

There is a story that took place a few years ago during a severe recession about a businessman. The man had lost his job, his life's savings, and his home. To add to all this misfortune, his wife died. But through it all he held on to his faith. He refused to be angry with God or turn away from Him.

One day the man was out walking, looking for a job, when he came across some stone masons working outside a church. He stopped to watch them chisel away for a while and then noticed one of them was working on a triangular shaped piece of stone. "Where are you going to put that?" he asked. The mason stopped for a moment and pointed up. "Do you see that little opening way up there near the spire? Well I am shaping this stone down here, so it will fit in up there."

The man quickly turned and walked away because his eyes were filling with tears. The Lord had spoken to him through these stone masons, giving new meaning to his life and the hardships and difficulties he was facing.

Many of us are living in difficult times. We have lost jobs, homes, savings, and any sense of safety and security we might have enjoyed previously. It is natural to ask why. It is natural to be angry with God. But it is important to put our situations in their proper perspective. We live in both a physical world and a spiritual world. The two are interconnected and what happens in one is reflected in the other. The social unrest, the state of the economy, the rising unemployment, shuttered businesses, and loss of means to support ourselves and our

families are all manifestations of the spiritual battle that is taking place all around us.

In today's Gospel Jesus is giving instructions to His Apostles before sending them out on their first missionary journey. Perhaps what jumps out to us most is the warning He gives them. Three times Jesus tells the Apostles to not be afraid, three times. He would not have told them this if they did not need to hear it. So why did they, and we, need to hear it?

We are told not to be afraid to preach the Truth. The Gospel of the Lord is destined to become known to the entire world and nothing can keep it from being known.

We are told not to be afraid of those who can harm us physically. Anything we have, including our health, can be taken from us in an instant. But our faith cannot be taken from us. We are told to fear only the one who can plunge body and soul into hell, but that cannot happen so long as we remain faithful to our mission.

Finally we are told we should not fear to carry out our mission, for the Father's hand protects us and guides us.

We are safe as long as, and to the extent that, we carry out our Christian mission.

Whenever we follow Christ, whenever we truly work to expand His Kingdom, the powers of darkness, the devil and his demons, do not like it. And they work to make it as difficult for us as possible.

To attack us directly, as they did the apostles, with death and imprisonment for preaching the Gospel is an obvious ploy. More often than not, when we are attacked for speaking the Truth we tend to double down on our position even at the risk of becoming martyrs.

But the powers that work against the Truth can be much more subtle. They can attack us in ways that we do not associate with our faith but may cause us to question why God would allow such things to happen to us. And that is all the demons need, a question, a doubt, a fear.

We are often told in times of difficulties that God is in charge and that everything will work out in the end according to His plan. I think we all can agree to that. We know that God is our rock, our fortress, our high tower. He is our refuge in times of trouble. We all know that things will work out, somehow, but I think that what we are truly afraid of, is the pain and hardship we will be called to endure while God's plan is fulfilled. But pain and hardship is part of our experience as Christians.

Following Christ is demanding. But the words of Christ are the words of God. It is God who is telling us “do not be afraid.” As long as we hold fast to our faith, as long as we stay united to Him and firm in our friendship with Him, then we are assured of meaning, purpose, and everlasting joy, no matter how difficult our journey may become.

The prophet Jeremiah understood this. He lists all of the terrible things that are happening to him, the whispers against him, the fear of being denounced to the authorities. He is surrounded by terror on all

sides from both friends and enemies. But he ends his lament with a testimony to his confidence in God.

"But the Lord is with me, like a mighty champion: my persecutors will stumble, they will not triumph."

Our terror may extend all the way to the cross, but our victory is in the Resurrection and the Ascension.

The Lord is our champion too. He proved this when He rose from the dead. He has proven it a thousand times since in the lives of the saints, those who have been faithful in their friendship with God. And He proves it in every place the sacrifice of the Eucharist is celebrated.

St. Paul also understood this. Paul did not face just a few personal enemies, he faced off against an entire world that had fallen into sin and death. A world that had rejected God. He assured us that even though sin, evil, and suffering affect us all, Christ's grace is infinitely more powerful. Paul knows that our sufferings are absorbed into the sufferings of Christ, because we are Christ's body. As His body, we feel His sufferings, sufferings that contribute to the salvation of all Christians.

"For if by the transgression of the one the many died, how much more did the grace of God and the gracious gift of the one man Jesus Christ overflow for the many."

Jesus will never abandon us. He wants us to rely on His strength to see us through difficult times.

Near my home there is a massive oak tree, it must be 2 or 3 hundred years old. Along the north side of the tree a vine has grown, sending its tendrils even into the upper branches of the tree. The vine clings tenaciously to the tree. If a storm were to uproot the tree and send it crashing to the ground, still the vine would cling to the tree. When the storm comes from the south, the vine is on the opposite side of the wind and the great tree shelters and protects the vine. When the storm comes from the north, the strong winds press the vine more closely to the tree.

God's grace is always at work in us. Sometimes He protects us from the storm in ways that we may never know. But other times He allows us to experience the assault of trials and struggles, all to drive us closer to Him.

Our lives are full of trouble and anxieties in order to teach us to hold fast to God. As a people we are weakened by sin, we are weakened mentally and morally and cannot trust ourselves to find the right path. If we are walking along a road, feeling fine, and someone reaches out a hand to help us, we might impatiently shake it off. But if we are caught in the wilderness, with the darkness coming, a storm brewing, and our strength waning, and someone takes our arm to help us, we would thankfully lean on that person.

God wants us to feel that way throughout our lives. When we encounter difficulties, He wants us to lean on Him thankfully.

The storms of our lives shape us, we are being shaped down here, so that we may fit in up there.