

Scripture tells us that faith is the assurance of things hoped for. For thousands of years the human race waited in hope for a Savior who would bring us from the darkness of sin and death into the light of the resurrection and eternal life. Thousands of years of prophecy, finally fulfilled in the birth of a child in Bethlehem. The Nativity of Our Lord is that assurance that turns our hope into faith.

We are not quite there yet. We still have a few days to go but the end is in sight. Today, on this Gaudete Sunday we rejoice. The dark night, in which the world lived in hope for its Savior, is coming to an end, Christmas is drawing closer; Christ will soon be born.

For now, we are still waiting and preparing. It is a time of joyful hope. It is this hope that becomes faith that is perhaps the singular virtue that separates us from the rest of the world. Our society, our popular culture, shows us an existence without hope.

All around us the trends in popular culture are increasingly self-indulgent, superficial, and decadent. People live only for the moment, seeking immediate gratification in fleeting relationships or substances that alter the mind so that they don't have to think about their own hopelessness.

Have you ever wondered why zombies are so popular? The walking dead are shuffling their way through our books, movies, television shows, games and even our advertising. They have become so pervasive, that people are beginning to think that such a thing as a zombie apocalypse is possible. I think it is a reflection of our society, soulless beings shambling

around, their attention riveted to their electronics, with no real sense that they are going anywhere. They live only for the moment, hopeless creatures feeding on the hopeful.

When the world is dominated by these zombie-like creatures, it's the rest of us who are monsters in their eyes.

It is our hope that sets us apart and drives the Christian life. If our hope is strong our lives are strong. Knowledge of God's faithfulness is what keeps our hope strong.

Outside of the town of Folsom, on Green Valley Road on the way to El Dorado Hills, there is a sign marking Mormon Island Cemetery. Mormon Island was once an important mining community that at its peak was home to 2500 people, four hotels, a school, and seven saloons. When the Folsom Dam project was set to flood the town all improvements and repairs to the town were stopped. What was the use of painting a house if it was going to be underwater in a few months? Why repair anything if the whole town was going to be wiped out? So, week-by-week, the whole town became more and more bedraggled, dilapidated and run down. Even the infrastructure, the roads and streetlights, the things that were meant to last, started to fall apart.

When there is no faith in the future, there is no power in the present. When society has no hope, the morals and values upon which it was built, begin to decay.

And it is easy to lose hope. Even Saint John the Baptist wondered if Jesus was really the Messiah. He baptized Our Lord; saw the Heavens opened and the Holy Spirit descend. He heard the voice of God saying, “This is my beloved Son.” But lying there in prison he began to doubt and so he sent two of his own followers to ask Jesus directly “are you the one we have been waiting for.”

Let me tell you about another place, the Old Market Square in the city of Warsaw, Poland. Walking through the square is like walking back in time 300 years. The buildings surrounding the Square appear to be perfectly preserved. But the truth is that not a single building in that square is more than 60 years old.

When World War II began; the master plan of the German invasion was to capture the entire country of Poland in one week. I don't know who figured that but they obviously did not know much about the Polish people, or people in general for that matter. It took one month just to capture the town of Warsaw alone. Hitler was so enraged he ordered the town be bombarded with artillery. There are pictures of the town square that show piles of rubble as far as the eye can see. Three hundred year old buildings that once rose six or seven stories in the air reduced to piles of brick not more than two or three feet high. Imagine looking at what used to be your home and not being able to find even one stone standing upon another.

It would have been easy to lose hope. But hope, that strong knowledge of God's faithfulness is something the Polish people have in abundance.

They rebuilt the Square. And they didn't just rebuild it; they scoured old paintings and engravings and rebuilt it exactly as it had been before the Nazi army destroyed it.

When there is faith in the future, there is tremendous power in the present.

But how do we maintain our faith in the future when our present seems so dismal? We are inundated by a daily diet of bad news. Child abuse, infidelity, mass killings, scandals, divorce, war, torture, the list just goes on and on. It is easy to lose hope and ask Jesus, like John did, are you really the one who is to come?

But the answer is still the same. The same answer Jesus gave to John is the answer He gives to us. Look around you, stop looking at your phone and see the good news, and you will perceive the Kingdom. Right now as we are gathered here, there are endless daily routine instances of the blind seeing. News reports are quick to point out how many people are leaving the Faith but they do not tell you how many more are flocking to it. The deaf are hearing the Word of God from countless clerical and lay ministers all around the globe. Innumerable counselors, volunteer firefighters, first aid personnel, therapists and healers raise the dead to life as people recover from addictions, accidents, illness, and depression. The poor have the Good News preached to them in the way of comfort and aid. Catholic Relief Services is the largest single caregiver of AIDS patients in the world.

Everyday corporal and spiritual works of mercy are carried out in hundreds of millions of ways, but they never make the news, virtue seldom does.

We take these things for granted. I have always maintained that all good parents are guaranteed to get to Heaven. There is only one place in the entire Gospel where Jesus gives the criteria of who gets to Heaven. It's in Matthew 25, "I was hungry and you gave me to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me to drink, when I was ill you visited me, ... As long as you did it for one of the least of my brethren, you did it to Me. Enter into the joy of the Lord." These are the corporal and spiritual works of mercy – and they are built into family life by nature. You can't escape them. That's why I think that all parents are guaranteed to get to Heaven.

Counseling the doubtful, how many times do you hear "Mom, what'll I wear?" How about instructing the ignorant? "Dad, will you help me with my math?" Giving drink to the thirsty, that 2am bottle or glass of water. Clothing the naked, if you're a parent you've changed a lot of diapers. Feeding the hungry? "What's for dinner?" Burying the dead when a family pet dies. Visiting the imprisoned. "Are you still in the bathroom?"

Now, you may say, I have to do those things; it's my job, my duty. But that doesn't make it less wonderful, less meritorious, or less the fulfillment of Jesus' criteria for Heaven.

The point is, these things go on all the time. The Kingdom of Jesus is here. Goodness abounds. Love is given and received. People are faithful. Caring, courtesy, and good deeds are commonplace.

Jesus tells us “blessed is the one who takes no offense at me.” It is a word of caution. What He is saying is “Do not let scandal or the offense of your sensibilities drive you away from me.” Do not let a daily diet of bad news trip you up. We all have our doubts at times, including Saint John; it is human to do so. But in Advent, particularly on this day of joy, we are told to lift up our heads. Looking down for so long only distorts the truth, look up in hope and joy and see the presence of Christ in our lives.

The Kingdom of God is at hand, here among us. Everyday the blind see, the deaf hear, the dead rise, and the poor have the Good News preached to them, every day, even here, even now.