

## **Advent 2 12.8.24**

When I was growing up, there was a cartoon which was shown featuring a character named Droopy Dog. Droopy Dog was this lethargic, down-in-the-mouth figure. He shuffled along. Mumbled his words. He made everyone aware that his life and life in general was just miserable. Droopy Dog could win a \$1 million and would complain what a burden it is to carry around that much money.

A more recent equivalent of Droopy Dog would be Debbie Downer. Debbie Downer is a character from Saturday Night Live. Skits about her were featured on SNL from 2004 to 2020. If you want a good laugh, look at the video of her trip to Disney World with her friends. She makes the cast break character and has them laughing so hard they can't deliver their lines.

While at the "happiest place on earth," Debbie can only fret that she might catch some illness there. She is also preoccupied and overwhelmed by current tragedies happening around the world – mad cow disease or an explosion, for example. She even laments that it will be just her luck to finally connect with a Disney character which will then pass out because of heat stroke.

In the cold war years, Droopy Dog was a character we could identify with. He reflected back to us just how pessimistic things were in the world in those days. Debbie Downer did the same. In the post-9/11 years and during the pandemic, Debbie Downer reenforced the notion that there wasn't much to be positive about.

The prophet Baruch, whom we heard from in the first reading, lived in a particularly trying period of history. The people of Israel were driven from their homeland. They found refuge in neighboring nations which were not welcoming to them. In fact, the people and government of those nations did everything they could to oppress these migrant refugees. As you can imagine, the Israelites didn't experience much joy during this time and felt there was little to be hopeful about. Baruch reminded them that God would always be faithful to them. He would bring them home to their native land. God would restore them to a way of life that would be greater than they had ever known. And the peoples' beloved Temple would be restored. In time, their pessimism and hopelessness gave way to rejoicing and newfound hope. All that happened as the Israelites re-dedicated themselves to God and re-dedicated themselves to living out their faith in him with every fiber of their being.

The gospel passage which we heard today, written by St. Luke, recalls the ministry of St. John the Baptist. The Jewish audience whom John addressed had ample reason to be pessimistic. The religious leaders of the time seemed more concerned with enriching themselves than anything else. They took advantage of widows' generosity in order to line their own pockets so that they could live more comfortably, instead of focusing on serving God's people. The people of Israel were also being oppressed – economically and politically – by the Roman army and rulers who had taken over their land.

Seemingly, there wasn't much to be hopeful about in the land of Israel during the time of John the Baptist. But John said a Messiah had come along who is establishing the Kingdom of God. Despite all that was happening around them, he reminded the people that they belonged to the Kingdom of God. They would have a place in that Kingdom if they repented – that is, turned back to God. By turning away from sin and in seeking a changed heart, John promised that the people would be given a new hope and a deep joy. He pointed the people to Jesus, whom he said would forgive them and strengthen them in the midst of oppression and hardship that seemed to come at them from all sides.

As we observe and live in the world around us, we might feel a bit like Droopy Dog or Debbie Downer. We might feel there is little to hope in or nothing that could give us joy. In fact we might ask: what do I have to be joyful about? Is there anything out there which can give me hope?

For me and for every Catholic, there should be several things that immediately come to mind – in fact, some are right in front of us.

As we anticipate the great Solemnity of Christmas, it would be helpful to reflect on what this celebration means for us today and in every generation. At Christmas we celebrate how God came to this earth. He became like us in all things, except sin. His coming among us reminds us that he knows every one of our challenges, temptations, and trials. Since he himself conquered those things, he knows what we need to face them as well. He gives us his grace, his very life, which re-ignites our hope and strengthens us to carry on in faith.

As we worship here today, we experience God speaking to us in the scriptures. He has a message for each one of us and is guiding us on the way to his Kingdom. His words have the power to raise our spirits and fortify us to face any and every challenge.

We are also hopeful and filled with joy as we hear Jesus tell us throughout the Mass that we are forgiven, we are made new. Those words are spoken to us in the penitential rite in the beginning of Mass, when we sing the Lamb of God, and when we join together in saying, "Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed."

In light of that last statement, the Church teaches that the Eucharist is a sacrament of forgiveness and healing. While our sins burden us and laden us with guilt and shame, Jesus constantly, consistently, and compassionately frees us from sin and the shame which accompanies those sins. Certainly this is a cause for joy.

Did you know there is a Catholic Parish in Gaza? It is named Holy Family Church and there are about 500 parishioners there. They are Palestinians who are striving to live holy lives and simply survive.

I google that parish every once in a while. Just two days ago, Catholic News Service did an update on that community. They reported that for many months, Pope Francis has been calling that parish every evening at 7 pm. The call may be a few minutes or only 30 seconds long. But in the midst of war, starvation, and the fear of new threats, the pastor and people of that parish look forward to that call. They said it strengthens their faith, fills them with hope, and reminds them that others outside of their war-torn town are thinking about them and praying for them each day.

The Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem who oversees this parish made some incredibly hopeful comments in the midst of the war and poverty which ravage that land. He said this, "Christmas is the feast of the children.... What we will try and do, if we are able, is to introduce not just food but also some toys. Something that will make a difference to the everyday life for children."

According to the Patriarch, hope in the Holy Land is a reality in spite of the multiple and complex challenges affecting that area of the world. "Where there are these acts of love — gratuitous love — there is hope," he told journalists at a press conference.

He continued, "We have to say very clearly that we do not confuse hope with solution.... If you identify hope for the future with the political [and] social solution for the Holy Land, there will be no hope because there is no solution — not in the short-term."

Describing hope as the "daughter of faith," the Patriarch said it is only by faith in a transcendent God that one has the ability to see "beyond the dark reality we are living."

In the middle of a war and famine, the people in Holy Family Parish in Gaza are seeing hope and living in hope. Where do we, who have so much more in comparison, see hope? How do we live in hope? And will we be ambassadors of hope to those around us who have none? It is our duty to be such an ambassador of hope, since we already know, have experienced, and continue to live in the hope that only Christ can give!

Amen? Amen!