

Third Sunday in Ordinary Time, C

By Fr. Larry Covington

Someone has calculated that every human being, on average, has some medical complaint or problem every three days. But usually nothing more serious than a headache or anything that cannot be dealt with by some over the counter solution. Daily people discover new challenges like hypertension or high cholesterol, diabetes heart disease, cancer and so on. And so, the regimen of medications begins. During the course of a year, many will undergo some kind of test or diagnostic health screening. We will require therapies, treatments, surgery, be bombarded by radiation, lasers and ultrasound, fitted out with new joints, pacemakers, braces, crutches or maybe even walkers or wheelchairs. The arsenal to overcome our tendency toward illness is impressive, the cost staggering. Yet, though treated, counseled or operated on, all of us will eventually lose the battle.

The bodies we inhabit for what we call a lifetime are imperfect vessels, jars of clay are what St. Paul calls them. Their resistance to attack has its limits; their endurance under severe stress or trauma has a breaking point. Sometimes our afflictions get to the point where they overwhelm our sense of wholeness giving us moments when we wonder why God has made his images and likenesses so vulnerable. It is good to be reminded that God has not failed in carrying out a better creative plan. I do not believe that we are flawed when we should have been perfect, or weak when God intended strength. Weakness is not an absence of strength: it is rather the means to strength. The struggles you and I have to endure to survive, to deal with our pain and suffering, occur not because God has not succeeded, but because God has not finished creating us.

Sitting at times as I do with family members who have lost a loved one and especially a young person, I know how difficult it can be to place that catastrophe into some kind of understanding of a loving and gracious God. It is a temptation to say that God planned it this way, that God sends us our trials and troubles to test or teach us. In Jesus Christ, however, we are revealed a God who is loving and compassionate. He said, **“In this world you will have tribulations, but fear not, I have overcome the world.”** Our troubles are not sent to us by God; they are already here. The bible reveals clearly that brokenness and fallenness are the basis of this world. From the beginning of Genesis, the Hebrew people described it well: **“The earth was without form and void, darkness was on the face of the deep.”** Rather than sending us trials, God’s Spirit is still at work calling us, bringing us something out of nothing, light out of darkness and life from death.

There is a story of a little girl, upon finding a butterfly cocoon, brought it home and planned to care for it until the butterfly came out. She waited with expectation until the day finally came. A tiny head appeared, munching its way through the gray, paper thin wall. She viewed the little creature with such love, but what she was not prepared for was how long it would take and what a difficult time the butterfly would have. With a small stick, ever so carefully, she decided to give the butterfly a helping hand. And within moments instead of hours the butterfly was free. Then it tried to fly, but when it stretched its wings it fell and died. Looking up at her father she blurted out with tears in her eyes, “what happened? I even helped!” “The creature needed that struggle,” her father answered. “Without it, it was never able to strengthen its wings to fly.”

When we struggle, God wants us to become something through that struggle. Great miracles do happen but most often the real miracles that occur are not the ones where suffering has been canceled in a moment, at the end of a prayer, but where, through suffering, someone has courageously lived. Even

when the life lived is not that which the world advertises as perfect. What is demonstrated is not failure, but a miracle of life being called out of chaos.

Jesus began his ministry with these words read from a scroll of the prophet Isaiah: **“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.”** The arrival of the dominion of God was, in these words, tied to helping the poor. Releasing prisoners, healing the sick. And yet, the poor remain in our streets, our prisons are overcrowded as never before, and everyone of us will eventually succumb to death. Had Jesus failed? Was it a mistake to announce that Isaiah’s prophecy had been fulfilled in this reading by Jesus? Following in his steps from that synagogue service to the hills of Galilee, on the road to Jerusalem, and the way of the cross, we discover that suffering is not God’s will; Rather life in the face of suffering is God’s will; Courage in the face of fear, faith in the face of doubt and abandonment; love in the face of hatred and prejudice. God’s will is to call these things out of the hurt and brokenness that we are and that we find around us.

You and I need good news, freedom and healing: that is in Christ, healing of our minds and hearts, Freedom from defeated attitudes and a negative outlook, good news to speak as we get up in the morning, and new hope for what we are doing with our lives.

Luke’s gospel today picks up after Jesus returned from the wilderness and the temptations. Why should this be significant? Because most of the time most of us think about life’s wilderness experiences as negative. Sometimes all of us need to be challenged and tested. Here is the significance of Luke’s telling us that Jesus was filled with the power of the Spirit. For Jesus the wilderness experience was empowering, and that’s the lesson for us. A wilderness experience in our lives can be overpowering in either one direction or another. It can make us or break us. A marriage or any other relationship can hit a period of wilderness, so can a young person’s life. We can hit a period of wilderness in our professional lives. What makes the difference between empowering or breaking?

For a disciple of Christ, it can make a great difference to know that Jesus hit such a period, a time when he desperately sought answers as to how he should plan and act.

Why is it a help to know this? Because then, when you and I hit our wilderness periods, we know that Our Lord knows how we feel. Then two wonderful things follow.

The first is that we can be aware of his being with us in the wilderness. **“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for you are with me...”**

The second is that we can be utterly honest with Jesus about the way we feel.

We can acknowledge fear, anger, resentment, depression...everything. We are often angry at God and since we are all children of God, God understands. A frustrated two-year old is helpless to do anything other than yell and bang on the knees of the parent. Even while hurling disappointment and frustration the child nevertheless knows that the parent will continue to be the source of all his blessings.

What is revealed to us today is a God who lets us emerge...even with great struggle, a God who promises to walk with us through the struggle and to invite us into the task of being Christ to others, being co-creators with him bringing to liberty to captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free and proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord.