

Everything will always be all right when we go shopping

Hespeler, December 1, 2024 © Scott McAndless – First Sunday of Advent
Jeremiah 33:14-16, Psalm 25:1-10, 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13, [Luke 21:25-36](#)

On their 2003 album, *Everything to Everyone*, the Barenaked Ladies included a song that always starts playing in my head around this time of year. The lyrics go like this:

*Well you know it's going to be all right. I think it's going to be alright
everything will always be all right when we go shopping...*

It's always lalalalalala... let the shopping spree begin

lalalalalalalalala... everybody wins

So shut up and never stop let's shop until we drop...

I remember many times when our kids were young, we would all pile into the car and head to the mall to do some Christmas shopping. As we headed down the driveway, we would put that very song on blaring from the sound system. It seemed to be the perfect thing to get us into the right spirit.

Shopping will Save Us?

But that song is about more than just how fun it can be to go shopping. It claims much more than that. It almost seems to be saying that shopping is what will save us – that it will be the thing that makes everything alright.

I am certain that they wrote it, not as a fun little nonsense song, but as a biting commentary on our society and its priorities. The song was written, after all, very shortly after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. In the aftermath of those terrible events, the need to keep shopping became a dominant theme.

A week after the attack, the American president famously said to the American people, “I’ve been told that some fear to leave; some don’t want to go shopping for their families... That should not and that will not stand in America.”

The intent of that statement was certainly more nuanced than people usually give it credit for; I have taken it out of the original context. But the message that stuck, that many people heard was absolutely that if Americans stopped shopping, the terrorists would win.

Black Friday

As Black Friday, the biggest shopping day of the year and the kickoff to the Christmas shopping season approached in 2001, everybody was watching nervously. The very fate of the nation seemed to hang in the balance. If consumers came through, if they did indeed shop until they dropped, the nation would be saved. The salvation of society itself was in the hands of shoppers and dependent on their willingness to go even deeper into debt to keep the economy moving. Note how it was not up to the corporations or the retailers or even the financial institutions. We would only know that everything would be all right when we went shopping.



But it was not just true that year. This year, with people hit hard by inflation, a string of disasters and political uncertainty, you can bet that people are nervously watching the numbers on consumer spending during this season. It is so important that the federal government has even cut back retail taxes and promised a big stimulus check to keep people shopping. If the shoppers don't come through, if they close their wallets and restrict their spending, it will be taken as a sign that we are all doomed. If, on the other hand, everybody goes shopping, well, you know that it's going to be all right.

Retail Therapy

But there is also another meaning behind that song. Not only is it a reminder of just how dependent our entire system is on consumer spending, it is also a commentary on individual strategies for coping. For many people today, the motto that they live by is this: "When the going gets tough, the tough go shopping." It is so common for people to distract themselves from their personal or global anxieties and fears by going out and buying something new that that people literally call it "retail therapy."

When we buy something or when something we have ordered online arrives, we get that hit of dopamine that makes us feel, if only for a fleeting moment, as if everything really is all right. The feeling sometimes even lasts until the credit card bill comes in.

That is the world that we all live in. And the sense that shopping is what makes the world all right is particularly strong at this time of year. If you, as we are all expected to do after all, went shopping this weekend, you may have gone home with the feeling that, yes, everything is indeed all right.

A Different Message in Church

And then you come to church on the First Sunday in Advent, just days after Black Friday, and what do you get? Do you get reassured that everything is going to be all right? No, you do not. Let me tell you what you get on the First Sunday in Advent. You get "**signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars.**" You get "**distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves.**" And you get people fainting from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens are shaken.

Those are words that were written almost two thousand years ago and were written in the shadow of some truly horrendous events – the invasion and destruction of an entire nation, the demolition of a temple and the wholesale slaughter of fighters and civilians alike. But they don't really seem to be talking about ancient history, do they? They seem to be a pretty good commentary of the state of the world right now.

What's Going on in the World

"**Distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves.**" That sounds exactly like several reports on the effects of hurricanes that are still ringing in our ears from over the last couple of months. And I don't know about you but my social media feeds are just chock full of "**people [fainting] from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world.**"

The ideas that are conveyed in this passage are painfully current – so much so that I suspect that many of us try not to think about the state of the world. In fact, that is one reason why we distract ourselves so very much with our “retail therapy.”

I can well imagine, therefore, that some people could be annoyed to come to church on the First Sunday in Advent and to open our Bibles only to be confronted with a gospel passage like this one which seems to be ripped from our newspaper headlines. Isn't coming to church supposed to make us feel good? Aren't we meant to be assured that everything is going to be all right? Because if the church won't tell us that, we can always go to the mall!

Hope

And isn't this First Sunday in Advent in particular supposed to be all about hope? I mean, we lit the candle and everything! All of this doesn't seem particularly hopeful, does it? It seems downright disturbing.

Well, that takes us right to the heart of the question of the day. What is hope? Is hope just a good feeling, an assurance that everything will be all right? It is not. Yes, it is true that one aspect of hope is a confidence that things will work out in the end. But there is a difference between a confidence and a feeling.

Hope cannot be engendered by ignoring the real-world problems around us, which is what we often do with our shopping obsession. And I'm not just talking about how we distract ourselves by buying stuff.

People Struggling

I'm also talking about how lots of people are struggling because they are falling through the cracks of our economy. They can't get work that gives them enough hours or enough pay to cover their bills. They can't get housing that they can afford. They don't have enough to buy healthy food. That is where an increasing portion of our population finds itself.

If the economy made any sense, such a situation would lead to utter collapse in every sector, but that is not what happens because we all go into debt to keep shopping. This hides the reality of the world we're living in and it means that we don't have to deal with it.

But hope doesn't hide from the truth. It believes in the future, but not because it knows that the system is stable. It recognizes that the system is corrupt and teetering on the edge of collapse, but it still has confidence in a future. That is the hope that we celebrate on the First Sunday of Advent.

Eyes Wide Open

The passage we read this morning from the Gospel of Luke is based on the words of Jesus. He spoke them to his disciples as he looked forward to the chaos and destruction that he knew would be visited on the people of Judea if they continued down the path that they were on. But Luke wrote these words decades later, when many of the things that Jesus had foreseen had already happened and the world was still a mess.

Both Jesus and the gospel writer looked at the world with eyes wide open. They saw the mess. They saw the injustice and the failures of the systems. And yet they still had hope.

They had hope, not because they knew what the outcome would be so much as because they knew in whose hands the future would be. They had hope that allowed them to look realistically at the situation in front of them, to come to terms with just how scary or anxiety inducing it was, and yet accept that it was the reality they had to deal with. They could embrace it because they knew that God was alive and that God would never abandon God's people.

Not Very Good at Hope

I don't think that we are very good at hope in our world today. We are more in the business of spreading good feelings or of distracting people with things like consumer spending. It is why so many of us have such a hard time once the distractions stop. We are all constantly scrolling from one tik-tok or tweet to the next on our phones, we always have the television or the music on in the background because we know that, if ever the distractions stop, the bleak reality of the world will come crashing in on us and we won't be able to cope.

What Else We're Distracted from

But Christians should know that there is another possible thing that happens when we turn off the distractions. People of faith have discovered again and again down through the centuries that when you enter into true silence – when you turn off the distractions and the voices within you – something amazing can happen. You can encounter God.

That's another reason why the distractions – including the shopping obsessions – of our modern world get in the way of hope. They may be keeping us from being disturbed by the evil of this world, but they are also preventing us from finding God, the source of all hope.

Powerful Image

This is the image that Jesus places before us to find hope when things are looking dark: **“Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in a cloud’ with power and great glory.”** I don't personally think of that as something that will happen once in practical terms. I see it as a promise of what will happen whenever we seek for God's presence. We will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory.

This vision of the glory of God's own mighty Son is what can keep us going even when all seems lost.

That is why **“when these things begin to take place,”** you don't need to fall into despair and you don't need to distract yourselves with shopping. You can **“stand up and raise your heads,”** because you know that it is not shopping that will make everything be all right. You will know that **“your redemption is drawing near.”**