

Just yesterday, we had the shortest day of the year. And admittedly, at times the world can seem to be a very dark place. In the world around us, people can be frustrated with the state of affairs or seemingly never-ending violence; and in our own lives so often we face personal difficulties from health to finances to people letting us down. But what if, despite the difficult things that happen, a person were to see not the darkness, but the light, and even in the midst of a great challenge, trust in God?

I've read and known many people who have had deep challenges in life, but among the most profound I've ever read is that of Witold Engel who is today a retired Deacon from the Archdiocese of Denver. But as a child, he was living his Catholic faith at the age of nine years old in a place no one could ever imagine — Auschwitz concentration camp.

As a prisoner during the Holocaust, Witold watched as a priest who had smuggled in a rosary was beaten to death by an S.S. soldier in the camp. A Jewish man close to the scene yelled at the S.S. man to put the dying priest out of his misery. The soldier shot them both.

Witold couldn't take it anymore. He stood up and said to him, 'Shame on you. You should turn to God instead of butchering people here. The soldier looked at him and said, 'You Polish cockroach. I'll crush you with my boot.'" Right when the soldier took out his gun to kill Witold, another soldier came to bring the S.S. man to the commandant.

He also was imprisoned in Siberia, Auschwitz and Dachau — but felt a calling from God despite the evil that consumed his childhood.

He was born in Stryj, Poland. He was just three years old when his family was captured by Russian soldiers and taken to Siberia as political prisoners. Witold and his mother, father and older sister, who was five, journeyed by train for two weeks with their fellow captives to a camp near the North Pole. The family survived for five years in horrible conditions, overcoming hot summers and horrible winters, abusive captors, and insufficient food. His mother even gave birth to a son during their time in captivity.

The Engels encountered kindness in a man with a wagon and a horse, who tied rags on the wagon's wheels and snuck into the living quarters at night.

During one of those visits, the man told the Engels, "I'm going to help you escape."

The man kept his promise and took the family away. Witold was eight, his brother four. They walked all night in the desert and hid behind massive sand piles during the day. The family traveled this way for an entire year, eating whatever plants they could find.

The Engels finally reached Kiev, but realizing they wouldn't last in Kiev, the Engels moved along and, although they were mostly denied help from local villagers, they encountered a family who offered them a wagon and horses to help with their travels.

Even further on their journey, they received two more horses, food and clothing from another family.

After several months of traveling, the family finally made it back to their hometown of Stryj, only to have their hopes crushed once again.

In 1942, just before Christmas, Witold heard trucks outside his house. He looked through the window and there were Germans. There were some people jumping off the wagons, and they were shooting them.

S.S. soldiers with swastikas on their uniforms approached the Engels' door and took the family away, despite desperate pleas from Witold's father. The family was put on another train, which, two weeks later, brought them to Auschwitz.

Witold recalled the barbed wires surrounding the camp, the massive door and the sign that read "Arbeit macht frei" (Work will set you free). Approaching the camp, Witold remembers his father telling him this is where they would die.

He remembers saying, "What did we do?" fighting back tears. His father said, Jesus didn't do anything, but they killed him, too.'

Adolf Eichmann, one of the major organizers of the Holocaust, separated the Engel family. At nine years old, Witold was sent with his father and the rest of the men.

The memories of Deacon Engel's life during the Holocaust are still fresh in his mind. Witold described his figure as "skin and bones, because sometimes they didn't feed us for a week or we didn't get water for a week." In desperation, Witold ate snow or drank from puddles of dirty rain water.

Despite all this, Witold felt like God was with him.

In 1944, Germany was losing the war, and when the Nazis took a few thousand people out of Auschwitz and onto another train, Witold discovered for the first time the status of his mother and siblings. They were still alive and reunited, but sent to Dachau. The Engels endured the horrible conditions of camp for a few more months, until finally, in April 1945, Witold watched as American tanks arrived at Dachau.

"By accident, they saw the camp," he said.

The Americans cautiously approached the prisoners and brought them water and coffee. One officer approached Witold and his family. He was from Chicago but his parents were from Poland, so he spoke some Polish.

"He lifted me up, and I was crying," Witold remembers saying. "We had lice, we were dirty. I told him, 'No, don't pick me up.' He said to me, 'You are my countryman,'" Witold recalled, holding back tears.

“Then he said, ‘You are free. Germans cannot touch you anymore.’ He lifted me up, he didn’t care [that I was dirty]. He cried, too. He said to me, ‘What are you doing in here?’”

Witold explained their situation and showed the soldier his family. The soldier looked at them and said, “You’re free.”

After their liberation, the Engels welcomed two more children — a boy and a girl — into the world. The family decided to move to America, but a few situations almost prevented that journey from happening, one of which was an illness Witold experienced just a week before the family was set to embark. The day before they were to leave, that illness mysteriously went away.

In 1951, when Witold was 18, he and his family immigrated to the United States and settled in New York.

At 23, Witold talked to the local priest about the call he felt to the priesthood. After all he had been through, he wanted to give his life back to God. But he was told he was too old and didn’t speak enough English. After facing that disappointment, Witold proudly served in the United States Army for six years.

He eventually ended up moving to California, where he met his wife, Carmen, through a coupon for singles form they both filled out. After two months of dating, the couple got married. They celebrated their 50th anniversary earlier this year.

Although Witold had faced rejection when he sought the priesthood, he later realized God was bringing him to Carmen.

Witold suffered another traumatic event during his marriage when he was hit by a car. After the accident, Carmen was told he wouldn’t survive, and if he did, he’d never walk again. Little did the doctors know, Witold was a fighter. He made a complete recovery and learned to walk again.

During his time in the hospital, a priest told him, “God loves you so much, he saved your life.” He replied said, ‘Many times he’s saved my life.’

The priest looked into Witold’s eyes and told him something he’ll never forget. “I can see in your eyes God has something else for you, something good for you,” he said. “That’s why God saved your life.”

God’s timing is never in vain. When Witold was in his 50s, he felt called again to give up his life to God — this time, as a deacon. He spent nearly a decade applying to the diaconate in California, and after patiently waiting, was finally accepted at 60 years old to begin the life he longed for.

Looking back at his life, Witold believes God spared him time after time so he could serve as a deacon and make an impact on the lives of the poor, the sick and the imprisoned.

Witold was ordained a deacon in 1999, and his ministry in California included serving at two prisons, which he and Carmen visited almost every week.

After telling some of the prisoners parts of his story, they were moved to tears. Two men came to God because of the visits. They were so changed, they were even granted early release from prison.

Witold was surprised to see one of the men walking free after his release. Just decades earlier, Witold was in the arms of a soldier, crying with him as the man saved his life. Now, Witold was doing the same with this prisoner, but this time, he was the liberator — not of his life, but of his soul.

Witold and Carmen moved to Colorado in 2005 to be closer to their daughter, Jennifer, her husband, Tim, and their son, Dylan.

Over 80 years after being sent to his first concentration camp, Witold continues to pray constantly and put his complete trust in God — who, he believes, saved his life over and over again.

This God also saves our lives too. And while there is no getting around the fact that there is evil in the world (for we know that the infant born will be killed by the forces of evil but ultimately triumph over it), what we do know is that Jesus, Emmanuel, meaning God is with us, is truly with us. And our readings this week challenge us to trust in God, but also to help others see God in the world as well.

Twice in the short reading from Hebrews, Jesus, in effect, says “Behold, I come to do your will.” The writer puts in Jesus’ mouth these words from Psalm 40:7: “Ears open to obedience you gave me.” From the incarnation to his death on the Cross, Jesus obeys the Father. Christ’s obedience and trust in the Father wins our salvation.

When the angel Gabriel announced to Mary that she was to be the mother of the Son of God, she simply said, “Be it done to me according to your word.” When an angel appeared to Joseph in a dream and told him to take Mary as his wife, despite Joseph’s initial intent to “divorce her quietly,” he did as God’s messenger told him.

Mary is blessed among women as Elizabeth says because she believes the promises made by God. She freely says “yes” and trusts, even when there’s no room in the inn, even when Jesus runs away as a boy, and when she stands and sees her Son killed. So what about you and me? How do we have that trust?

A starting point is to remember that Christ is the Messiah - God Himself who came to dwell among us. Once we have that down, we can begin to get our minds around the

fact that God is deeply in love with us. We can remember that while we sinned, God was willing to die for us all to show us how much we are loved. We can look at the world through the eyes of God and see not hopelessness, but hope. As I said last week, he came down so we could go up. And this means trusting that we can come to God with anything and need not hide anything from Him. Sometimes it's hard to trust God when we see sin in the world, but sometimes when sin affects us too through our decisions a person may wonder about God's mercy. It's important to get pride out of the way, for God knows original sin impacts us. Perhaps God allows us to fail as a reminder that we can never earn salvation - God achieves this for us. So we need to turn to Him and never hide.

I also think it helps to meditate on how Jesus experienced so many things we too do too. God is not distant and far away, but went through all of our experiences. Jesus knew the pain of death, of betrayal, of being rejected, of seeing people he loved die. This is a God who fully knows what we go through.

Prayer also can help greatly; remember Jesus prays in the Garden; He prays before He begins His mission; He is praying often. The Holy Spirit comes to Elizabeth as we hear she was "filled with the Holy Spirit" at Mary's greeting; the angel comes to Mary. Prayer is conversation with God. I've heard it described by another priest as a "continual being in love because God is real. God is personal." So keep the conversation going.

Trust also means trusting in God's commandments. When we were younger, we might not have always trusted our parents when they said to go to bed at a certain time, do your homework, help with the chores, etc. But we grow older and see their wisdom. Parents are of course fallible; they make mistakes. God is not though. So why then do we rebel and sin? We say we want to follow God's commandments, but then our actions sometimes say otherwise. So it's important to review the commandments, to look at our areas of struggle, and to ask ourselves where are we lacking in our trust.

So, too, must we remember when we say "I'll trust in God," it means that we trust in His plan for us. Sometimes when we pray, we may discern God has a plan for us that's a challenging one. Like Jonah the prophet we might want to run away. But we can't run from God's calling. What God has in mind can be incredibly challenging. But we also must remember that when we discern a vocation, or some new path to take or something new to be involved in, God will give us the tools to meet the challenge.

Finally, we must look at how Jesus lived. Fr. Richard. Leonard, a Jesuit priest, in his excellent book "Where the Hell is God," writes: If Jesus' only mission was to die, what kind of God would that make the Father? As Fr. Richard points out, if Jesus would have been murdered by Herod at two years of age, then God could have gotten His blood sacrifice over nice and early. And if Jesus just came to die, then what of the hidden years and the public ministry? Jesus came not to die, but rather to live. He was courageous and lived out this love, and because of it, He was seen as a threat to the political, social and religious authorities of His day, so they arrested and executed Him. Jesus knew He would likely die for what He was doing, but it was not just to die that He

lived – rather His whole mission was done to save us. You and I are called to emulate Jesus, which is why He washed the feet of his apostles and gave us the beatitudes. The Cross shows us how far Jesus was going to go in making the message of God’s love known. It can’t be reduced to some piece of jewelry, but rather is something we should look at and think “if Jesus goes that far for me, how far am I going to go for those I care about?” That’s what Deacon Witold did throughout his whole life - he not only trusted in God, but he decided to, like Mary bringing Jesus to Elizabeth, help bring Jesus into the world. Our actions of mercy can truly do so much.

With what he has endured in his life, at various points Deacon Witold could have abandoned his faith. But instead, he trusted time and time again, and God was and always will be with him. In the face of so much evil in the world from the crucifixion to Auschwitz to abortion and human trafficking, may we look past the darkness and see the light, and truly remember that Christ is with us. No longer a little infant, but Christ the King forever, who is with us every moment of our lives for the journey, and who will always have the last word over sin. And as the people who were once in darkness who see a great light, may we daily like Deacon Witold, and like our Blessed Mother, look for ways to bring hope and the light of God’s love into the world. Christmas, as a day, will pass once again. But God is with us. Truth is triumphant. Evil, death, chaos and oppression have met their match. Jesus who is the Christ reigns from his mother’s arms. That’s something we can trust, for God is with us not just in Bethlehem, but always and forever.