

There is an anonymous author who was quoted as saying “the only way to see a rainbow is to look through the rain.” And indeed, a rainbow is a very beautiful sight, but it only arrives if you also have a rainstorm that first goes through. The same can be said with life.

Let’s face it, life is hard. There are the nice things in life, but all of us will experience let downs and disappointments too. And sometimes it can be tempting to think the rain will never end and to let this change us into people who are devoid of hope.

For Ashley Sanders and her family, this was the case back in 2007.

Her husband was in the military, and his deployment orders ended in 2007, and she and her small family found itself without a job for the very first time and with a very new baby.

They put out their resumes and her husband applied to every possible place he could think of, regardless of locale. He took a job across the state, more than four hours away, and the family began making preparations.

They cleaned their home in record time and virtually lived out of suitcases as the “For Sale” signs were pounded into the lawn. They tried to leave no trace of living in their home because they knew at any moment they could be asked to leave for showings. They said goodbye to friends and family and prepared for more heartache and distance. They were leaving the entire family behind.

Then, something magical happened. Their prayers were answered, and in the nick of time. They had another job offer. And it was local. They would not have to move after all. Everything seemed perfect like it was falling into place.

With great enthusiasm, they uprooted the real estate signs and began planning their lives again. This new job paid much less than the previous job, but they had enough in savings to last until the raise her husband had been promised came. Things were going to be just fine.

Until, of course, they were not.

Within months, the savings were completely depleted and things had changed in the company. The money they had been holding out for was no longer something that could be counted on. With a slow job market, Ashley and her husband began to prepare as things began to get worse. She and her husband poured over their finances and marked off anything they could live without, including their home phone and TV service.

Despite the cuts, finances were very tight. So they borrowed some tools and planted a small garden in their backyard. They planted the vegetables they knew they’d no longer be able to afford at a supermarket. They began looking to trade their services for other goods or services they might need.

Meal planning and coupon cutting took up more and more of Ashley’s time as she calculated meals that she could feed the family for less than \$1.50 per serving and compared prices between

the two local grocery stores. Gas became precious and was only used as a means of getting to and from work. Entertainment had to be creative because the family could no longer to pay someone else to entertain them.

Everything seemed to be going downhill quickly until it got even worse. The insurance stopped, and Ashley had to research ways to alleviate smaller medical troubles. It felt as if Murphy's Law had swooped down on them all and everything that could go wrong was going wrong.

They continued sending their prayers up though, hoping for a break somewhere along the way, hoping they'd find a way to pay the electricity before it was cut off again.

As the days passed, nothing seemed to change. The family was barely getting by. But as Ashley's hands dug into the rich soil, uncovering the rooted vegetables as they peeked through, she knew there was something different. She watched as her daughter, who had just learned to walk, tottered down the rows of the family garden and stooped over a bucket to fill it with lettuce leaves, and she smiled. Indeed, nothing on the outside had changed. But Ashley reflected that this was because God was changing them on the inside first.

Looking at what they were going through, Ashley reflected that what at first seemed like a tragedy for the family turned out to be what forced them to change for the better.

Sure, the cable was gone, but instead they spent more time together by the campfire in the backyard or they chased bubbles on the patio. They could no longer to afford to go out to eat with their friends or to the movies, but they now spent time together as a family hiking and exploring local parks. They were no longer eating quick frozen meals but were eating carefully prepared healthier meals with fresh vegetables from a garden. A garden that taught two adults who thought they knew it all and a little girl who found even the worms and ants exciting.

Ashely says she prayed for change, and change is what they got. It just took them a little more time to recognize the blessings bestowed on us, and they just needed a little more faith to see the rainbows through the rain.

Today, we celebrate "Gaudete Sunday," the third Sunday of Easter hence the reason for the pink vestments. It's from the Latin word to rejoice. And in our second reading, Paul stresses the importance of this, saying rejoice always, pray without ceasing and in all circumstances give thanks. That's something that Ashley did in her situation, but as her story illustrates, life is hard. And it can be very hard to do these things. For why rejoice when the chips are down, give thanks for a misfortune, or pray all the time? Well taken in context like Ashely did, these three things are a great blueprint for the Christian to follow to find the path to true happiness.

With respect to rejoicing, we can look to the victory of Jesus. Jesus comes as an infant, but the pinnacle is the resurrection. Jesus overcomes death and darkness forever. This is why we celebrate Christmas at one of the darkest times of the year to symbolize that reality. Paul speaks in Romans that nothing, defeat, sickness, failure, sin or death itself can overcome what Jesus has done. This is a cause for joy - that no matter what happens in life, nothing can separate us from the love of God. When we have this rejoicing, we can find peace. We can sometimes look back

on suffering, such as the suffering that comes with home life and raising a family, of working a tough job or getting ready for a project or test at school in tough subject, and see that we grow stronger. We can remind ourselves that when we battle sins and are remorseful, God's love is there to not say "you are a failure" but "I love you" and to help us pick ourselves back up. When we suffer, we can look to the Cross and see that Jesus suffered too, right along with us, but the suffering and darkness did not have the last word - hope and the resurrection did. Suffering isn't something we seek out, but when we look to Jesus and the Holy Family, we see that it was something they endured and triumphed through.

Paul stresses we should pray too. Ashely and her family certainly prayed. But the better times didn't come nor did the money. But just because prayers aren't answered in the way we hope for at first does not mean they fall on deaf ears. Rather, we can think of praying without ceasing as reflecting how we are drawn up into the life of God, Father, Son and Spirit. Think of "It's a Wonderful Life." George Bailey prays for a miracle. It doesn't happen; indeed he gets into an accident and gets punched at the bar by the husband of his daughter's teacher whom he yelled at on the phone. When his guardian angel Clarence shows up, and says "I was the answer to your prayer," George is pretty skeptical thinking what kind of angel has God sent him. But Clarence is God's response to George's prayer, because God loves him. The story may be fictional, but "pray without ceasing" means you and I are drawn up into the life of the Trinity. The Father and Son in their relationship of perfect love, the Holy Spirit the expression of that love. It means God is always with us, every step of the way, even if we don't think about it. Much like breathing, we might not think about it, but we depend on it, and you and I can depend on God. Hopefully we don't just pray when we need something, but talk to God often and remember He is always with us.

Lastly, Paul says that we should give thanks in all circumstances. Maybe you are like Ashely and her family, in a tough situation. Or because of things in your life, perhaps it can be hard to see much to be thankful for. How can one be thankful for a math test? A setback at school or work? Suffering due to health, or the pain of loss of people we love? Well we can look to Jesus. Jesus comes as a frail infant, and He enters fully into our humanity. He experiences all things - suffering, the emotional pain of seeing his friends leave him, the death of Joseph and others He loved, and what happens is He changes these things. Through the suffering comes the triumph. And it's also true that when we open our eyes like Ashley did, we can see that there is much to be thankful for. God answered her prayer not in the way she thought, and she learned to be more thankful for the time as a family they had together, the new things they discovered and learned about one another, and what the whole experience taught them. Through our sufferings, we can sometimes learn more about ourselves and grow closer to others. Life is good but the pain is a reality, but because of Jesus, the grace is always there as well to bring the good out of the evil.

So much energy in our lives can be spent escaping, or thinking we need to escape, and it can at times be unhealthy if we spend too much time doing things that cause us to lose sight of reality. But rather than flee from the world, we must open up our eyes to it.

In the world, we meet those who have also come to search out the Baptist to be shown the Lord who is to come. We meet those Christians from various places around the world who are literally fleeing for their lives because they believe in Christ. We meet those broken by poverty and

hunger. We meet those who have been abused by people who should have loved and cared for them. We meet the lonely and bereaved. We see the suffering and pain. Sometimes right in our own families. But together, in our varying degrees of brokenness and suffering we rejoice. We rejoice because we encounter the Lord and in his presence everything else is transformed. That's what Ashely's family found through their suffering, and that is what we can find too. So encounter Him. Seek Him out.

As Advent winds down and we move into Christmas, may we too rejoice knowing that no matter what life brings at us, we have so much to be thankful for, because God is with us every step of the way through the peaks and valleys. So may we too like Ashley and like Paul says, rejoice, pray and give thanks for the God who is no longer an infant in a manger, but the King of Kings who through his life, death and resurrection has led us all out of darkness into the light.