Persevering Through the Valleys of Life

Anne Stortz, in poem called “Perseverance” writes:

When all the world is looming dark
And things seem not so clear,
When shadows seem to hover ‘round
Lord, may I persevere.
When it seems everything’s been tried
And there’s no way to go,
Just let me keep remembering
Sometimes the journey’s slow.
I may just need to stop and rest
Along the path I trod,
A time to try to understand
And have my talk with God.
As I gain new strength to carry on
Without a doubt or fear,
Somehow I know things will be right,
And so I persevere.

Easier said than done though, isn’t it? One of the biggest challenges we all face is going through periods where everything seems to go wrong. Maybe it’s our work, or family issues, or some sin we are battling, or things that are out of our control or things we try to do right only to have them fall apart. And, at times, we can be tempted to give up.

As we all know though life is a marathon not a sprint, and so is the path to holiness. We are reminded to keep at it. So how do we do that?

For one, we turn to God. Note what Abraham does, as we read about him in our first reading this weekend, when he is tested. To calm Abraham’s fears, God turns to the ritual of covenant. A common covenant ceremony in the ancient world involved placing portions of slaughtered animals opposite each other. People would then walk between the divided portions to demonstrate how seriously they regarded the terms of the agreement. In this reading the smoking pot of fire and the flaming torch represent God passing between the dead animals. This covenant ritual should be proof enough to a doubting Abraham that God’s word is entirely reliable. And Peter, James and John are given a glimpse of the future on the mountain where Jesus is transfigured. On another mountain come the Ascension, they will be told remember, I am with you always until even the end of the ages. So we must remember, when we sin and struggle, God is there with His mercy. When we hurt, we look to the Cross and remind ourselves God suffered to like we do, and that he is with us still here which we celebrate with the anointing and the Eucharist. God might not give us the answer we always want, and sometimes we can inevitably wonder where He is, but just as He journeys down the mountain with Peter, James and John, he journeys with us through our lives too. We should never fear turning to Him no matter what we are going through.

Secondly, we need patience. Understandably we can want instant results. But with patience, Abraham's dreams were realized. With patience, Peter, James and John became saints. Lent gives us a great time to think about what we have to do to go back up the mountain and help others to do so too, the one that leads to heaven. We must be patient with ourselves knowing we are human and make mistakes. When we are trying to help others it's so important to be patient with them too, encouraging them on and never giving up.

Third, we need to rely on others for our journey. Peter, James and John would rely on one another and others to continue their mission. God in His wisdom gives us people to help us, to inspire us and to encourage. There are so many people whom we call "friends" these days, but real friends are far fewer. These are the people who will encourage but also challenge and give us the straight story. People who will pray for us but also help us when we need it, and help us help ourselves. When I think about my vocation, so many people have and continue to help me from other priests to friends to my parents and the amazing staff I work with. Think of the mission of our Church, to save souls and bring them to God. Each of us has different gifts that we pool for that mission. On our own personal journeys, we need to seek out the people who help us and not think we can do it all alone.

Fourth, we count our blessings. Abraham already had God come through for Him. And He will again. Sometimes though when we mess up, or when life gets us down, we can forget all the good things that we have been blessed with and that God has already done for us. Sometimes it can help to write down things and keep a running list to look at, especially if we are in a slump, and see all that God has done.

Lastly, while we can't do it alone, we also need to be introspective and realize we have so much talent. Eric Liddell, the runner from "Chariots of Fire" who was killed in World War II, said "God made me fast. And when I run, I feel His pleasure." I don't run much, but, and God did not make me fast, but He made me, and He has a plan for me. Others can help me, but ultimately I have to discover and use what God has given me to continue my journey.

Hopefully so far this Lent, you've asked yourself a question: where am I going? And hopefully you've come to the realization that you want to get to heaven. The road to get there is long, and we'll have many slumps along the way. But ultimately we can get there where we won't have to set up tents for a temporary stay, but will be forever with the love of God. So see that love in your lives. Realize God is with you every step of the way. And use that love to transform yourselves by not getting down or thinking short-term when the inevitable setbacks come, but keeping your eyes fixed on the goal, the crown of eternal life, which we can obtain through the love of God, the support of one another, and by believing in ourselves as God believes in us.

God's blessings to you,

Fr. Paul