

Resilient hope: Stay awake! Be ready!

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [December 19, 2001](#) issue

It is generally not a good idea to refer to one's children in sermon or print, but I've concluded that when it comes to grandchildren, such rules are suspended. Rachel goes to Cardinal Bernardin School in Chicago, and as her mother was putting her to bed one night last year during Advent, she asked Rachel if she had learned any new songs at school recently. Rachel sang out of the darkness:

Stay awake! (clap-clap)

Be ready! (clap-clap)

The Lord is coming soon.

Alleluia! Alleluia! (hands waving in the air, like a wide receiver after scoring a touchdown)

The Lord is coming soon. (clap-clap)

She loves to sing it, and will sing it at the drop of a hat. So with Rachel and her sweet song, it's Advent all year long.

Advent is about hope, based on something God did in human history in Bethlehem two thousand years ago. And Advent is about hope, based on the promise that God will continue to act creatively, lovingly and redemptively in human history, and in our personal histories. Advent and the promise of Christmas come at a moment when the world desperately needs a reason to be hopeful.

Even before September 11, our culture seemed caught in a crisis of hope. Andrew Delbanco in *The Real American Dream: A Meditation in Hope* argues that "our hopes are a measure of our greatness. When our hopes shrink, we ourselves are diminished." Delbanco thinks our hopes have shrunk a lot recently, to the point where we are self-pampering.

The psychologists remind us that hopelessness is the seedbed of melancholy and destructiveness. Those of us who live in cities know how hopeless poverty breeds

mindless violence. On September 11, we experienced such hopelessness nationally.

Against that backdrop, intensified this year, comes the Christian faith with its particular hopefulness. It is persistent, resilient and very old. It has lived through military catastrophes, national defeat, exile, persecution, holocaust. God's people have held tightly to hope in the darkest and most hopeless situations, and it has given them stamina, courage and life itself.

Christmas reminds us that God's hopeful love comes in ways that are not always recognizable. Nobody much recognized God's presence in Bethlehem, or later, when Jesus taught and healed and confronted and challenged. And even fewer recognized God as Jesus was betrayed, tried, convicted and crucified. We don't know how or when, but we trust that God will come into the world and into our lives with love and forgiveness and healing and reconciliation.