

I Child

Once upon a time there was a young country boy named Jamie who could not talk. In spite of his disability, however, his father refused to allow him to be different. As a young boy he helped with the farm chores. When Jamie was old enough to go to school his father sent him to listen and write with the others.

Jamie often was frustrated by his inability to communicate with others. He often pitched tantrums when he felt really powerless. One time when he felt particularly powerless was when the schoolteacher put him in the choir for the Christmas play. Unable to make any sound except a grunt with his open mouth, he would aggravate those around him as they sang. Finally, in exasperation, the teacher changed her mind and cast him as a small shepherd. Jamie took this role very seriously, and was quite pleased with his costume--a multicolored robe and shepherd's crook. He was not so pleased, however, when on the night of the scheduled play performance a heavy snowstorm set in, preventing the play from being performed.

As he sat by the window, he noticed two figures in the snowstorm. A man and his wife came to the door to ask for lodging. Jamie's father escorted them to the church where there was heat and room. There the woman gave birth to a baby.

Christmas morning, Jamie and his family went to check on the family who had slept that night in the church. As they looked on the newborn, Jamie suddenly rushed from the building to his own home where he gathered his meager presents--an orange and a dime--and his shepherd's costume and crook. Then he returned to the church.

Going to the mother's pallet he dropped to his knees and said, "Here's a Christmas gift for the Child." He laid the orange beside the baby's hand. "And here's a Christmas gift for the Mother," putting his dime in the woman's hand.

Jamie's family fell to their knees, trembling with wonder at the sound of Jamie's voice. "Surely," said the mother, "The Lord lives this day."

Jamie's father replied, "Surely, the Lord does live this day, and all days. And he is loving and merciful and good."*

This, of course, is just a story. But Christmas is a time of wondrous things, isn't it? That is why we sing joyous carols like "Joy to the World" and "Silent Night." The little baby Jesus has brought hope and joy into the world for all people, but particularly for the least and the lowest, for those in need, for people like Jamie, and for you and me.

*Rebecca Caudill, A CERTAIN SMALL SHEPHERD, NY: Holt, 1965.

Adult

What's the thing with fried chicken sandwiches? Popeyes introduced, as part of its Louisiana Kitchen offerings, a fried chicken sandwich which created a craze that surprised nearly everyone, including KFC and other rivals. The craze was so wild that people stood in line for hours, stores ran out of the sandwiches, and a fight at one store led to someone's death. crazes like this catch our attention; but they also come-and-go, whether it's clothes we wear, movies we see like Frozen II, diets we begin, or even politicians we start to follow.

From the Gospel reading it seems that crazes happened even in ancient times. Matthew tries to give the scope of this, with people from "all of Judea and Jerusalem" coming to be baptized. While certain groups practiced water cleansings in ancient Israel, the idea of baptism for many people was a rather novel idea. Hypeing this craze was the tenor of John's message, the same as Jesus's message: "Repent, the Kingdom of God is at hand." Whatever the people understood, and whatever John meant to say, we would have to wait until Jesus' Resurrection to find out what this meant.

The shocking part of this was John's reaction to some groups that wanted to join the crowd, to get in on the craze. When Pharisees and Saducees came to be baptized, John lets them have it. "You brood of vipers," he yells. These are the religious and civic leaders of the Jewish people and now we have John calling them a bunch of poisonous snakes. John even tells them why he's attacking them: "Don't presume to say that Abraham is your father." In other words, don't rely on your Jewish identity as something that will cover for you.

John says that Jesus will come to clean the threshing floor with fire and the Holy Spirit. This means that God is expecting a deeper level of purity and commitment for people who want to respond to the invitation. It cannot be business as usual. It cannot be the same excuses or inertia. "Show signs of repentance," John says to the leaders and, of course, John says to us at Mass today. Since the Pharisees were unusually pious people, we have to wonder what John meant.

The real preparation for Christmas that you and I need to make is our determination to turn from evil and sin and hatred and turn to celebrate the One who brings peace and love to the world. We have penance services and increased times for reconciliation to help us turn from sin. We have special charitable opportunities like the Advent Giving Tree and Project Thanks to help us foster love.

We do have to be careful that with all the Advent preparation we make, we don't make the mistake of Befana in a folktale of the Epiphany. Let me read it to you in poetic form:

Befana the housewife, scrubbing her pane,
Saw three old sages ride down the lane,
Saw three gray travelers pass her door,
Gaspar, Balthazar and Melchior.

“Where journey you, sirs?” she asked of them.
Balthazar answered, “To Bethlehem,

“For we have news of a marvelous thing,
Born in a stable is Christ the King.”

“Give him my welcome,”
Then Gaspar smiled,
“Come with us mistress to greet the child.”

“O happily, happily would I fare,
“Were my dusting through,
and I polished the stair.”

Old Melchior leaned on his saddle horn,
“Then send but a gift to the small Newborn.”

“O gladly, gladly, I’d send him one,
“Were the hearthstone swept
and my weaving done.

“As soon as I’ve baked my bread,
“I’ll fetch him a pillow for his head,
“And a coverlet too,” Befana said.

“When the rooms are aired and the linen dry,
“I’ll look to the babe,”
But the three rode by.

She worked for a day, and a night and a day,
Then, gifts in her hand, she took up her way.
But she never found where the Christ Child lay.

And still she wanders at Christmastide.
Houseless, whose house was all her pride.

Whose heart was tardy, whose gifts were late,
Wanders and knocks at every gate.
Crying, “Good people, let the bells begin.
“Put off your toiling and let love in.”

“Put off your toiling and let love in.” This is what Christmas is about: letting love in. We are going through a difficult time in the world and in our country. There are, sadly people who think that in certain circumstances bigotry and hatred are

acceptable. Right wing groups like the KKK are convinced that they are being good Americans if they hate others. Those in Middle East terrorist groups express their hatred in many horrible ways. Those affected by terrorists think they have a right not only to hate those who attack them but also anyone of the terrorists' faith. More than that, some people think they have a right to hate all people from the Mideast. I was talking to a lady recently who was a Catholic from Iraq. She told me how difficult it was for her to love when she is continually abused with hateful remarks from people so bigoted that they don't even notice the persecution Iraqi Catholics suffer. It is amazing how hatred and ignorance work hand in hand. Some people who hate act as though they are good Christians. They are not. True followers of Jesus Christ respond to His call to make the Lord's love real in the world.

When John calls people to conversion, and Jesus follows after him, it is all with reference to the Kingdom of God. In other words, conversion means that we are willing to live with a different vision and a different challenge in our lives. The Holy Spirit and fire characterize the way we live in and for the Kingdom. Fire purifies us from our taking things for granted. The Holy Spirit drives our hearts to what God wants to accomplish—we cannot live with business as usual and also live for the Kingdom of God.

Rather, we have to live with hope and live for change. A lot of the change has to do with us, in the ways we have used a superficial faith to keep us from real commitment to God. Advent is yet one more powerful call to live as disciples. But some of the change has to do with what we expect of the world around us, the way we settle for, and accept, injustice, exploitation, aggression, and sometimes cruelty rather than resist these. We are asked to live from the viewpoint of the Resurrection of Jesus and what this means for our hopes for ourselves and our world.

Isaiah says that even the stump of Jesse can bring forth another shoot. God is never finished working with us. We may feel complacent or even powerless when it comes to faith, but Advent says that God will always give us hope as a dynamic for change and transformation. The signs we show of our repentance are the ways we live energized to serve a Kingdom that will transform our lives.

II

In a radio interview, Nazi concentration camp survivor Gerta Weissman recalled an episode one spring when she and her fellow concentration camp inmates stood for roll call for hours on end, nearly collapsing with hunger and fatigue. She said, "We noticed in the corner of this bleak, horrid, gray place that the concrete had broken in a corner and a flower had poked its head through it. And you would see thousands of feet shuffle every morning to avoid stepping on that flower . . ."

No wonder they were careful not to step on that flower. That tiny flower poking its head through the concrete represented hope and beauty to the women in the concentration camp. (1)

Isaiah the prophet knew what those women felt. The year was 700 B.C. The Jews had been fighting for four decades against the Assyrians and occasionally against the Egyptians. And their will to resist their enemies was nearly depleted. They were living through what has been called the first holocaust of the Jews. It occurred between 740 and 700 B.C.

Dr. Bill Self describes this awful time like this: "Five times during these 40 years did the Assyrian army, the vast and superior Assyrian army, stampede through the hill country of Israel working terror and destruction wherever it went. With no regard for anyone's culture, with no regard for anyone's religion, with no regard for anyone else's life, they came like a scorpion plague, devouring everything and everyone in their path. Over and over and over, the people of . . . Judah had been ravaged. The horrid sounds of war were ever familiar. The cries of pain seldom ceased. Who could plant a field and have any hope that it would survive to the harvest? Who could bear a child with a confidence that it would reach maturity? It was a horrible forty years, those years in which Isaiah lived." (2)

But Isaiah refused to give in to the despair of his time. Isaiah still managed to hope in God. And under the leadership of God's Holy Spirit Isaiah was able to write, "A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit. The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of might, the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the Lord and he will delight in the fear of the Lord.

"He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes, or decide by what he hears with his ears; but with righteousness he will judge the needy, with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth . . ."

Isaiah was prophesying the coming Messiah. All around him things appeared desolate and without promise. The reign of Israel's greatest king, King David, the son of Jesse was a distant memory. He compares it to a stump that is left in the forest after a great tree has been cut down. But, he says, like Gerta Weissman's flower poking its head through concrete, on this stump of Jesse, says Isaiah, a shoot will appear, and a new tree will emerge bearing much fruit.

When that day comes, he continues, "The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them. The cow will feed with the bear, their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox. The infant will play near the cobra's den, and the young child will put its hand into the viper's nest. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

"In that day the Root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples; the nations will rally to him, and his resting place will be glorious."

This is one of the great statements of hope in all literature. And at this time of the year when we celebrate the birth of that shoot from the stump of David, Jesus of Nazareth Messiah, Savior, King these are words as precious to our ears as they were to the people of Isaiah's time.

Hope is based on our faith in God. There is no other foundation for hope in this world. Economic systems crumble. Governments rise and fall. Only God's truth marches on through the ages.

In the book, *When God Is Taken Captive*, James DeLoach puts it this way: "I am not a connoisseur of great art, but from time to time a painting or picture will really speak a clear, strong message to me. Some time ago I saw a picture of an old burned-out mountain shack. All that remained was the chimney . . . the charred debris of what had been that family's sole possession. In front of this destroyed home stood an old grandfather-looking man dressed only in his underclothes with a small boy clutching a pair of patched overalls. It was evident that the child was crying. Beneath the picture were the words which the artist felt the old man was speaking to the boy. They were simple words, yet they presented a profound theology and philosophy of life. Those words were [these], 'Hush child, God ain't dead!'" (3)

And that is what keeps hope alive even in the darkest times. "A baby is God's opinion that life should go on," wrote Carl Sandburg. And it's true. A baby is a sign of hope. During this season of the year, the symbol of that hope is a babe in a manger. All the world is heartened by that babe.

Children understand hope far better than we do.

Psychiatrist Elisabeth Kubler-Ross tells of visiting a children's barracks in one of the German death camps after the Second World War. In those horrific camps she had expected to see symbols of fear and incredible cruelty. Yet the walls of those children's barracks were covered with drawings of butterflies, a universal symbol of joy and hope. Where does such hope derive? Only from our hope in God. How else could Isaiah write of time when, "The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together and a little child will lead them . . .?"

There was no scientific evidence that such a faith would be rewarded. There was no philosophical optimism that could justify it. It was only faith in a righteous and omnipotent God.

Nothing is sadder than when hope dies. Resignation is the most potent sign of loss of faith in God. The atheist is not nearly as dead in his faith as is the person who has simply given up trying. That is a great temptation at this time of year in a society like our own.

William Willimon tells about a man in a depressed region of Appalachia, a coal miner out of work for months, who years ago caught his children on the back porch thumbing through a Sears catalog, wishing for things he could never provide for them. This poor man flew into a rage, switched their legs, tore the catalog to bits, and sat down in his yard and wept.

John Jewell tells about a young woman named Virginia, 19 years old and pregnant when she went to live with her 15th set of foster parents. "Her case file read like a textbook example of neglect, abuse and bureaucratic failure. She sat silently in a chair, hands neatly clasped, staring into her lap. The foster parents, whose three children were in school, had been apprised of Virginia's story and promised that this placement would be 'temporary.' (Temporary was the story of Virginia's life.)

"Finally, the foster mother said, 'Are you frightened, Virginia?'

"'Kinda,' she replied without looking up. Then, 'I've been in lots of homes.'

"'Well,' the sympathetic woman tried to reassure the bewildered young mother-to-be, 'Let's hope this time turns out for the best.'

“Virginia’s reply is one of those statements that sticks to your soul,” says John Jewell. “It was flat, without change of tone and without Virginia even looking up. ‘Hurts too much to hope.’” (4)

I hope you never get to that point when it hurts too much to hope. I suspect, though, that some of you know what she was talking about. It is common knowledge in the medical community that the holidays bring about a sharp increase in cases of depression, primarily due to people’s unmet expectations for the season. There is no deeper depression than that experienced by the person who cannot hope.

Hope is what Christmas is all about. That is why these words from Isaiah thrill our hearts when we read them during the Advent season. In the midst of a holocaust, in the midst of societal despair and devastation, Isaiah, led by God’s Spirit, dared to envision a day when God’s reign would be over all. “A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit . . .” He was describing hundreds of years in advance the coming of Jesus. A Messiah will come and righteousness shall reign triumphant.

That wonderful writer Arthur Gordon in his book *A Touch of Wonder* tells about a man he met who had been a skydiver until, on his nineteenth jump, his parachute failed to open fully and his emergency chute wrapped itself around the partially collapsed main chute. He slammed into a dry lake bed at sixty miles an hour. Doctors thought this broken remnant of a man would never leave his hospital bed. They told him so, and he sank into black despair.

But in the hospital he had frequent visits from another patient, a man whose spinal cord had been severed in an automobile accident. This man would never walk, would never, in fact, move a finger again. But he was always cheerful. “I certainly don’t recommend my situation to anyone,” he would say. “And yet I can read, I can listen to music, I can talk to people . . .”

“*And yet*,” writes Arthur Gordon, “those two words (“*and yet*”) shift the focus from what has been lost to what remains and to what may still be gained. They gave such hope and determination to the skydiver that he came through his ordeal and today walks without a limp.” (5)

In a world of pain and defeat, in a world where might often makes right, and the worst often crowds out the best, The Bethlehem babe is God’s “*And yet* . . .” Cruel Herod is on the throne of Judea, the deified Augustus Caesar is still extending the might of the Roman empire, while Mary and Joseph make their slow arduous journey to Bethlehem. Yet Herod and Caesar are now but curiosities in dusty books while the babe that Mary bore reigns in the highest heaven. And one day his kingdom will be made manifest when as Isaiah says, “In that day the Root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples; the nations will rally to him, and his resting place will be glorious.”

That is what Christmas is about. Enjoy the lights, the music, the food, the gifts, the love of family and friends, but never lose sight of the hope of Christmas. For there will come a time when you, too, will be going through your own time of travail, and you will need to lift your eyes from your sorrow to your Savior, from your misery to a manger wherein lies your salvation.

There is a wondrous poem found in many places on the Internet. Maybe you have seen it. It does a wondrous job of reminding us of that truth. It is titled, “Do You Still Have Hope?” I’m going to shorten it just a little bit, but listen to its message:

If you can look at the sunset and smile, then you still have hope . . . If you can find beauty in the colors of a small flower . . . If you can find pleasure in the movement of a butterfly . . . If the smile of a child can still warm your heart, then you still have hope . . . If you can see the good in other people . . . If the rain breaking on a roof top can still lull you to sleep, If the sight of a rainbow still makes you stop and stare in wonder . . . If the soft fur of a favored pet still feels pleasant under your fingertips, then you still have hope

. . .

If you meet new people with a trace of excitement and optimism . . . If you give people the benefit of a doubt . . . If you still offer your hand in friendship to others that have touched your life, then you still have hope . . .

If receiving an unexpected card or letter still brings a pleasant surprise . . . If the suffering of others still fills you with pain and frustration . . . If you refuse to let a friendship die, or accept that it must end, then you still have hope . . .

If you look forward to a time or place of quiet and reflection . . .

If you still buy the ornaments, put up the Christmas tree or cook the turkey . . .

If you still watch love stories or want the endings to be happy, then you still have hope .

. . .

If you can look to the past and smile . . . If, when faced with the bad, when told everything is futile, you can still look up and end the conversation with the phrase . . .

“yeah . . . BUT . . .” then you still have hope . . .

Hope is such a marvelous thing. It bends, it twists, it sometimes hides, but rarely does it break . . . It sustains us when nothing else can . . . It gives us reason to continue and courage to move ahead, when we tell ourselves we’d rather give in . . . Hope puts a smile on our face when the heart cannot manage . . . Hope puts our feet on the path when our eyes cannot see it . . . Hope moves us to act when our souls are confused of the direction . . .

Hope is a wonderful thing, something to be cherished and nurtured, and something that will refresh us in return . . . And it can be found in each of us, and it can bring light into the darkest of places . . . Never lose hope . . . (6)

Hope is based on our faith in God. God is a loving God who watches over His children. Hope is a flower breaking through a slab of concrete. Hope is a shoot coming up “from the stump of Jesse . . .” Nothing is sadder than when hope dies. If you quit trusting God, then where will you turn? Hope is what Christmas is all about. This Advent and Christmas season, turn your eyes to the babe who was born in Bethlehem of Judea, the One foretold by Isaiah in the midst of the ruins of his time. Where God is, hope never dies.

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1. Julius Segal, *Winning Life's Toughest Battles* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1986), p. 66.

2. http://day1.org/2385-not_much_but_enough_for_me.

3. Cited in Willard Aldrich, *When God Was Taken Captive*, (Multnomah, 1990), p. 24.

4. <http://www.lectionarysermons.com/pieces1.html>.

5. (Jove, 1996).

6. Author unknown, <http://www.colindunbar.com/still-have-hope.html>.