

With XM 70s on 7 frequently on in my car or when I'm exercising at the gym, a song that comes on quite a bit is Gloria Gaynor's "I Will Survive." The song is sung from the perspective of a person finding strength following a relationship coming to an end, but on another level, Gaynor herself found strength to survive the ups and downs of her life by coming to the realization that if she wanted to get to the place of hope that we hear about in our first reading today, with the new shoot sprouting from the stump of the tree, she herself wouldn't be able to survive on her own but needed God to bring about this growth in her soul.

Her discovery of God came after she had found what she thought would fulfill her, namely a thriving music career. But despite being at the top of the music world, Gaynor knew she was still searching for something more. As he puts it, "At a time in my life when I felt as if I were on a seesaw, praying one day and then smoking and drinking and partying the next, I went to a little Baptist church in New Jersey with my godmother. At the end of the service, the minister asked if anyone wanted to accept Christ as savior. Accept Christ? I didn't even know what that meant."

When she got home she dusted off a study Bible a friend had given her some years before. They had discussed religion, and Gaynor says her friend must have realized how little she knew. Now she wanted to find out more.

So she sat down in her dining room and let the Bible fall open. She had prayed at various points of her life, but now reached a point where she wanted to know who this Jesus really is. It was 1982 and she was the "Queen of Disco," with more success as a singer than she could ever have dreamed of. Her single "I Will Survive" had been a hit, topping charts around the world, and yet Gloria still felt empty. She realized she needed to sit in that dining room in her New Jersey apartment, read the Bible and look back at how God had worked in her life.

Gloria grew up in Newark, one of seven kids, and hers was a singing family. Her mother sang; her brothers sang; even her youngest sister, Irma, who had a terrible voice, sang. They all loved music and constantly had the radio going.

When she was a girl her mother had surgery on her throat. After the operation she could no longer sing. Still she tried. One day she was trying to sing a beautiful song called Lullaby of the Leaves. Gloria had heard her sing it hundreds of times. But now she couldn't reach the notes. Finally she turned to her daughter and said, "Gloria, sing it for me." Gloria didn't think she had ever paid any attention to her singing. And there she was asking her to do one of her favorites.

Her first public recognition came when she was 13 years old. She was practicing a song by Frankie Lyman—Why Do Fools Fall in Love?—under the staircase in the hallway of her building. The lady from upstairs leaned over the banister and said, "Oh, I thought that was the radio." Wow, Gloria thought, I really can sing.

Later, after she had graduated from high school, she was baby-sitting for a couple of days. Every morning at 10:00 she heard footsteps in the apartment above her. She began to follow the sound of those steps; wherever they stopped, she sang underneath. She wasn't interested in applause. She just wanted her voice to be heard.

A few nights later, she and her brother Arthur went to a nightclub. As they were sitting at a table with their Cokes, she sang along with the band. The next thing Gloria knew the bandleader said there was a girl in the audience named Gloria and perhaps if the audience applauded, they could get her to do a number or two. Too surprised to ask questions, she went up onstage and sang. Afterward the band asked her if she would like to work with them—starting the next night. As it turned out, the person whose footsteps she had been serenading was the manager of the club.

That was her start in show business. For the next few years she performed in clubs for nearly nothing. She loved every minute of it. She went in with her book of 200 songs, the band chose enough of them to get through the engagement, then they went to work. It built character, fortitude and confidence. By the time she was being hailed as “Queen of Disco” in the mid '70s, she had put in countless hours of work. And she had said her share of prayers.

For as long as she could remember, she had prayed every night for all of her family and friends. As a child she had a list that she said in the same order: God bless this one, that one. Whatever worries or troubles, Gloria told God and asked him to put them right. She honestly can't recall a time when God didn't answer the smallest request. But still, she knew she needed more.

Two things happened that led her to that New Jersey church and started her reading her Bible in earnest. First, her mother—her closest companion—died. With her gone Gloria became more and more aware of a great emptiness at the center of her life. She was looking for something to fill the ache inside, yearning for something she couldn't even identify.

Then on March 12, 1978, she had a terrible accident onstage. She was performing at the Beacon Theater in New York City. She was doing a number during which she danced away from three backup singers and then turned around, twisted her microphone upside down and snapped the mike cable like a whip. The singers grabbed the cable, but they didn't hold on to it. Gloria crashed backward over a monitor at the side of the stage, severely injuring her back.

What upset her later when she saw a videotape of the fall was the reaction of the band members. They didn't look at her. They didn't reach out for her. Nothing. The whole audience stood, and some tried to catch her. But those three singers didn't. She had worked with them for several months, and had thought they had gotten really close. And so she asked, “Is there no one who really cares about me?”

She was in the hospital for several months, and while there she began to read the Bible, almost out of boredom. She must have read the first chapter of Genesis 15 times. She never got further than that because she didn't understand what she was reading; but doesn't think she really wanted to. It was a semiprivate room, and one of her roommates called later to tell her that her reading had got her going to church. At least it did her some good she thought.

When Gloria was released from the hospital she stayed away from partying for a while, but then she couldn't stand being left out of the good times. She wanted to study and talk to people about God, but she didn't know any Christians well enough to ask the questions that nagged her. It got so bad that she stopped praying at night because she returned home so late she just fell into bed.

Then came her visit to that little Baptist church. For the first time, she was really ready for whatever God told her. At home she sat at her dining room table with her study Bible. She prayed, "God, I want to know who Jesus is. I'm listening. I want to hear from you."

Her Bible fell open to a chapter titled "Harmony of the Gospels." Verse by verse it showed how the Old Testament prophecies were fulfilled. She wrote and studied and read. The verse that really spoke to her, a verse she had sung in Handel's Messiah as a schoolgirl, came from Isaiah: "Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son and shall call his name Immanuel" (7:14). And then the study Bible referred her to Matthew, where it is explained that Immanuel means "God with us."

At that moment, the Good News spoke to her. God with us. Jesus is God with us. He is with us always, every day. He had been with her when she was a girl listening to her mom sing, when she was teenager, when she was a young woman performing in clubs night after night. Jesus is God with us.

For the next two years she sat down at her dining room table every time she had the chance, and spent an hour or two studying the Bible. Today Gloria feels blessed, and unshakable in her faith because she didn't get it from her aunt, her mother, her grandmother or the lady upstairs—the Lord taught her.

She believes she was born again that first day that she sat down with the Bible. She had money and fame, but there was a great void, a God-shaped void, in her life. She was willing to let her old self die and ready to accept the gifts and strengths God would give her. Though she can't name the day, for her it was her second birthday.

In a nutshell, what she did was to use the image from Isaiah that we had last week, where we heard the words "the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest mountain and raised above the hills. All nations shall stream toward it." Advent is a time where we make that mountain of the Lord the highest mountain in our lives. That's what she did in her life starting in that church one evening and continuing in the

years that followed. Today's reading from Isaiah gives us the image of what happens when the King arrives; he sets everything right, establishing justice and peace, and we are told "baby shall play by the cobra's den, and the child lay his hand on the adder's lair." As we remember, the serpent, symbolizing the devil, tempted Adam and Eve who gave into sin; now sin, through Jesus, is destroyed and if the Christian trusts in the mercy and love of the Lord, and listens to Jesus, there is nothing to fear. For on the Cross, Jesus does battle with the dysfunction and sin of the world and triumphs over sin.

Like Gloria, the people in the Gospel too are searching. John utters the promise of Isaiah, and we are told that all Judea and the region around the Jordan are going out to him. They are leaving something behind. Their journey to the desert is a demanding one for all who make it. They relive the beginnings of the Exodus by turning their backs on Jerusalem and Judah, the monarch and the Temple and now coming to John and committing themselves to search again for the living God. Advent gives us a time to think about how we make that same journey.

For starters, we can think about what we might want to leave behind. Gloria as she matured realized that her deepest desires weren't going to be achieved just through her fame, or running with the partying crowd. But that required some time with God in her hospital bed during recovery and in that church. We can all get used to a lifestyle but sometimes that lifestyle isn't healthy. Whether one is ignoring sins and just tells themselves no one has to know, it's private, it's not a big deal, or whether one is just tired from a grueling schedule that leaves no time for God, or perhaps being around people who aren't true friends but just leading us further astray. It's important to be introspective about these things because we want to grow in holiness.

We then, as Gloria did, and as the people in the Gospel do, take the step. There is a Hindu saying, take one step towards God and he will take ten steps towards you. There's a lot of truth to that. Sometimes we don't think of God until there is an emergency or we really need something, but as Gloria realized, God was with her her whole life and He is with us too. What a great time this season gives us to take a step towards the God who comes to dwell with us. The Gospel tells us the people were being baptized as "they acknowledged their sins." We'll have the chance to do just that at our parish penance service Monday night at 6:30, and next weekend and the following there will be an added hour of confession too. It's not easy to do because we can get an inflated ego. But when we get introspective and look at what we have done and what we have failed to do, we emerge better people. Sometimes we fail. We let members of our family down; old sins crop up again; or in silent reflection we see the sins that we hadn't even thought about such as how we treat others, our struggles perhaps with pride or being arrogant or too controlling or whatever it might be. We acknowledge these things in private prayer, in the confessional, and use the strength of God to become better people.

We then strive to keep up the changes. Gloria continues to pray and live out her faith. We as Catholics don't typically use the term she did, "born again," but we are in fact

born again the fire of God's love; John tells us Jesus will send the Holy Spirit, which He has through our Confirmation. And as in her life, there needs to be ongoing change. We will fall again, but we also need to open ourselves up to constant growth to reflect the new way of life striving to grow in holiness by having that constant, ongoing relationship with our God, especially through actively assisting at Mass.

And lastly, we must remember like John, we point others to Jesus. As Gloria found out simply by reading her Bible and thinking about her faith while in the hospital, others were brought to the Lord. But as she also found out, the people on the stage who were who she thought would help her when she fell didn't. So how about us? Do we bring people to Christ by being a welcoming and warm person, and giving others the gift of our time and compassion? Or do we push others away through our attitude or lack of charity or the moral choices we make? God gives us so many ways to bring people closer to God, from the people we live with to the people we meet at school and work, we have to make sure our eyes are open to doing just that.

"I Will Survive" focuses on a woman finding strength on her own, but in the closing lyrics Gloria sings "as long as I know how to love, I know I'll stay alive. I've got all my life to live, I've got all my love to give, and I'll survive." On a deeper level, all of us know how to love because of what Jesus has done for us. And His challenge to us is to give not just some, but all of our love. In doing so, we don't just survive, but we become saints. Sometimes in life it seems we just kind of survive going day to day and never think about where we are going - but God calls us to something greater because we are loved, a love we remember on Christmas and every time we come to celebrate Mass, but a love we are also called to respond to through our way of life. So which way are we going and where are we headed? Let's use this time to think about that so as the people of God, we can do just more than survive but become saints.