, and seeks power or prestige.

And we *can* and *will* live in hope, not fear. Because you see, Jesus *will* come in glory to judge the living and the dead.

Adolph Hitler, Osama Bin Laden, every tyrant that ever was will one day stand before the judgment seat. So we need not fret about judging them—or anyone else.

Now, *there's* a little hopefulness: the Last Judgment will put things right.

And, remember: *we* will stand before the judgment seat, as well.

Christ the King will know *everything* we've done or left undone. Everyone we've hurt. Every evil intent, every neglectful moment, every time we gave in to fear.

And he will say, "I forgive you. Welcome into paradise."

Now, that's more than a little hopefulness: that's comfort, reassurance, glad tidings of great joy. "I forgive you. Welcome into paradise."

So let us not be afraid. Let us prepare to celebrate the birth of our Savior. Let us strive to emulate Jesus.

- Jesus, who offers not fear but forgiveness.
- Jesus, who offers not hate but sacrificial love.
- Jesus, who offers not condemnation but life eternal.

What would this world be like if we, each of us, lived more and more into that sure and certain hope?

Father Barrie Bates lives in Jersey City and Michigan. He wishes to draw your attention to the Advent Project (theadventproject.org), which calls for a seven-week season of Advent, something the Revised Common Lectionary already supports. By this means, preachers will have the opportunity to speak of the Advent season and Christmas before the major Thanksgiving shopping rush. It's worth considering.