

Two weeks ago, today, I remember putting up my blue Advent stole for the last time for the next twelve months or so, and I'm not sure why my initial reaction immediately went to a cringe, thinking about what our world might look like come the next time we bust out the blue paraments again, which will be for November 29, 2020. Will we be engulfed with just as much hatred after another election cycle set to tear us all apart, again? Will we have another emotional layer to singing, "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel"? Will the Advent catch-all word of *hope* have a little more desperation to it not just because of politics, but so many other things that could happen in this year to come that we have no earthly idea about yet?

However, we can, also, rest assured that there will be, without a doubt, another year of Good News to proclaim, not just out of Scripture passages from thousands of years ago, but through stories being brought to life in this very world that we can, most certainly, easily overlook, or just not care about because there's too much going on on the other side of the evil spectrum, to pay attention to at all. For starters, come a week from tomorrow, there will be a college football national championship game played, and I know many of us Buckeye fans, myself included, are still trying to get over what happened last Saturday on the field. Nevertheless, next Monday, most of the eyes will be on

the players and coaches on the sideline in determining who will reign as champion for a few months before they start all over again come late August.

Except, one story cannot be overlooked even by those who despise sports for the insane amounts of money it produces year after year after year. The man who will play quarterback for the Louisiana State University Tigers, for one more time, at least, is named Joe Burrow, who even had a short stint at Ohio State. Joe Burrow did so incredibly well at his respective position on what was considered the best team in all of college football, that he ended up winning, not just all the games for his team, but the most prestigious individual award for the sport, the Heisman Trophy.

In recent times, it is common practice that if you are named a finalist for the award, you make the trip to New York City, and if you end up winning, you walk up onto the stage, where many of the previous winners are standing behind you, and you give an acceptance speech, all broadcasted on national television. Typically, the winner extends appreciation to family and friends and coaches and teammates, maybe sheds a tear or two in the overwhelming emotional whirlwind looking back on the long journey it took for them to get there. Except, Joe Burrow, took it to another stratosphere of humility and recognition of where he came from.

You see, Joe Burrow is from Athens County, Ohio, and according to many statistics, it is the poorest county in the entire state, with 30% of the population living in poverty, a rate nearly three times the national average. During his speech, where he could have stuck with tradition and focused on himself and his team and the game of football, he ended up saying, “Coming from southeast Ohio, it’s a very impoverished area...and there’s so many people there that don’t have a lot. I’m up here for all those kids in Athens and in Athens County that go home to not a lot of food on the table, hungry after school...and you guys can be up here, too.” All while the Heisman-winner was struggling to get the words out through his relentless barrage of tears.

Soon enough, *hope* took on a different level in Athens County this past Advent, as a fundraiser was started the next day on Facebook for the local food pantry, and, within the next week, nearly half a million dollars was raised for those who are not simply a percentage number at the end of a detailed poverty equation, but actual human beings: children of God, who still desperately need help in this 2020 new year.

And with thinking about that awe-inspiring news coming to life in our world today, my initial reaction to the words of Jeremiah this morning, take on a different meaning than they were meant thousands of years ago. “See, I

am going to bring them from the land of the north, and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth, among them the blind and the lame, those with child and those in labor, together; a great company, they shall return here. With weeping they shall come, and with consolations I will lead them back.”

Granted, the original context is meant for the Hebrew people returning home from exile long ago, but I wonder about the people today: the people who will live in their own exile, of sorts, of devastating circumstances in 2020; some of whom, in their own sheer desperation, will turn to the church for help.

Yes, of course, we know first-hand those who take advantage of the system, who do their best to even scam all kinds of charitable organizations; and that reality will not change in this calendar year. Except, there are more people than we will ever realize who do not want to admit that their reality is part of that shocking percentage of people who live in poverty not just in Athens County, but right here around us. Far too many are scared to ask for help. They don't know who they can trust. They don't want the emotional toll of shame brought upon them personally, or on their family, either. And so, I firmly believe, by far the most powerful part of this entire Joe Burrow story, is from the wife of the man, who started the fundraiser on Facebook. She teaches special education in Athens, and she said for the first time ever, those of her

students who would go to the county food pantry, who did their best to hide it, were now proud to use it.

So, what if the church could evoke such pride? Or, better yet, what if the church could boldly proclaim to the world with the utmost compassionate conviction, that it is more than okay to ask for help. It is more than okay to not have it all together. It is okay to be human, to have moments of weakness, and to boldly believe the Gospel: that regardless of the circumstances, regardless of how you got there, you are loved by God just as much as any other time in your life. After all, it was out of weakness that God came to us as a helpless child. It was when God decided to leave behind all the almighty powers of heaven itself, to become one with our imperfect, our broken humanity. We all needed his help then, and we still do now, not only for our eternal sake, but to bring even more Good News to this world today; this world that God still loves just as much as when the Christ child came along to save it. And for that Greatest News of all, we most certainly give thank to God, indeed! Amen!