

One of the realities we face in life is that inevitably for all of us, there can be setbacks and struggles, even if we think everything is going well and that we are headed in the right direction doing the right things not only to succeed, but to get to heaven by carrying out God's will.

John R. Paine is a man who had it all. He was a respected businessman, devout Christian and dedicated father.

Then he received a diagnosis that changed everything. He had ALS, also known as Lou Gehrig's disease, and was told he wouldn't live long.

Seventeen years later, Paine has long outlived the doctor's prognosis. He uses a wheelchair to move and a ventilator to breathe, but has found deep joy in his relationship with God. He penned a book last year called "The Luckiest Man" where he shares the story of his journey, which entailed a saying goodbye to many things, but also a newfound trust that his journey would not be made alone.

In his own words:

I'd said goodbye to so many things: climbing stairs, swimming, scratching any given itch. I'd hired a full-time driver who doubled as a part-time caretaker. I'd maintained the rhythm of my evenings, perhaps my favorite part of any day, though I knew it was only a matter of time before that changed too.

Margaret (his wife) has always been an early-to-bed kind of girl, and in those days, she'd settle into bed sometime around nine o'clock each evening. I'd make my way to my favorite deep-cushioned chair by the bed, often reading until close to eleven. Satisfied, I'd settle into bed and fall asleep, spent. It was a good arrangement, one that worked for me. I was growing weaker, though, and with each passing night, I found myself struggling to maintain the rhythm. My arms now dead, Margaret would open my book, set it in my lap, and place my hands on either side. With my right thumb and forefinger, I'd turn the pages with great care, sliding the edge under the fingers of my resting left hand. It was a tedious process and grew more tedious by the day. When I was finished, I'd stand, shuffle to the bed where Margaret had pulled the covers back, and with a series of arm slings and knee raises, I'd pull the covers over my chest before falling to sleep. It was unconventional, but isn't so much about adapting to death?

It was a night like any other, though I should have seen it coming. The routine had been the same—the chair, the book, the pulled-back covers. Having had my fill of reading, I stood, allowed the book to fall from my lap to the floor. I dragged to the bed, then stretched myself under the covers. I tried to sling my arms up using my knees, tried to throw the covers over my chest; I couldn't. It was no use; I couldn't cover myself.

I turned to look at Margaret, already asleep, and there was no way I would wake that kind of resting peace. Pity set in—self-pity is a difficult battle for the ALS patient—as I realized there was no feasible way to solve this problem. In that pity, I was overcome by

emotion. Tomorrow night, would I have to turn in with Margaret? Would I have to let her tuck me in and turn off the lights? Would I stare up at the dark ceiling, unable to move until I was able to fall asleep hours later? Did I have to say goodbye to my favorite part of the day?

I rolled to my side and climbed out of bed, arms dangling. I shuffled back to the chair I'd just left and sat in fresh awareness of my newest loss. Why tonight? Why ever, really?

I felt the sadness and resentment and depression creeping in, knew that this kind of self-pity made life so much darker, so I turned to prayer. I waited for an answer, a sense, anything. I heard nothing. I waited, started praying again, and that's when a movie started playing in my mind's eye. It was the video of my life. I was a young boy in Tyler, running from home, pushing past the boundaries my parents had set. I was a college student in love, but I was spending more time away from Margaret, more time pursuing academic achievement. I was married, working for Mr. Hill, and asserting my independence more and more. I was a successful builder, an entrepreneur, a self-made man. I was sitting in the doctor's office, the recipient of a terminal diagnosis, and even in my success, I felt so alone. Where were my parents? Where was Mr. Hill? Where was Margaret, really? They were a part of my life, sure, but were they in it? Were we connected in intimacy, connected in such a way that would help me carry the load? Hadn't all my assertions of independence been nothing more than acts of isolation?

That's when I felt the words, flooding.

I created you for dependence on me and others. Your pursuit of independence pushed all of us to arm's length. Say goodbye to independence. Really.

Conviction is a difficult thing. First, He'd convicted me of my understanding of His love, then of ways I sought validation. Now He was showing me that dependence was not weakness, so long as I was dependent on the right things. And just as it had in those other moments, this new moment of conviction brought a sorrow with it. This false independence, all this striving to prove my self-sufficiency—what was it worth? How had I missed this truth, that God created us for proper dependence? I knew it at once—the false John Paine had made this kind of dependence impossible. How could I confess my failures, my weaknesses, my inadequacies, if I needed others to believe that I had the answer to every problem? To admit I needed others would require an act of transparency, of confession. Wouldn't it?

It was a moment triggered by the silliest thing—my inability to cover up—but it exposed a deeper, longer trend. Now I felt myself invited into something new: the admission of my need for others was necessary if I was to kill the false man. Only through this death of the false man could I plumb the depths of intimacy.

I will care for you as you learn to give in, I heard in that moment. I have you covered. I'd learned to trust these inklings, these deeper leadings of God, and so, I stood from my chair and made my way back to my bed. I scooted my feet under the covers again

and waited for something to happen. Margaret stirred, raised up on her elbow, and pulled the covers up over me. She lay back down, still sound asleep.

“Margaret?” I whispered.

No answer.

“Margaret?”

Still no answer.

“Thank you, Lord,” I prayed into the dark.

There is no getting around the fact that life is difficult. But what is so important to remember is that through the journey, we are not alone as we journey to God’s Kingdom. God is with us every step of the way, as are the saints and one another.

In our readings today for the Assumption, the three readings remind us of this truth.

In the reading from Revelation, we are reminded of the image of the woman about to give birth to her child. The woman represents the Church, God’s faithful people, Mary the mother about to give birth to the Messiah. He is the one who will fulfill God’s plan of salvation. The dragon represents all that is opposed to God’s plan. He is red with the blood of the martyrs who resisted him. Now the dragon wants to devour the child.

In the journey that is our life, there can be so much that is there to devour us too. An illness like John faced; a sin that seems to overwhelm us; a series of setbacks. Life can be overwhelming as we struggle with our own dragon or dragons. One can’t help what our Blessed Mother must have surely thought when an angel visited her and asked her to bring Jesus into the world. But what Mary did was to trust, saying may it be done to me according to your word. And God saw her through. It was the same trust the Son would have in the Father on Holy Thursday and Good Friday. Like Mary who’s trust was always there, and like John, we need to trust that God will help us to slay our dragons. Along with God are of course Mary and the saints who have gone to where we hope to go.

In the second reading, we are reminded of the basis of our hope. Through Adam death came to us and all our world. But through Christ, we are to be freed from sin and destined to life eternal in the kingdom that Christ is handing over to his heavenly father. The question though is can we like Mary and like John surrender our lives to the Lord? For when we do, He will always see us through. We also hear this in the Magnificat from the Gospel, where our Blessed Mother praises how God has taken her, His lowly handmaid, and made her the instrument of God’s plan in a great reversal of her lowliness and that of the world, through her son, when he begins his mission.

Lastly, we look to others just as Mary did. As John put it in his book, we are created for dependence on God but also on others too. Sometimes there are temptations to live solely for ourselves. But today's feast also reminds us that Mary's journey to heaven was one in which she too was helped and gave the love that she received from people like Elizabeth and Joseph and Jesus, changing lives for the better just as John's wife Margaret would help him too on his journey. This is so important because just as in the first reading from Revelation the threat is there to devour Mary, so much in our world also has the potential to devour us; the despair of a difficult situation like John was in; the frustration at the state of affairs in the world or life circumstances that seem overwhelming. But we are not alone; Elizabeth had Mary with her to help her, and we also have others who walk with us, but also our blessed Mother and the saints who intercede for us. On our part, this is where we take a page from Mary and ask what can we do. In the visitation, Mary is present to her cousin despite being an expectant mom herself, but the two care for one another. As Mary brings Jesus to the world, we are called to do the same too.

Today's great feast celebrates how through a life of surrendering to God's will, and trusting in Him and carrying out his plan, Mary was assumed body and soul into the heavenly kingdom. Her journey there though was far from easy, but through it all she knew God would not abandon her and help her each and every step. May we have that same trust as we are now fed by our Lord at Holy Communion, knowing that while the journey may at times be hard, when we trust in God and ask for the help of one another and look at ourselves and realize we too can do so much for one another, the road to heaven is far easier to travel.