

"The Gospel According to Debbie Downer"¹

*"You're enjoying your day; everything's going your way,
when along comes Debbie Downer.
Always there to tell you 'bout a new disease, a car accident, or killer bees.
You beg her to spare you, 'Debbie, please!'
But you can't stop Debbie Downer!"²*

So go the lyrics to the theme song for Debbie Downer. I thought about starting this morning by singing them. Then I thought again. You can thank me later.

If you have no idea what I'm talking about right now, don't worry; that just means you haven't watched *Saturday Night Live* since 2004. (According to the Nielsen ratings, that goes for a lot of you). Debbie Downer is a recurring character, portrayed by Rachel Dratch. The premise of the sketch is pretty simple: A group of adults engaging in some sort of innocuous activity—a family eating breakfast together at Walt Disney World, or gathered around the Thanksgiving dinner table. Everybody is making small talk, the kind of light and meaningless banter that always seems to accompany such situations. But then Debbie opens her mouth. And whatever comes out is so dour, so depressing, so utterly inappropriate that it completely kills the mood.

So at Disney World, when her companion orders steak and eggs for breakfast, Debbie dourly exclaims, *"Ever since they found mad cow disease in the US, I'm not taking any chances."* Or, when someone opens a bottle of wine at Thanksgiving dinner table and jokes, *"Do you suppose the Pilgrims brought a bottle of Pinot Grigo to the first Thanksgiving?"* and everybody has a chuckle, Debbie retorts: *"I'll tell you what the Pilgrims did bring: smallpox."*

And then, just to underscore the point, each of Debbie's bleak pronouncements is followed by the sound of a muted trumpet: *Wah wah.*

I didn't say it was funny.

But it does kind of remind me of this passage from the Book of Romans. Call it the Gospel according to Debbie Downer.

To get this passage, you have to get the Apostle Paul. The great dream of Paul's life—his foremost ambition—is to preach the Gospel in the city of Rome. Back there and back then, Rome was New York, DC and LA all rolled into one; the economic, political and cultural capital of the known world. If Paul can make it there, he can make it anywhere. There is just one small problem with Paul's plan: the Gospel got there first. There is already a Christian community in Rome, and he has never met them. So he writes the letter to the Romans—the longest letter we have from Paul—to introduce himself, and his Gospel, to the Christians living in Rome.³

But, just between you and me, I don't think it is going very well. In this particular part of the letter, Paul does not put his best foot forward. He sounds gloomy. He sounds glum. He sounds kind of miserable—he is talking about suffering and groaning, longing and bondage, weakness and pain. It's depressing. It's the Gospel according to Debbie Downer.

II.

It's not that Paul is wrong. There is a lot of suffering in this world. But I don't come to church to hear about it. I come here to be uplifted, to be inspired, to hear something encouraging to get me through my week.

I don't know about you, but I was always taught to focus on the positive, to maintain the right attitude, to stay cheerful. And, to be honest, the older I get, the easier that becomes. At this point in my life, I'm pretty well educated, not rich but certainly comfortable. I have a beautiful family, a rewarding career and plenty of worthwhile activities to fill what little free time I have. I don't often say it this bluntly, but I'm pretty privileged. And that allows me to build a life for myself where I don't have to be bothered by the pain of this world. So that is what I do, and that is the way I like it.

Of course, it doesn't always work. Sometimes a fast puck gets past the goalie; some suffering intrudes on my life and demands that I pay attention. I may be surfing channels, and stumble over an unsettling news report about a war in some unpronounceable country, or children dying from a preventable disease. Illness or addiction may reach right into my life to claim someone I love. Sometimes—usually late at night, when I can't sleep—sometimes it seems that I can hear a groan somewhere inside of me: the long-forgotten pain of a dream deferred, a lingering resentment, a hurt that won't heal.

Sometimes, suffering does interrupt my life. But I'm a busy man. I never have to pay attention to it for very long.

III.

There was, however, this one time when suffering interrupted. August 17, 2010. We had just started our Tuesday afternoon staff Bible study when my cell phone rang. A call from my wife. Now, let me offer you a little insight into my marriage: My wife is the kind of person who sometimes calls just to say hello. I, on the other hand, am the kind of person who gets kind of grumpy when I am interrupted. *What is it now?* I wondered as I reached for my phone. And I even started rehearsing how I would answer: “You know honey, I’m kind of in the middle of something here...”

But I never got to make that little speech. When I picked up the phone, what I heard on the other end...was a groan. A cry of pain the likes of which had never escaped her lips before. And it was the most beautiful sound that I have ever heard. It meant that I would be meeting my daughter soon. The groan told me that something new was being born.

IV.

The groans and the suffering that Paul talks about here are not just any old groan or any old suffering. They’re labors pains, the distinctive sound of birth.⁴

If you want to get Paul, you’ve got to get something else as well. You have to know what time it is. In Paul’s thinking, there are two times, two ages – the old one and the new. The old age is the age of suffering and sin, of oppression and death. The new age is the better one that God has promised, the one that Jesus told us about, the one we pray for every time we gather. In the new age, God’s reign will come; God’s will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.⁵

Two times; two ages. But this next part is key: What time is it now? It is the in-between time. The already/not yet time. The time when the old world is passing away and the new one is right around the corner.

For Paul, Jesus Christ is the hinge on which the two ages turn. In his life, death and resurrection, the old age concludes; the new age begins. But it doesn’t happen all at once, or in the blink of an eye. It is more of a process. It is more like a birth.

So the sufferings of this present time—the pain all around us, the pain deep within us—this suffering means something. These are cosmic contractions; the pain of a new world being born.⁶

Of course we can still shut it out –ignore it, deny it, pretend it doesn't exist. We have the best toys and the best drugs in all of human history, so we know how to stay distracted. But it will cost us. If we gag our groans, if we stifle our suffering, if we insist on ignoring the pain within us and the pain in our world, we will miss out on the new thing God has promised. We will overlook the work that God is doing right under our noses. New life will remain just out of our reach.

V.

By now, I hope you have heard that we have a strategic plan here at Plymouth Church. It's a pretty good one, as such things go –and we can load you up with all sorts of charts and pamphlets and spreadsheets showing you exactly what we intend to do.

It's a good plan. But as I listened to David describe it last week, it occurred to me that this whole business of strategic planning can kind of sound like a downer. If we are really going to do this, we have to take a hard look in the mirror, own up to the ways we fall short. I don't want to do that. It would be so easy to stay focused on the things that are right about this place. Last year's survey and listening circles and leadership retreat gave us a lot to feel good about, a lot of reasons to pat ourselves on the back. It would be so easy to accentuate the positive; to stay focused on all the good things going on in the life of Plymouth Church.

It would be so easy. And so wrong. We would feel good about ourselves, and stay stuck where we are.

But we're not going to do that. We're going to go deeper. We going to try our very hardest to become a different kind of church –more connected, more spiritual, more aware of God's presence in our lives and in our world.

Do you know why we want to do that? Because there is a groan. Out there, in the world, those who go hungry and homeless, those afflicted and oppressed those outcast and mistreated, they groan under the weight of their suffering. Can you hear it? In here, right here in this sanctuary, inside of you and inside of me, there is groan –a yearning to go deeper, a longing to get real, an empty place, deep within each one of us that only God can fill.⁷

There is groan. It sounds like something being born. Can you hear it? You will. If you come along with us on this journey, I promise: you will.

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¹ Although I do not directly cite them, two books have significantly shaped this sermon: Walter Brueggemann's *The Prophetic Imagination*. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1978) and Jürgen Moltmann's *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and The Implications of Christian Eschatology*. Translated by James W. Leitch. (New York, NY: Harper & Row Publishers, 1967).

² To get these lyrics, along with more information about Debbie Downer than anyone could possibly want to know, I turned—where else?—to Wikipedia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Debbie_Downer#Theme_song

³ For a brief and readable introduction to the background and purpose of Paul's Letter to the Romans, I recommend Leander Keck's Introduction in *The HarperCollins Study Bible*. (San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins Publishers, 1993), pp.2114-2116.

⁴ "The whole creation is viewed as a woman in labor, giving birth to new life." Holladay, Carl R. *The Access Bible*. Gail R. O'Day, David Peterson, General Editors. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1999), p.232.

⁵ As Leander Keck indicates, the association of labor pains with eschatology is not original to Paul; the image has a solid foundation in Jewish apocalyptic thinking. *HarperCollins Study Bible*, pp.2126-2127.

⁶ Unfortunately, the NRSV translates this passage in a way that obscures the centrality of the birth metaphor to Paul's argument. Verse 22 speaks of "groaning in labor pains" – a translation of the words *sustenadzei* and *suvodivei*. But then verse 23 speaks of the ways in which we "groan inwardly," a translation of the word *stenadzo*. This term is also associated with labor, but here and again when the related noun occurs in verse 26 (*stenagmos*), the NRSV renders it first as "groans" (verse 23) and then as "sighs" (verse 26). This obscures their connection to the metaphor of giving birth. If all words from this root were consistently translated as "groans" or perhaps even "groans of labor," it would better convey what Paul is up to. For these are not any old sighs. In this passage, "sighing takes place by reason of a condition of oppression under which [human beings] suffer and from which [human beings] long to be free because it is not in accord with [their] nature, expectations or hope." *Kittel's Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. Volume VII. Edited by Gerhard Friedrich. Translated by Geoffrey Bromiley. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), p.601

⁷ So Brendan Byrne is right to argue that, for Paul, our groaning and longing for salvation is itself the work of God's Spirit within us. *Sacra Pagina Series*. Volume 6: Romans. Daniel J. Harrington, S.J., Editor. (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1996), p.263.