

Fear can be something that is quite powerful and it can easily take over our lives the more we think about things, or look at the unknown that lies ahead. Sometimes we feel powerless in the face of the things going on in the world, or the things we deal with in our own lives from health issues to finances to job loss or fear of being hated for what we believe in and stand up for. But what the Christian is called to remember are the words from the Gospel today, namely to not be afraid, for God is so loving that He even knows how many hairs are on our head.

Jan Brand, who is a freelance writer from Texas who has as a goal of her writing to help America become reacquainted with God, wrote a story about her own journey of fear a few years ago.

She recalls being 24 years old, and it was happening again with her heart slamming against her rib cage. She wondered if she was dying but then wondered how that could be at the age of 24 as she wanted to live. She tried to suck in enough air to breathe as she stumbled next door and rang the doorbell.

She asked for help, even though she didn't know the neighbor, but her neighbor got out her car keys and drove her to the closest doctors office.

They approached the receptionist and her face reflected the same fear that Jan felt. She jumped up and went through a door and came back in seconds with the doctor who led her to a treatment room. In a soothing voice, he asked questions as Jan wrung her hands and tried to keep fear at bay. But all her senses were focused on the need to breathe, which was harder and harder and drained her energy.

After listening to different areas of her chest and back, the doctor sat on his stool and looked into her eyes, saying "You're having a severe panic attack. Can you tell me what's wrong?"

What's wrong, she thought, was that she was 24 years old and life wasn't working for her. She had a sad, lonely childhood and now she was married to a serial adulterer. She was the problem, and thought to herself, and everyone knew the secret to happiness but her. She didn't want to live and die with nothing good in between.

Jan walked out of the doctors office on trembling legs with a handbag full of tranquilizers that were supposed to help her cope. They didn't work though because they couldn't make her husband faithful; they couldn't make her feel worthy of love; they couldn't convince her that life was full of promise or give her hope for the future. The pills only dulled the fear, but they didn't get rid of it.

She soon found a way to diminish the severity of the attacks. She would stay in a safe place and not leave home - something she did for the next 10 years. Alcohol helped to relax her more than the tranquilizers, so she ditched the pills and couldn't wait until five o'clock daily, when she deemed it acceptable to have a scotch and water.

At times, she felt strong enough to go out to dinner with her husband and children. On rare occasions, she went shopping or attended something at one of the children's schools. But those occurrences were rare, and for 10 years she was mostly homebound.

To the outside world, it looked like Jan was living a privileged life. The maid drove the children to school and did the shopping, a hairdresser came to the house to do her hair, and department stores sent saleswomen to her house, their cars loaded with clothes for Jan to try on in her bedroom while terror held her prisoner. When the attacks came, it was like living inside a horror movie that wouldn't end.

After years of suffering, Jan says she would have talked to a monkey if she thought he could help.

One bitterly cold winter day, she felt desperate. She had to find help or she couldn't go on. The president of her daughter's PTA had the reputation of being "religious." The few times they spoke at school, Jan reflected that she seemed to have a sweet, gentle spirit, so she decided to risk it.

She called and asked if she could talk to her about school-related things. They made a date for 2 p.m. She had learned to function with the alcohol, so she tossed down two scotch and waters for courage and drove the four long, terror-riddled blocks to her house.

The maid ushered her into a lovely home that smelled of oranges and cinnamon. Marilyn, the PTA head, waited for her in the family room, and they settled onto a comfortable sofa before a roaring fire and drank Russian tea.

Her family had been chosen family of the year by the local paper, and the room she saw was filled with loving touches and photographs. Jan's first thought was "I don't belong in the house." She wasn't sure she belonged anywhere, but she was sure she was not worthy to be there. But where else could she go, she thought.

After a few minutes, she took a deep breath and decided to find out just what kind of Christian she was. Jan felt she had nothing to lose. Her life was out of control, and she couldn't fix it. And so in a torrent of tears, Jan spilled out her story - the awfulness, the pain, the despair, the hopelessness, and the shameful secrets of her wild-child youth.

When she finished, Marilyn did an amazing thing. With tears sliding down her cheeks, she put her arms around her and said, "Oh, Jan, I always knew you were one of God's special kids. I just didn't know how special you were."

Jan was stunned. Marilyn thought she was special? Was it possible, she thought, that God loved her? Wouldn't He count as someone who cared, and did Marilyn, really? This was heady stuff.

Jan didn't walk out of her house whole, but she walked out with a hope that changed her life. Sitting in her cozy family room, Jan remembers she saw Jesus, just like it was two thousand years ago when He hung on a cross for her.

She closes her story by saying Ralph Waldo Emerson said, "Do the thing you fear, and the death of fear is certain." That day Jan began the process of recovery by leaving her safe place that was her home. Hope gave her the courage to try. Sometimes she hyperventilated the whole way, but she went.

From that day, Jan realized she wasn't alone anymore. God cared, or so she had been told, and then liberated from fear, Jan started taking tiny steps toward freedom.

"Do not be afraid" are the words Jesus gives us in the Gospel today. But there is so much to be fearful of. The unknown future. The state of affairs in the world. An invisible enemy called Covid 19. People getting after us online or in our face because we disagree with them or hold firm to something we know to be true. What then is the Christian to do?

As a starting point, it begins by realizing what Jan came to realize, and that is in the living room of Marilyn, she helped her to realize what Jesus says in the Gospel: "are not two sparrows sold for a small coin? Yet not one of them falls to the ground without your Father's knowledge. Even all the hairs of your head are counted. So do not be afraid, you are worth more than many sparrows." It's hard to get our minds around that. As I shared once before a former atheist I knew once said to me if God does exist in the vastness of this universe do you really think he would care about you at all? It would seem he has a point when you consider how big the universe is, but also in the bad things we see in the world. But let us look bigger. Jesus invites us to do that, revealing God's truth and love for us. Jesus says three times do not be afraid, because God does not want to hurt us but in His love, He gives us the opportunity He gave Jan in that living room - to freely reject or to return that love. For a time, because others who should have loved her did not as they should, she couldn't see that love. But with the example of the sparrows, Jesus, as Marilyn did to Jan, reminds us that God knows all things, and in his providential will encompasses all things. The early commentator Origen taught that God's direct will is not in play when the sparrow falls; God only permits death, but never actively desires it. God's love and care may not prevent all suffering, but holds all things in being and never lets sin and death have the last word. Jan just needed someone to help her take the steps. It's why on the Easter Vigil the Exult refers to Adam's sin as the "happy fault which earned for us so great, so glorious a redeemer." So the first step is to run to him. To look at our lives and say what is keeping me locked in. What is the shame I need to get rid of. What do I need to turn over to God. Trust that He will forgive you even if you can't always forgive yourself. Trust that when your mind begins to go around in circles and worry that you need not worry because God is with you step by step. Trust that in the midst of the chaos that fills our social media pages and newscasts that God has not forgotten about the world, but is still actively engaged in it.

With that though, we also remember Jesus gives us a job in the Gospel: “What I say to you in the darkness, speak in the light; what you hear whispered, proclaim on the housetops!” Marilyn didn’t have to have Jan into her home. But Marilyn chose to not just talk about school things with Jan, but to communicate to her the love of God. We do this too. At times it is having a moment like Marilyn did with Jan - being a listener, and there for people in times of need. Giving someone a hug, praying with them rather than just for them and helping them to discover the love of God. But it also means communicating the teachings of Jesus. Earlier in Matthew 10, Jesus speaks of speaking in His name causing division in families and amongst friends and people hating us because of what we speak. “You will be hated by all because of my name” he says in verse 22. Quite the pep talk eh? But Jesus is saying it’s not just the “Father’s job” to spread the Gospel, but for each of us. We are to be missionaries with a job description from Jesus. And that is to love and sacrifice for people we know and also will never know. This involves acts of charity, but also being an apologist for our faith. Not fearing what others will think when we talk about what our faith teaches and why, be it challenging others to come to Mass, or speaking about racism, abortion, capital punishment, marriage or other issues. To be clear, there are moral absolutes. Some of these are incredibly counter-cultural. But as I’ve said many times, we need to learn how to argue and defend the faith, and gradually bring people through engagement with them to the faith. Some will turn on us, call us names, hate us, call us intolerant or many other things. But we draw on the courage God gives us, and from the Eucharist and from the support of others. In these times where people are so vocal, sometimes you might read this Gospel and think yes it’s a lot easier to whisper and stay in the shadows. But God doesn’t want us to hide in church, or behind a handle on social media - God wants us engaged the world to save souls, because so many are lost. We need to be the shepherd that guides them back.

I have to admit, sometimes it’s hard to see the light at the end of the tunnel these days. I ask myself what is going on when I see statues allowed to be toppled or police officers attacked or businesses set on fire. I get down when I visit a senior living center and put on gloves and a gown and a mask and see a sign saying to the resident they are essentially a prisoner and cannot leave their room for their own safety. But then, I think of people like Archbishop Nguyen van Thuan, imprisoned in Vietnam as bishop of Saigon for a few days before it fell. Through all his suffering he had hope in God’s plan, and he saw Christ in all people - even in his guards whom he treated with kindness. The guards who were starving for a sense of meaning in their lives then asked him about the Church, and he explained his faith with patience and love. He also told them when asked if he resented being in prison and had hate towards them, that his only concern was love for them. The higher ups kept changing the guards but his patience and love and persistence kept reaching the replacement guards. His life was one of hope, of being seized by God’s love seeing not just the moment in front of his eyes, but the reality that he need not be afraid, for God was in control, and He used that love to bring peace to his heart and gave it to others.

St Peter, having run away from the crucifixion, was reestablished in love by the Risen Christ, and strengthened his brothers with these words (1 Pet 5:6-7): 'Humble

yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that in due time he may exalt you. Cast all your cares on him, for he cares about you.' Yes, the world can be an ugly place. Yes the future can be scary. And yes we will be hated at times when we talk about what we believe and why. But while evil is strong, God's love is far more powerful. So let it embrace you when you get down on yourself or scared about the future. And as we receive Holy Communion, may we remember what Venerable Nguyen Van Thuan did, that our only concern should be love for one another, for love transforms both us and one another. May that love set us free.