On a spring night in 1970, Tom Kovach stuck his thumb out into the biting wind. He was somewhere in Utah, trying to hitch a ride as the daylight faded. It was bitterly cold and beginning to snow. He had on a coat and the combat boots he'd worn in Vietnam. But not much else to protect him from the late spring snowstorm.

It was 1970. He'd served a tour of duty in Vietnam and come home in 1966 with plans to help his dad with the family farm in Minnesota. Maybe go to college and find a career. Instead...he drifted. No reason. Just a vague sense of unease.

Vietnam had left him with nightmares. He was in an artillery unit, the so-called kings of battle. Sometimes their maps were wrong and they ended up shelling their own guys. Once, they accidentally hit a South Vietnamese militiaman. He died alongside his pregnant wife.

Tom tried to blot out the horrible memories with alcohol and marijuana. Then he tried to outrun the thoughts by moving around. His nine older siblings lived all over the U.S., and he hitched from place to place, finding work on farms or in construction. California, North Dakota, Alaska, Missouri, Oregon, Idaho, Nevada. Wherever Tom was, he wanted to be somewhere else.

Now he was broke and attempting to get back to Minnesota to see his dad before he died. He can't remember why he thought it was a good idea to walk along this empty highway in a snowstorm. There's a lot from that time he doesn't remember well.

He'd been walking all day. He is sure he looked awful. Long, scraggly hair and beard. Dirty clothes. Probably smelled like whatever he had drunk the night before. He hadn't eaten all day.

Evening descended. The last bit of dim light vanished. He could barely see. The snow picked up, falling in sheets, whipping his face. It was getting colder by the minute. Was he going to freeze to death on this lonely highway? After all he'd survived?

Tom wasn't a praying man. Not since Vietnam. Sure, he'd tossed up the same foxhole prayers other guys did. But prayers didn't save the people he'd accidentally shelled. Prayers didn't take away the nightmares.

And yet here, in the middle of the blizzard, prayers were all he had left. Shivering violently, he prayed for God's help.

Light sliced the darkness, illuminating the swirling flakes of snow. Tom turned and saw a pair of headlights approaching. A truck. He waved frantically with both arms.

Brakes squealed and the transmission shuddered as the truck slowed. It loomed out of the snow and rumbled past, stopping with a hiss ahead of me. Tom jogged to catch up, and the cab's passenger door swung open.

Tom clambered up and a voice said, “Hi there.”

The driver was a big guy, a real trucker, rough-looking. That voice, though, put Tom right at ease. It was calm, reassuring. He couldn’t remember the last time someone had spoken to him like that.

“Where you headed?” the driver asked, offering him a sandwich and a thermos of coffee before putting the big rig in gear.

“Minnesota,” he said, unwrapping the sandwich and wolfing it down. The cab was warm and dry, and for a minute Tom just sat there, eating that sandwich and drinking the coffee.

“Thank you,” he said at last.

“No problem, buddy. I can take you at least 50 miles before I have to turn south. You planning to keep hitching? Not a great night for it.”

In fact, Tom had no idea what he was going to do next. “I’m kind of broke,” he said. “I’m trying to get back home to the family farm. My dad’s not doing well.”

The trucker nodded and gave Tom a quick appraising look.

“I don’t want to preach or anything,” he said after a silence. “But I used to be in your shoes. Served in Korea. Came home drinking, smoking, drifting. One day I was driving drunk and I hit someone. The guy lived, but he was disabled.”

His words hung in the air. Without taking his eyes from the road, the trucker continued: “That horrible accident made me take a long, hard look at myself. And the man I hit? He was something special. He forgave me, and we became friends. I quit the drinking. Got a steady job and gave the guy a part of every paycheck I earned. Still do.”

His story struck home big-time. It was like he had lived Tom’s life and was telling him he could change.

Tom didn’t go into his story much as they drove on. It didn’t seem as if he had to. The driver’s turnoff was in a small town. He insisted he take enough money for a bus ticket to Minnesota. Before he got out onto the icy road, the driver cleared his throat.

“Funny thing,” he said. “When I saw it was going to snow today, I got all fixed to stop for the night at the last town back. But something told me to keep going. Good thing I did, huh?”

Tom nodded.

“Like I said, I don’t want to preach, but I believe great things can happen if you believe and pray for what you need,” he added. “Good luck to you, son.”

All Tom could say was “Thanks.” He closed the passenger-side door to the cab and watched the truck rumble away until it disappeared into the snowy darkness.

Something changed that night for Tom. It wasn’t immediate. But that ride was the turning point for him. He made it to the farm. Dad lived a few more years, and he stayed with him, helping him and getting his life back together. He stopped drinking, went to college, found work. He married, had kids and got treatment for my PTSD.

Through the years, anytime Tom has felt down, he just thinks of that truck appearing out of the night. A gentle voice speaks the words that saved him then and keep saving him now: “Great things can happen if you believe.”

Not everyone has hitchhiked in a snowstorm. But like Tom, sometimes in life it can be easy to be adrift, and to have no sense of direction or knowing where we are going, or make a series of bad decisions. We as Christians however hopefully know where we want to go, which is the Kingdom of Heaven. For Tom, he not only got a ride back to Minnesota, he got a clearer vision of where he needed to go.

This is what the brothers also have in the first reading. The Maccabean brothers who live in a time of Greek occupation deal with a tyrant king, a descendent of one of the generals of Alexander the Great. They want to impose Greek customs on them that they find offensive and have the people turn away from God. But some do not. The Maccabean revolt leads to the re-dedication of the Temple which had been destroyed, and which is celebrated by our Jewish Brothers to this day with Hanukkah coming up. The consequences are the 7 brothers in our first reading lose their lives for their faith.

Tragically, this is something we’ve seen up and down the ages.

In February of 2015, a group of Coptic Christians so ancient church in Egypt were arrested by ISIS in Libya where men had gone looking for work. They were dragged out of their beds, held captive for many days, and were told to renounce their Christian faith. They all refused and so we remember these photographs they were led to the beach front in Libya by ISIS operatives wearing orange jumpsuits mimicking the prisoners at Gitmo. By the water they were there to mix blood of martyrs with the blood of Osama Bin Laden. They were invited to renounce faith once again and when they refused they were beheaded. Many spoke the name of Jesus as they died. A detail, there were 20 Christians, 21 men were killed. The 21st was a man from Chad who was not a Christian by a coworker with them, but he was so impressed by the courage and conviction of his brothers that he said when challenged their God is my God and he died along with the others.

And just last century, while we think of Mexico as a Catholic country, it endured a terrible Civil War that so many forget about. José Sánchez del Rio was born on 28

March 1913 Sahuayo, Michoacán, Mexico. Wanting to defend the faith and rights of Catholics, he followed in the footsteps of his two older brothers and asked his mother for permission to join the Cristeros, the Catholic rebellion similar to the Maccabean one in the first reading. She objected telling him that he was too young. “Mama”, he replied, “do not let me lose the opportunity to gain Heaven so easily and so soon”.

On 5 February 1928 the young boy was captured during a battle and imprisoned in the church sacristy. In order to terrorize him, soldiers made him watch hanging of one of the other captured Cristeros. But José encouraged the man, saying, “You will be Heaven before me. Prepare a place for me. Tell Christ the King I shall be with him soon”.

In prison, he prayed the Rosary and sang songs faith. He wrote a beautiful letter to his mother telling her that he was resigned to do God’s will. Jos’és father attempted to ransom his son, but was unable raise the money in time.

On 10 February 1928 the teenager was brutally tortured and the skin of the soles of his feet was sheered off; he was then forced to walk on salt, followed walking through the town to the cemetery. The young boy screamed with pain but would not give in.
At times the soldiers stopped him and said, “If you shout, ‘Death to Christ the King’, we will spare your life”. But he answered: “Long live Christ the King, Long live Our Lady of Guadalupe!”.

Once he arrived at the cemetery, José was asked once more if he would deny his faith. The 14 year old shouted out: “VIVA CRISTO REY!“, and was summarily shot.

These people, like all the martyrs, have that clear vision. They know where they are going. They do not fear death, because they believed that this world is not all there is, which is the condition that tyrants use to force people to submit, but also what so many in our world fall into thinking. So the question is how do we counter that and live in this world while preparing for the next?

The first is to remember what ultimately matters and that is getting to heaven. And the way we get there is through growing in love of God and one another; coming to build relationships with God and one another. This is something we work so hard to catechize people on because so many kids get the message that God is an afterthought, and get caught up in the whirlwind of the here and now. We live in this world and enjoy it, but getting into that routine of Mass every week, of praying daily, and working to treat others with love and respect helps form a person into living out their lives like a saint, and in the way Jesus told us to do when He summarized all the commandments into the great singular commandment, love God with your whole heart mind and soul, and love one another as you love yourself. Paul says in our second reading: 'the Lord is faithful; he will strengthen you and guard you from the evil one.” So let’s talk to Him.

Second, we all have to hitchhike if you will at times on the road of life, and look for direction. Tom got guidance and advice from the big rig driver. And we need to seek out people who will help us and give us sound advice and guidance.

Third, we remember holiness is a process. Tom wasn't doing anything particularly evil, he was just lost and then grew as his life went on. God helps us to grow in holiness through our conscience, through the guidance of others, and ultimately even after we die too. We have to look at our lives and sometimes that means swinging the light on things we may not be proud of, but being honest about our struggles and turning them over to God. And the beautiful thing with God is even if we still struggle with these sins after confession, or after death, His love is there to help us purge them entirely from our souls. Hence the meaning of purgatory; not some type of concentration camp or place where we do time, but where, mindful that we are no longer in the confines of time after we die, we are helped to entirely remove these struggles so we can love completely in the way that Jesus loves us.

Fourth, we all have to be like the truck driver too to Tom in the world, because so many people are lost. For parents, it means you pray with your children, you take them to Mass, you teach them about respecting others. For all of us, it means we seek out the lost, people who are hurting, or need someone to listen. But it also means we challenge, admonishing the sinner and instructing the ignorant, not in a holier-than-thou kind of way, but in a way where like the martyrs we are not afraid to be attacked or ridiculed for our faith or what others may think, because hopefully our main concern isn't image, but rather getting others to heaven.

Lastly, we move forward with hope which counters fear. The great Dominican preacher, Fr Bede Jarrett, wrote a prayer in time of grief, saying: 'life is eternal and love is immortal, and death is only an horizon, and an horizon is nothing save the limit of our sight.' Life and love always go on. There is fear in dying; but having been around so many people who are preparing to cross over, what I am always struck by is the peace and hope they have. My grandmother Pat for instance kept telling me to have a good life, and when my dad told her she had terminal pancreatic cancer, he relayed to me that she seemed so at peace, ready to go home. God journeys with us and also consoles us in our pain too when we say a temporary goodbye to our loved ones, for He died Himself and lost people close to Him, and is truly with us through it all.

Hopefully in life you know where you are going. But I often think about the fact that while I did not do anything that got me in much trouble, if I could go back and have a conversation with my younger self at various points, I'd give myself some good advice. I think we all could say that. But I also remember on a winter's night in the year 2000, right before I started seminary, praying at the cathedral before a prospective seminarians dinner at the Archbishop's residence, and having an incredible sense of peace as I gazed at the candles in front of the Sacred Heart statue, the same statue 7 years later where I'd be invited to give my first blessing as a priest. To this day I don't know what tomorrow will bring, and I know there will be moments I'll see the horizon and others where I'll feel like I'm in a blizzard. But daily through it all, through prayer, self-examination, and seeking out God and others, I truly believe I will make it to the Kingdom of Heaven. I just have to remember that there's something even better than winter ending, going back to the Canadian Rockies next summer, or the buffet at

Caesar’s Palace in Las Vegas - its truly what eye has not seen and ear has not heard. Like the martyrs may we too keep our eyes daily fixed on that as we move forward on the road of life.