

Twelfth Sunday in Ordinary Time - June 23, 2024

Homily by Deacon Jim Olshefski

In today's readings, we witness God's power over creation in dramatic fashion. While God has total control over his creation, he sometimes demonstrates that power in more subtle ways.

A number of years ago, I helped lead a 10-day, 120 mile trek at the Philmont Scout Ranch in the Sangre de Cristo mountains of northern New Mexico. Among the goals of this adventure was to develop the leadership skills of the 8 teenagers, including our son—John. Midway through the trek, the scouts wanted to watch a sunrise from the top of Mt. Baldy, a 12,441-foot-high peak. And so, **we meticulously planned** the hike that required our contingent to arise just after midnight and hike over 5 miles of steep mountain trail which would rise about 4,000-feet in elevation.

Unfortunately, a trail, which can be easily seen in the daylight when the sunlight is coming from above, can be very hard to identify when lighted solely by flashlights. The short of it is: We couldn't find the trail; we got lost! So, by necessity, we had to alter our plan. Knowing the compass heading toward the peak, we did what is known as "bushwacking;" we walked, not on a trail, but in a straight line up the forested mountain. That was slow and laborious hiking, and painful too, due to scratches from plowing through the underbrush.

Eventually, we popped out of the tree-line just before sunrise. However, with the top of the mountain in sight, we had another misfortune: One of our boys had a severe asthma attack that turned life-threatening. But we were able to use our first-aid skills and, with the assistance of many good Samaritans and much prayer, we were able to safely get Jack off the mountain. However, we never did reach the top of "Old Baldy." This was one of many lessons in my life where I learned that the old maxim is true: **If you want to make God laugh, tell him about your plans!**

In today's first reading, we hear of Job, a good and prosperous family man, whose life also didn't go as he had planned. In the midst of his prosperity, Job is suddenly beset with horrendous disasters that take away all he holds dear—his family, his wealth and even his health. These calamities are intended to test Job's faith in God. Struggling mightily to understand his situation, Job reflects in his despair but consistently remains devout and **faithful—trusting** in the will of God. Eventually, Job is rewarded by God for his unwavering faith with another large family, great wealth and life to a very old age.

The Apostles, as we hear in today's Gospel, are traveling to the east shore of the Sea of Galilee after a long day of listening to Jesus preach. In fact, this reading begins where last week's gospel ends with the parable of the mustard seed. Suddenly, the Apostles find themselves in the midst of a "violent squall" and in fear of their lives; all the while, Jesus is asleep in the back of the boat! But, upon waking, Jesus "rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, "Quiet! Be still!" And "the wind ceased and there was great calm." In a more literal translation of the Greek in Mark's Gospel—the Apostles "feared a great fear." Their initial fear of the storm was transformed into a fear at the display of divine power, a fear of God! Today's passage ends with Jesus admonishing them for their **lack of faith; their lack of trust.**

We all face stormy times in our lives, when God's presence is hard to perceive. One of the most common struggles in the spiritual life is a feeling of God's absence during painful times. It may surprise you to know that even the saints experienced such **fear of abandonment:**

- St. John of the Cross
- Mother Teresa of Calcutta, and
- St. Thérèse of Lisieux, among others, experienced that *Dark Night of the Soul*.

Why is this so common? Perhaps because when we're struggling, we tend to become afraid and focus on whatever pain we're experiencing. It's natural; it's human; however, focusing on the pain makes it more difficult to see where God might be at work elsewhere in our lives. As a result, our prayer life—our open channel of communication with God—simply evaporates and, as a result, we turn further away from God, in a terrible, vicious spiral sinking into feelings of hopelessness.

Yet, when we honestly share our feelings with God through prayer, the physical pain we may be experiencing may not go away, but honest prayer helps us reestablish an open relationship with God and allows us to focus, not on the fear of what God cannot do, but rather on those areas in our lives where **God is with us**. Fear in our spiritual life is our true enemy.

Throughout scripture, we're warned against fear in the spiritual life. The telling of Jesus' earthly life is bracketed by warnings against fear. The angel, Gabriel, at the Annunciation told Mary, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God," (Lk 1:30) while the angel announcing Jesus' resurrection to the women at the tomb said, "Do not be afraid!" (Mt 28:5). Moreover, the statement "Do not be afraid!" is arguably the most often-repeated phrase in the Bible.

Jesus does NOT want us to fear because:

- **God loves us:** His presence provides us with his peace; not fear.
- **Our ways are not God's ways:** Just because we may not understand, we shouldn't be frightened. Job maintained his faith and trust in God despite losing everything he held dear. At the Annunciation, Mary couldn't tell what the future would hold, but she was empowered with God's grace to fear not. While immediately after the Resurrection, the Apostles didn't understand what was occurring, but they overcame their fears and, through faith and the gift of the Holy Spirit, trusted in Jesus.

So I ask you: How are you doing? If I were to ask you that question today, how would you respond? When your life doesn't go as you had planned, are you willing to yield to God's will? Or will you tenaciously hold onto your own plans and allow God to have a good laugh!