

Hope

*“When the sky is a bright canary yellow
I forget every cloud I’ve ever seen
And they call me a ‘cockeyed optimist’
Immature and incurably green...”*

Oscar Hammerstein II

These words from “South Pacific” seem to enter into my head when I think about the word, “hope.” You almost have to put this song into context. South Pacific was a musical written about life during the war based off of the novel, Tales of the South Pacific by James Michener. Apparently, Michener survived a plane crash in New Calcedonia and, in recovery, was inspired by the stories told by soldiers. He also visited part of the island and met up with some of the characters who became part of his novel.

Without delving into a treatise on “South Pacific”, the song “Cockeyed Optimist” introduces audiences to the character of Nellie Forbush as well as her usual, sunny disposition. Even with war all around, when she looks about the island, she is entranced by what is around her, even though others make fun of her for it. Nellie is filled with hope.

The original hearers of the book of Isaiah needed hope as well.

The first twelve chapters of the book are filled with Isaiah's vision of judgement and hope for Jerusalem. Basically, he is telling them to "straighten up and fly right" so that the people may enjoy the benefits of what has been promised to them by God. It is believed that this part was written before the Babylonian exile. They could be filled with hope that if they did what they were supposed to, i.e., follow their religion, they could enjoy the life promised to them by God. The reading we heard this morning allows us to be joyful with them as they were filled with hope for what could be.

The psalmist also fills people with hope as people were exhorted to pray for the peace of Jerusalem. For us it can be seen as fulfillment of hope in Christ. In his letter to the Romans, Paul reminds them to be ready for the second coming, not from being asleep, but shaping up their lives. Again, some folks thought that the return of Jesus was imminent; he could come at any moment. Couldn't that be the same for us as well?

And then we have the reading from Matthew. As we enter a new liturgical cycle with readings for Year "A", we will hear a great deal of

Matthew's Gospel. What we need to know is that Matthew's Gospel was written after Mark's, the theme is Jesus as the fulfillment of God's promise to send the Messiah (ahem, he IS the Messiah) and is placed first in the "New Testament" as it was deemed it would make the best transition from the "Old Testament."

The original hearers or audience for Matthew's Gospel were Palestinian Christian Jews. These folks were Jewish people who also followed "The Way" after the death of Jesus. Perhaps some had heard Jesus but needed some "convincing" that Jesus was indeed the Promised Messiah. It was written down around 65-70 AD and was either the second or third Gospel written, depending on which Scripture scholar you follow.

In our reading today, Jesus is getting foretelling what will happen after his death and telling them of his followers that he will return to them. The reading is placed in the lectionary at this time as a reminder that the "Son of Man" will return, but we do not know exactly when. Jesus tells his disciples that it will be quick, though, and that they should

be ready. The original audience who heard this probably thought that they should prepare for the coming of the Lord.

These folks also needed some hope. If you think about what was happening to the early followers of “The Way”, even in Jerusalem, it would be crucial for them to have this hope. They, too, were being harassed, arrested, and even tortured for their faith. These were the ones who were probably being turned in by their families for being followers of “The Way” or part of the new sect called “Christians.” These folks needed to know that the return of the Savior would happen and they should be ready as well.

Nellie Forbush goes on to sing, “I hear the human race is falling on its face and hasn’t very far to go.” What does this do for us in 2025? Think about it; we need to be filled with hope as well. We look around at everything going on with the government, people protesting on either side, and many who are in need of assistance right here in Southwick or Westfield and in the neighboring towns. We may be pessimistic and think, “Aw, what does it matter? What good can I do? How can I bring good news to the poor, etc.?”

We have to be filled with hope for us to get through any of our tough times. We are filled with hope just by doing what we can to follow the Gospel message. If we aren't following this message or, if we can be doing a better job of it, we have hope that we can take the time in this season of Advent to make it right with us and with God. Advent gives us hope to take the time let our relationship with Jesus be "reborn" at Christmas. It is because of our relationship with Jesus that we have hope for the future, hope that lion can still lie down with lamb, and that we will all be able to celebrate the birth of the Savior with a renewed hope in our hearts.