

While many of us know the story of the Annunciation, when the angel visits Mary and tells her of God's great plans for her, sometimes what can get lost in the scene is how terrifying this might have been for Mary. She is a peasant girl, and there is nothing in her background that would give her clues to make sense of what she has been told. There is also so much she would have to worry about. Bearing in mind the culture, if she were an expectant mother outside of marriage, she would be completely ostracized. Joseph would certainly leave her. And some may even call for her to lose her life. But rather than running away, rather than saying no, Mary says "yes." And because of her "yes," Jesus comes into the world to save the world.

Like Mary, all of us face situations where we can either say "yes" or "no," or sometimes nothing at all. But when we have a bit of courage, so much good can result from it.

Ruth Ann Supica, in a short story she entitles "Courage," talks about finding it in her when it wasn't an angel who visited her, but rather a speaker at her school.

She was in 7th grade, and headed with the other kids in her class to the auditorium for a presentation. She quickly found her best friend Lauren.

"So, what exactly are we doing here?" She questioned.

"Well, according to Mrs. Marks, we're supposed to be listening to a speaker about bullying, peer pressure, and put-downs." Ruth said this somewhat sarcastically, because the entire year her grade had been lectured over and over again on these topics. They were earning the reputation as the worst class in the school, which was not a reputation that her Ruth and her friends were particularly proud of. As their science teacher stood in front of the entire grade level, attempting to get their attention, Ruth and her friends sat back, prepared to sit through another monotonous speech full of harsh remarks about "kids these days" and "your maturity level when you put someone down is no greater than that of an eight-year-old."

But as soon as she started talking, Ruth snapped to attention. She had this way about her, as if she knew how to reach into their minds and souls and make them think. And for once, Ruth actually began to think about what it was she was preaching about. She thought about all the kids who came to school every day, despite knowing that they would have to face cruel comments and sneering faces all day long.

One boy, in particular, came to mind. Every day, this boy came to first hour late, and Ruth suspected it was because he needed to get medicine from the nurse. But this didn't stop the kids from making fun of him. They punched him in the shoulder and said, "Hey man! Where have you been?" And then another would add, "How's that girlfriend of yours? Oh sorry, we forgot. You don't have a girlfriend. You only have boyfriends." This harassment would continue until the teacher cut in, forcing the boys to stop. But it was too late - it always was. The boy would put his head down on his desk in shame. The worst, though, was when he tried to retaliate. His attackers only laughed and continued the cruelty until the entire room was laughing at his expense.

As Ruth sat in the auditorium, absorbing everything the speaker had to say, thoughts of that poor boy crept into her head. She sighed, thinking how sorry she felt for him, not that there was

anything she could do. She turned back into the speaker and listened intently to her words of wisdom.

“Now, before I leave today, I would like to give everyone here an opportunity to say anything he or she wants to on the subject of bullying or peer pressure. You may apologize to a friend, thank someone for his or her kindness, anything. And this is the one time I can promise that no one, but no one, will laugh at you.”

The stillness in the room made Ruth believe her. Slowly, she saw a few hands raise tentatively in the air behind her. One girl wanted to apologize to a friend she had been ignoring recently. Another thanked a boy for his kindness when she slipped on the steps. It was then that Ruth’s moment of courage happened. The speaker called on her, and with shaking hands and clammy palms, she began to speak.

“What you said today really made sense. I know that it’s true, because I see it every day in class. There is one person who is always made fun of. It doesn’t matter why - it could be the way he looks, talks or even takes notes.” Her voice shook. “I think that everyone here has made fun of him at one time or another. I know I have. And now I really regret it. To us, it may just be a game, but to him, it must hurt. And I think...well, I think we need to stop.”

Scared of her classmates reaction, she felt the silence that followed lasted forever. But then, soft clapping started in the front of the room, quickly spreading through the entire crowd. By the time Ruth looked up, the soft pitter-patter had turned into a thunderous roar of applause. Ruth had voiced something that everyone was feeling.

Later on that day, the boy whom she had been talking about came up to her and privately said “thank you.”

She noticed from that day on, people began to treat him a little better. The teasing stopped, and people greeted him in the halls with a friendly “hi.” This kept up, but what didn’t was the bullying, due in part to the courage exhibited by one young woman who knew she had to do what needed to be done.

The challenge for us is to do the same thing, because, like Ruth, we too will face difficult situations where we have to take a stand, say or do something difficult, or just be alone with our thoughts about the unknown of what lies ahead. Thankfully, God gives us a tool for this, called fortitude. Fortitude helps us to overcome any dangers, obstacles, and fears; it enables a person to withstand whatever difficulties may block him from attaining his true goal, sainthood. Mary shows us how to live it out.

As we think about the role courage and fortitude play in our lives, it’s worth considering a few key things.

The first is that God is with us. Gabriel the Angel tells Mary that her Son shall be called Jesus, Emmanuel, God is with us - He will be great and called Son of the Most High. As the angel tells Mary “Do not be afraid, for you have found favor with God,” the same is true for us. We do not

journey through life alone. As He ascended to the Father, Jesus promised us “remember, I am with you always even to the end of the ages.” So, too has Jesus given us the gift of the Church. Receiving Him in Holy Communion, celebrating the sacraments of reconciliation and anointing, these also help us to grow in fortitude for the situations we face in life. Sometimes when we are in a stressful situation, or not sure what to do, it helps to think about that. To think about Jesus in the garden; not wanting to die, but saying the words His mother said at the annunciation, your will be done. Trusting in the Father’s plan even if He did not fully understand it. We might not understand why we face things like illnesses, difficult people, a tough situation with family or at work, but we must remember we do not battle them alone, God is with us. That’s why we need to pray, to celebrate the sacraments

God also gives us that virtue of fortitude though to face the fears. Prayer must lead to action (or even in-action). We begin with prayer, but what did Jesus do after He left the garden? He faced the situation. Mary leaves the message with the angel and then has to deal with the emotions, and the fear of running away shortly after Jesus is born because Herod is trying to have Jesus killed, and perhaps the stress and fear of Simeon who says a sword will pierce her heart. It does; and even on Good Friday though she does not walk away, or abandon her Son or her faith. She bravely confronts these things. When we are facing tough things in life, we have to avoid being paralyzed by fear.

Sometimes this means we say “no” to things. For instance, we are tempted to escape a problem through excessive use of drugs or alcohol; or to look at inappropriate images of the human body, or like at Ruth’s school to join in bullying someone if one wants to fit in with the cool kids. Fortitude can help us avoid these things.

But it can also lead us to acting when we need to act. In her school assembly on bullying, Ruth was scared that speaking up might make her a target of bullying. In her case, it wasn’t enough to just not bully the boy anymore - she also had to encourage others to not do that too. Sometimes we can get trapped into thinking “I’d better not say anything.” Think of typical family situations or situations at work. A loved one has wandered from the faith and never goes to Mass. Someone you know invites you to a wedding but it’s in a context you judge to be inappropriate, such as a same sex wedding. An injustice is going on in the work or you are aware of sexual harassment. It’s a lot easier to choose flight over flight. And sometimes we do need to prudently choose not to say something, such as if we don’t know the full story. But more often than not, this should only come after the part of confronting. It does not mean we have to be hyper-aggressive or come across as condescending, but it does mean when we have a concern about someone or a situation, we should, in a loving way talk to the person about it and certainly if it’s more serious or could cause harm to someone alert a person in authority. We are not called to be the most popular person in the world, but we are called to become saints and to spread the Gospel. That can be tough. So it’s important to examine our conscience and say “am I speaking up or using not wanting to offend someone as a way to avoid a situation?” Now, it could be you’ve talked about your faith with loved ones who left the Church, or you’ve had that discussion on morality with others. We don’t then kick someone out of Christmas dinner or our lives, or keep harping on them. We try to be patient and endure. We journey with them and look for chances down the road to converse, not yell. We pray for them. We try to set a good example to them. And we remember that the saints are full of stories of people who changed after only many years.

Also, as we embrace fortitude, it is important to think long term. God could have come in many ways, and everyone would recognize Him. But what happens? Mary says “yes,” but then 30 years pass before Jesus begins His ministry. Hundreds more pass before Christians are no longer killed by Rome, and as the centuries have gone on Christianity is still under attack. Perhaps you have even experienced this persecution when talking about your faith. But we think to the long term. Mary did not just look to the weeks ahead; if she did, she would have said “no, Gabriel, the consequences here could be too much.” She trusted. God has a plan; but it takes time to unfold. When we think long-term, we find how fortitude leads to magnanimity or magnificence. We think long term. The parent who says “no you can’t go to the party” where there’s bad things going on isn’t thinking about the fight they are having with their teenager; they are thinking long term. The heroes of the civil rights movement who endured so much physical and emotional violence were not thinking about the short-term consequences, they were thinking of a new society where racist attitudes were changed. The early Christians who died for their faith didn’t think about their own mortality or how little the Church seemed; they thought of a world where God’s love would be more fully known. All of these situations and so many others involve sacrifice, but when we have that vision of the meaning of the words we pray “thy kingdom come,” we can realize that through fortitude, we can bring God’s kingdom into this world, even if the results might not always be immediately apparent.

Finally, we must remember we have others to help us. One of the examples of this I see all the time here at Saint Joseph’s is through our Samaritan Ministry. These are people who volunteer to bring Communion to the homebound. But they also build many new friendships, and converse with people. I’ve anointed people in nursing homes and hospitals who have and also met with families prior to funerals who have all said what an impact these people had. Dealing with an illness or confronting death is scary; but these ministers help people through very challenging times. We must remember God is with us, and with Mary was Joseph and Elizabeth too, and in our lives our people we can count on to give us advice, to listen, or to just be present when we need them. There was nothing Mary could do on Good Friday to save the life of her Son, but she was with Him to the end. In our lives, there are people just like her to do the same for us. They can’t make a situation go away, but they can help us through the storm.

Most everyone knows that tonight we begin our celebration of Christmas. But I wonder how many know what December 26th celebrates other than the kick off of return season. The answer is Saint Stephen’s Day. Stephen was the first martyr of the faith. And his feast day follows Christmas because it’s a reminder that Jesus was born into a world that could be ugly at times. People would have to suffer for the Gospel. Stephen though bravely spoke out about His faith with the strength of the spirit, because He knew God would see him through. Later on, one of the people who killed him, a young man named Saul of Tarsus would then do the same thing when he converted. The birth of Jesus is not just about opening presents, having a dinner and feeling a warm fuzzy as Linus recites the story of the Nativity. Jesus comes to show us how to love, which He does through His life. But He also calls us to action. Thousands of years ago, a young woman who had every reason in the world to be afraid, to say no, to run away, didn’t do that. She said yes, and brought us her Son. Now it’s up to you and me. But like her, we must listen to those words of Gabriel: do not be afraid. Do not be afraid to do the right thing. Do not be afraid when it seems like we are alone, because God is with you. Do not be afraid to defend the faith. Like

Mary - do not be afraid to bring Jesus into the world. Saying yes to God's messenger Gabriel, being told you have to give birth in a cold and dilapidated manger, meeting strange shepherds from the night after she gives birth, running away to avoid those trying to kill her son, seeing her son persecuted and eventually executed. Yes, Mary's life was full of things to be terrified about, full of things to look at and say "where are you God?" And full of opportunities to give up. But she never did, and in the process helped bring us all to her Son. By following her example of fortitude, may we do the same. Holy Mary mother of God, pray for us.