

Advent 2 A December 6 and 7, 2025. Greenwich.

I have been a priest for more than 45 years. I have ministered in California, Indiana, Massachusetts, Australia, New Zealand, Washington DC, Philadelphia as well as here in Connecticut. I have preached thousands of times.

In all those homilies, I believe I have never spoken a word of heresy.

But today, I depart from that tradition.

I confess to you, frankly, that I hold a belief many of you may find heretical.

You may term this the “Humbug Heresy,” after Ebenezer Scrooge.

It is this:

I hate December.

I hate cold weather, snow and ice. I hate December's short days and long nights; indeed, two weeks from now is the winter solstice, the longest night of the year.

I spent most of my adult Decembers on a university campus: Harvard, Boston College, Berkeley, Notre Dame, University of Connecticut or Fairfield.

And December always meant late nights, the pressure of exams and papers, exhaustion and anxiety. And that was true whether I was a student or a teacher.

That December stress didn't dissipate when I left campus to run a nursing home, or a parish, or supervise nation-wide formation programs for the Jesuits.

And I wager you all know exactly what I mean. December is stressful for all of us.

Maybe this year you have to cut back on the shopping and entertaining and sending cards. At family gatherings there likely will be squabbles, awkward conversations, disappointments, and exaggerated expectations that, once again this year, won't be fulfilled.

So, when we hear the Advent cry, "Wait, expect, watch and look for," lots of us spend December looking for it all to be over, waiting for the madness to end.

I hate December, and maybe some of you heretics do too.

Now, in addition to being a heretic, I may also be schizophrenic, because I also love December.

Advent is my favorite liturgical season. I love the holidays, and the holy days, and the music. I especially like Advent Lessons and Carols on Christmas Eve from King's Chapel, Cambridge. And I hope you'll join us on Tuesdays of Advent for chanted Taizé Prayer.

I love the Christmas lights and decorations----except those that go up before Thanksgiving!

I love eggnog, and Christmas cookies, and gingerbread men, and caroling, and Christmas Eve mass, and holiday movies like It's a Wonderful Life and Miracle on 34th Street, and hearing from old friends. Their love is a beacon of warmth and light in the cold and dark.

So, I hate December and I love December.

Maybe you are as confused, schizophrenic and heretical as I am this month.

The Scriptures today proclaim both those realities: both the uncomfortable and disconcerting reality of John the Baptizer-----
 “Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths,” for
 “there is an unquenchable fire for the chaff.”

But also, the joy and encouragement of Saint Paul: God, the source of all patience, will enable you to live in harmony with one another in the Spirit of Jesus.

And the image that captures those two truths, the image that symbolizes the whole story of creation, sin, and redemption, is that of the tree:

John the Baptist says the tree that does not bear fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.

But Isaiah says, From the stump of Jesse, a shoot shall sprout, and from that root a blossom will grow.

And indeed, it is a tree that starts the whole story.

You remember that first tree, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Because of disobedience and the human desire to be God, to deny our status as creatures of a good God, that tree of life became a tree of death, exile and enmity, bringing about a world where wolves prey on lambs, and lions feast on oxen, and children fall victim to the sting of the serpent; a world where injustice is the fate of the poor and afflicted, where wisdom and understanding are driven out by ignorance, foolishness and sin.

In short, the world of the December I hate.

But there is also another tree, the tree “on which is hung our salvation,” the cross of Jesus Christ.

There, by the obedience of God’s Son and His choice to empty himself of his equality with the Father and become a human, indeed to become a slave for us, the tree of death has become the tree of life.

The dying and rising of Jesus ushers in a new world, where former enemies will become neighbors, where there shall be no more ruin or harm on God's holy mountain, where the Holy Spirit will baptize all in the glory of God.

And in this Advent time, this time of waiting for the fullness of that vision to come to pass, there is a third tree, the evergreen.

The evergreen is cool and refreshing in the midst of summer drought, and it lives and flourishes even in the midst of winter cold.

At my parish, in Storrs at UConn, each December I used to go to a local Christmas tree farm and cut down real trees for the church and the parish hall. These days, alas, because of fire laws, many of us have to settle for artificial ones.

But even those can remind us that God's faithfulness endures, even in the midst of the long nights and the snows and the bitter times.

Our evergreen branches at the foot of the Advent candle stand begin to foreshadow the coming days of new life,
a rich harvest.

the flourishing of justice and peace.

We will light our evergreen Christmas tree outside on December 20th, just as we light the Advent candles here, to symbolize our confident hope in Jesus Christ, the Light of the World, come in the midst of our world's cold and dark.

These Advent days, and nights, I invite you to anticipate, and to hasten, the Lord's return in glory, by yourselves becoming evergreens for one another-----perhaps a preacher never before exhorted you to become a Christmas tree! Well, another December heresy---Become evergreens for one another, not artificial ones, but genuine symbols of patient endurance and sturdy growth.

Remember, even in the chilling times, the evergreen tree always points upward, to God's grandeur.

Let yourself be festooned with light, the light of Christ, to brighten the way of those in darkness.

Many of you have heard me exhort you, Be Brilliant!

Well, as with the Giving Tree in the narthex, under your branches may the poor find gifts of compassion and justice this Christmas.

I still hate the cold and the dark, for all of us are meant to live in the light of the new creation, filled with the fire of the Spirit of the Lord.

So, with the whole Church, we brilliant evergreens will continue to pray, every day of Advent, and every day until He returns, “Maranatha, come Lord Jesus, come.”

And the people of God said, Amen.