

Sometimes in the midst of suffering it can certainly be hard to find God.

Years ago, a teenager named Marla Thurman found herself in church one day trying to find God.

She writes that abuse was parceled out in generous portions at her home any day of the week, but rain brought out the demons and often she had to run to survive. She always ended up in the same place, in the back pew of her church, the same church where she attended Mass each morning before going to class in her Catholic school. Cold and wet, she would stare hard at the crucifix on the wall, the image of Christ hanging.

By the time she was a senior in high school, she was furious at God. She knew God existed - daily religion class and Mass six times a week kept her from doubting - but she was not at all convinced God was good, and this was especially true when she was 17. One day the terror at home began, and she ran as she always did, ending up in one of the darkened pews at the back of the church.

Despite her anger, she couldn't take her eyes off the crucifix. It had been hanging there for her entire young life, but only now did it occur to her that she might be wasting her time talking to some guy nailed to a cross. She felt tears well up for probably the third time in an hour.

"If you care about me at all," she shouted in her head to the God on the cross, "you have to show me now! Today! Because I can't live anymore unless I know you are out there somewhere!" She started to sob.

Just then she felt a hand rest warmly but firmly on her shoulder.

"Marla, honey, you're soaked through," sister Margaret said from behind her.

Sister Margaret, her school principal, had found her here before on many occasions. She walked around to stand in front of her. She quickly looked downward to avoid her gaze.

"You poor child," Sister Margaret said. "You're going to catch pneumonia one of these days you know." She gently took her chin in her hands and turned her face towards herself. Her dark eyes were kind beneath her nun glasses, framed by her boxy, brunette nun haircut. She studied Marla's eyes, but made no mention of the swollen, purple mess she saw there.

"Let's go back to the convent and see if Molly has something that might warm you up a bit."

It was what Marla was hoping for. "Yes, Sister."

In the vestibule, Sister Margaret leaned over and picked up an umbrella from the corner. "She this?" she teased. "This is called an umbrella. Handy little invention. We'll have to get one for you."

With that, she popped open the umbrella, held it over them both, and walked with her the few short yards from the cold, dark church to the warmth and light of the convent.

Despite the close proximity of the church, the school and the convent, few students had ever seen the inside of this house where the teaching nuns lived, and they imagined it to be a scary, funeral place. She knew the convent as a place of love and safety though. As soon as they crossed the threshold, she felt better.

Sister Margaret got her a towel, and she dried herself off as best as she could. Sister John, her art teacher, waved hello and smiled hugely as she passed through the kitchen. Any apprehension she might have felt evaporated. The nuns loved her, even if her parents did not. Sister Margaret took her damp towel and draped it around her. She pulled out a chair from the kitchen table, indicating that she should sit. Molly, the convent maid, had already placed a steaming bowl of vegetable soup on the table.

Suddenly, Marla started to cry, with great hiccupping sobs that shook her to the core. Sister Margaret sat next to her at the table and patted her back. She allowed her to cry, but only briefly. After a minute, she said "eat your soup."

The soup helped. Molly gave her one of her amazing hot rolls and that helped even more. Nuns came and went from all corners of the house; most just calling out greetings, but others stopping to chat for a minute or two before heading off to other things. None asked about her face but she saw compassion in the eyes of each sister.

When she finished eating and had regained her composure, Sister Margaret asked "Do you want to tell me anything this time?"

Her phrasing was purposeful and deliberate. In all the times they had made the walk from the church to the convent, Sister Margaret had asked but never pressed her about her home life, and she had told her little. She wasn't blind of course. She saw her black eyes. She had witnessed her anguish for years.

This time, when she didn't answer, Sister Margaret said, "Tell me who did this to you?"

Marla looked at the table. "My mother" she said. "It's almost always my mother."

Just those few words opened up a dam. While nuns laughed at "Gomer Pyle" in the next room, she talked to Sister Margaret about the horror that was her life. When she finally stopped talking, she was unburdened for the first time.

After a brief silence, Sister Margaret said, "I think you'll stay at your grandmother's house tonight. She'll be happy to see you."

A trill of anxiety coursed through her then, but Sister Margaret saw it and comforted her. "I've known your grandmother many years Marla," she said. "You have no need to worry about her. She will want to help you even more than I do."

Sister Margaret was right. Several hours later, she was at her grandparent's house, snug and warm and exhausted in the guest room. Her grandmother and grandfather had accepted her story unquestioningly and offered her respite.

She reviewed the night in her mind. Sister Margaret had rescued her and taken her to safety. Sister John and the other nuns had welcomed her and even made her laugh. She had finally felt safe enough to tell someone about the bad things happening at her house-and they had reacted properly. She wasn't just to stay a night at her grandparents house, but as long as she needed, and she ended up there through her first year of college. She no longer had to run away every time it rained.

Before she slept, she spoke to God. "I saw you tonight. Thank You!"

Marla reflected she had, indeed, seen God. Sister Margaret, the other nuns, and her grandparents had rescued her and cared about her. It was the first time in her life she recognized that God shows up so very often, not in a cloud or in a burning bush, but in other people. Recognizing God in those wonderful people renewed her faith. God was real to her again, and it was all she had asked for.

In our lives, we are all aware of suffering. And I suspect many people have said the words of Marla, asking God where He was. Jesus asks this too, looking for the Father on Good Friday but feeling the pain and the abandonment.

But when we look to the Cross, as Marla did in that Church, we see God's response to sin. Not silence, but involvement. Like Marla, He knew what it was to be abused. Like Marla, He knew what it was to be betrayed by those who are supposed to love and care for you. Jesus touched on all parts of our own human lives; every joy, sorrow, quiet moment, and crowd-filled experience in daily life. All except sin. With Jesus, like Marla in that church, we cry out to God for the sorrow and sin of the world that touch each of us. Jesus could have called on the 12 legions of angels, but had He done that would we have known the truth, namely that we are loved? God comes to us not with 12 legions of angels at His side, but as the Suffering Servant, as the one whom the author of Hebrews reminds us, is the one who is capable of feeling the deepest weaknesses we have, and who has been tempted as we have been tempted. In that Garden, Jesus takes the cup filled with the evil humanity is capable of, and so too does He take on all of our pain and sufferings. Our king dies for us on a throne of wood, dying for us all under a sign written in Latin, Hebrew and Greek and another sign "—I love you," written in the red of His blood.

Many won't be able to venerate the cross today at church. But odds are you have a crucifix in your home, and you'll be able to see it on the screen. Hopefully it reveals to us its true meaning: that the Cross shows both the evil and the dark side of humanity,

but also just how far God will go in reaching out to us with His love. So think for a moment. Yes, life can be painful, and at times God can seem far away, and at times we can push Him far away through our decisions. But this God is never far away. No matter what we have done with our sins, He is with us. And He is with us in suffering, in weakness and loneliness. He knows our hurt because in his humanity he suffered too. He suffered today. God loves us. In the proverbial gutter and struck down because of our bad choices and sinfulness, in our pain, God does not abandon us but instead reaches to grasp our hand and says, "I want to be your king."

This Good Friday my prayer is that we realize our need for a savior and also how much God loves us. As God was with Marla, He was with her as He is with us at every moment.

But, we also have a challenge. To do what Jesus did for us to a broken world, to attend to those who are suffering, and not take the attitude of apathy or blindness or thinking we can do nothing, but to be on the front lines to help those in need. To be like the nuns that day in the convent. The problem is indifference. Sin muddies our eyes to seeing sin and suffering in our midst; the Cross opens them to do something about it. We pray. We act for others. We listen to others, We defend the unborn, the hungry, the imprisoned, the bullied, the doubtful. We bring light to the darkness that others go through. And if there is a silver lining in this Corona virus, I think while on the one hand we see the darkness of the suffering and also of tribalism and scapegoating as some look to blame others, or are fearful of others seeing people as a threat, the flip side is so many respond to it with compassion and mercy. They see suffering and chose to do something about it, from the doctors and nurses to those just making a phone call or sending a card or online message of hope. To quote again Mother Teresa who I talked about yesterday: ""We can cure physical diseases with medicine but the only cure for loneliness, despair, and hopelessness is love. There are many in the world who are dying for a piece of bread but there are many more who are dying for a little love. Let us not be satisfied with just giving money. Money is not enough, money can be got, but they need your hearts to love them. So spread love everywhere you go." Good advice that we can all do, because love is so incredibly powerful. That is the message of the Cross.

As we remember this Good Friday, may we take the words of the Psalmist to heart: "In you, O Lord, I take refuge," always aware that through His sacrifice on a throne of wood, we can take refuge in Him whose love knows no bounds. No matter where we are at in life, may we strive to see past our pains that come to us, or the pains that we cause, and see ourselves with the eyes of Christ – gazing to us from above with compassion and love, and hear that message loud and clear " –I want to be your king," and reach out and take His hand, while like Sister Margaret helping others to do that too, and let His love fill our heart and soul to bring us the peace we find gazing upon the crucified Christ as not a distant and far away God, but a God who loves us to the end.