

Fear can be a powerful thing that builds on itself, and can be overwhelming. And sometimes it can feel like there is no way out of a tough situation in life, or that we are all alone. But the truth of it is like the sheep in the sheepfold who venture out when the voice of the shepherd is heard, and like Peter who goes from being paralyzed by fear to boldly proclaiming the Gospel, while we might not always be able to see where we are going or what lies ahead, what we need to remember is that our Good Shepherd is with us through it all.

In the early 1960s, Kathy Baumgarten, who would grow up and become a technical sergeant in the Air Force and then a writer, remembers one such moment when she was in the midst of a terrible storm as a child, but was also suffering with her family through other storms of life.

In her story entitled “In the Basement” she writes thunder and lightning come and go in our lives but therein lies a lesson. For when the sun comes out again, the raindrops on the leaves will sparkle like diamonds. If we stand long enough to watch the last of the clouds blow away, we will also see that the storm had nourished us in a way that we could not predict. It was in such a storm that she learned to have hope.

She was four or five years old. Her father had died and her mom had to work, so her grandmother came to live with her and her siblings one summer. Their home was surrounded by lovely trees, but this terrified her mom whenever a storm blew up. She didn't understand then what she does today, namely about house insurance deductibles and how much money a widowed secretary with a mortgage and three kids could actually have at her disposal in 1962 to pay for repairs. Impossible numbers must have swirled in her head with every thunder clap. Worse yet, they lived on an island where the waters frequently attracted lightning.

But, oblivious to all these facts, a young Kathy was standing on a chair by the window really enjoying the sight of the trees fighting against the wind when she heard the phone ring. Her grandmother answered it with the shaking hands of someone who'd only ever gotten bad news over the phone. Her older sisters sensed trouble, and she recalls that a shadow fellow across their countenances as her grandma put down the receiver and shepherded the kids down the basement stairs.

The kids asked what was wrong. It had been their mother calling from work to order everyone to seek shelter. Kathy's grandma, anxious that nothing would happen to the kids on her watch, complied. At the bottom of the stairs, she stood and watched the old woman pull over a chair and instruct her sisters to drag over the old shaggy pink rug for everyone to sit on. The basement, rarely used, was dimly lit with only a bare bulb or two and a pair of cobwebbed windows through which Kathy observed the wind bending the grass flat. She sat by her grandma's right knee, her two sisters on her left, and enjoyed the cozy little situation she found herself in for the first time with family members that she loved. As she happily took in the scene, she noticed how peaceful her grandma appeared compared to her sisters.

"What if the tree falls on the roof, grandma" they asked. "Who will pay for it?" More pleadingly, "Where will we live then? How will we eat?"

Suddenly alarmed, Kathy looked eagerly to her grandmother. As her father's mother, she held her in high esteem. Touching her, she always felt a connection to her dad. And she noticed her grandma just smile and shake her head.

“Grandma,” Kathy asked, comparing her face to that of her two older sisters, “why aren’t you afraid?”

She looked up and her sisters looked up with her. Kathy thinks her sisters only saw the floor joists and impending doom, but somehow Kathy knew her grandmother was focusing her eyes on something far away than the rough-cut boards, pipes and metal ductwork. “God will watch over us,” she declared as the lightning cracked.

Her sisters disagreed heartily. Where was God when their father died and left them destitute? Where was God when their mother locked herself in her room sobbing and left the kids to their own devices? Wasn’t it God causing the storm? Didn’t God grow the trees that were perilously near their eaves which would take out the hall window if they brushed too close?

Kathy looked at her sisters and weighed their complaints and then she looked back at her grandma. She sighed a little, folded her hands, and looked up again. They were already in the basement; they could not hide any deeper from the storm; they had done everything in their power to protect themselves and she knew that. When she repeated “God will

protect us,” making that promise again, Kathy made the first and most valuable decision of her whole life, one she said she would need to remind herself of time and time again. She decided that she liked her grandma at that moment better than the fear mongers. In her 70-plus years, she had seen many trees felled by storms, watched many loved ones fall around her, but she still had learned, or taught herself, the inner discipline to look beyond the situation at hand and trust that there was something bigger at work than what she could fully understand. She’s just sorry that she never knew how much she needed to see her looking from the basement out at the storm and declaring, against all doubts, that it was going to be okay.

Years later, as she was laying in a sleeping bag beside a Rocky Mountain lake with another storm raging around her, she felt the same thrill as that day with her grandma in the basement. She smiled at the power and might of the storm, certain that the sun would shine again in the morning. Her tent mates, shuddering in their bags, began to murmur as her sisters had so long ago. “How can you be so calm?” they charged. “We’re camped at the highest point on the mountain, and metal poles are holding up the tent! We’ll be toast if we take a direct hit!”

She didn't know then how to tell them why she enjoyed the storm, but she does now. She reflected that when the wind had died, she followed her grandmother up the stairs. She watched her place her hand tentatively to turn the doorknob, not knowing what the storm had wrought on the other side. Then she saw the sun break upon her face and the great relief that rose from her heart. She heard her sisters laugh and saw them jump up with joy. Perhaps, she says, she was awfully young to make the decision to follow her grandmother's way, but as life went on, the more she's opened doors and seen the sun greet her in her owl life, the more she has hope that there are more sunny days ahead.

Right now like the sheep in the sheepfold, or like a young Kathy in her basement, we too are dealing with fear of the unknown, and of what lies ahead. And like her sisters, sometimes it can be hard to find God in midst of such challenges. But what her grandmother knew was the voice of the shepherd who was with her through the loss of her son, through that storm, and shepherding her through it all.

A sheepfold was a stone enclosure out in the fields, with walls high enough that the sheep could not jump over them, and the enclosed space was

small enough to keep the sheep warm and safe at night, while being too closely packed together for predators to be able to snatch one of the sheep away. Jesus leads us there because we can't climb over the wall or sneak through the gate into the sheepfold. We follow Jesus through the gate. But the safety isn't just from being in the pen. Rather Jesus the shepherd is the one who is the entrance to eternal life. When we look to Him, through his Passion, death and resurrection, we see how he leads us safely through the storms of life. Jesus, says Peter in the first reading, is the living expression of the will of God - both Lord and Christ. By preaching the crucifixion St Peter brings home to the people the fact that Jesus really gives us life, in fact His own life. Dying for us and feeding us are part of one and the same mystery. He is not just 'a good shepherd', he is the 'never before experienced, unheard of shepherd, so mind blowingingly self-giving that He sacrifices himself for His sheep as the inevitable outcome of his love and care for them' So the answer to Kathy's older sister's questions at the time, maybe ones we've asked too, is that looking to Jesus and the Cross, looking to the Eucharist, His food for our journey, the answer is Jesus is with us, step by step.

Taking that to heart, we have to also learn from Kathy's grandmother. How did she have that trust? It came from faith. It came from coming to know the shepherd. We do that through prayer, through learning the faith at a deeper level, and coming to know the shepherd more deeply. Faith always needs to grow, and not just be seen as something that wraps up learning when we're confirmed, or one thing among many. So take time to grow in the faith and come to know the shepherd. Be aware of the false shepherds too; Jesus says the sheep know his voice, the unique voice of the shepherd. So many times in life we can hear the voices of those who would lead us into sin and tempt us, or the voices of those who would feed us with lies about God and the Church. It's what causes so many to minimize sin, or to make bad decisions or stop going to Church all together. Only by fine tuning our spiritual hearing can we hear the true voice of the Good Shepherd.

And lastly, we guide one another. Kathy's grandmother didn't just help keep her safe in that storm, she helped put her on the right direction in life by passing on her faith, which she carried with her for years after. We are told in the first reading the people listening to Peter are "cut to the heart." As he has grown in his faith, Peter has come to emulate the shepherd. Peter makes it clear every member of the flock is called to be a witness, and this

isn't easy. There will be suffering for the Gospel when we speak the truth and live out our faith. Normally our instincts can be to run away from suffering, or to fight fire with fire. But Jesus shows us the path of love, of non-violence. We can tap into this Divine Love when we are met with hostility for speaking the truth, when parents show love and patience to a growing child who may rebel, or when others gossip about us or attack us either to our face or on social media. It's not easy, but it can really do much to ultimately unleash the good that is inside us all.

At the end of the storm, Kathy was safe as the sun shone on her, and her sisters anxiety turned into relieve and joy. The Son shines on us too; the love of the Son of God, who is to borrow from the great Bob Dylan, our shelter in the storm. Like Kathy and her sisters, the storm of this virus goes on all around us as we wait for it to pass. And maybe like her sisters we too ask where are you God? And the answer is right there with us, and in so many people around us who guide us, and in our hearts and souls to help us guide one another. So when the storms of life come, let us look to our Shepherd. For what awaits us is truly a joy that none of us can begin to imagine. Hopefully we do all we can to find that joy by following the Shepherd home, coming to know Him more and more each day, and being

Good Shepherds by leading one another to Him through the testament of our lives.