

Though he has the image of an outlaw and is a staple on the outlaw country channel on satellite radio that is often on when I'm driving, Johnny Cash never really did much time in prison. However, he did find himself in jail briefly on a couple of occasions. And this was because, like all of us, he was confronting his own temptations and demons. Eventually, he would find his way, but it would be a series of steps forward and steps back, and it required a commitment to facing his fears, and also reaching out to God and others for help.

In a story he wrote back in the 70s, he recalls one of his experiences in jail.

The old man asked, "Are you feeling better now, Johnny?" He'd been lying there a long time, staring at the ceiling and fighting off the sickness. Now he looked at the old man. He looked like he was behind bars. But Johnny knew that he was the one behind the bars, only he didn't know where the jail was or how he got there.

The old man said, "Let me know when you're ready."

Johnny forced himself to sit up. "I'm ready now."

Ready for what? He wasn't sure why he'd been arrested. He figured it had something to do with the pills. Once before the pills had put him behind bars, but that time I was lucky.

That was in 1965. He had gone into Mexico to get a supply of the pills he felt he needed to stay alive. As he was re-entering at El Paso, the customs inspector found the pills.

That time he spent a day in jail. Because it was his first arrest, the judge let him off with a year's suspended sentence. There was a newspaper reporter in the courtroom; his story went out on the wires, and that's how people found out Johnny was an addict. A lot of people already knew. By then, he had been on pills five years. He took pep pills to turn me him on enough to do a show. Then he took depressants to calm down enough to get some sleep.

That, at least, was what his friends said. They said he was working too hard and traveling too much and trying to squeeze too much out of every day. They said maybe he should take some time off.

Johnny though knew better. He tried pep pills the first time because they happened to be available one day when he was in the mood for a new kick. The high they gave him was beautiful. He says he felt he owned the world, and the world was perfect during those lofty moments.

He couldn't believe that a couple of little pills could contain so much beauty and joy. He stayed on pills because they made him feel great. If people wanted to give excuses for his habit, he let them.

Then he began to realize that the highs were getting lower. The few pills he was on every day weren't enough anymore. He had to go from a few to several, then to dozens. Still that old feeling wasn't there. He was always nervous and tense and irritable. He didn't want to eat. He couldn't sleep. He started losing weight.

So he went on depressants, looking for lows, looking for peace. When he found peace, he couldn't trust it because he knew it was a fleeting peace. Soon he would crave to get high, and the highs would not come to him.

After the El Paso mess, Johnny took an apartment with a friend who was also on pills. One day when his supply ran out, he remembered that he had some in his car. He was asleep and Johnny couldn't find his keys, so he went out and broke into the car.

When he later accused Johnny of this, he denied it violently and they almost fought. He knew Johnny was lying, and Johnny knew he did. Next day, he admitted it, and he said he understood. They were like two cowardly kids forgiving each other for being afraid of the dark.

In time, Johnny says he became afraid of everything. He would be a nervous wreck before a show; He was never sure of himself during a performance; he didn't believe people when they said things had gone all right.

Sometimes he was too sick to work. Sometimes he didn't even show up. It didn't take booking agents long to stop risking their money on him. Even though he knew this meant a loss of income to others in the show, people who were good friends, Johnny at times didn't care. He didn't care about anything.

Deep down, he knew he was killing himself. He had seen drugs kill others. Whatever drug an addict is hooked on, he has to keep increasing his daily dosage to feel anywhere near normal. This is the nature of addiction. The day comes when he takes the overdose that kills him.

Knowing this, he accepted early death as the inescapable fate of addicts: There was just no other way out. Even when he thought of all the things he had to be thankful for, he could find no hope for himself, no chance for change.

Looking back on younger times, he was 12, he remembered, when electricity came to the small Arkansas farm where I was raised. He heard country music on the radio for the first time, and knew his future.

Right away, he started writing his own country songs, and he told everybody he was going to become an entertainer. His mother took in laundry to pay for a few voice lessons.

At 17, he earned his first money at performing: the \$15 first prize in an amateur contest. Then he learned to play the guitar.

In 1954, Johnny attended a radio-announcing school, hoping that becoming a disc jockey might open doors to performing. To earn a living, he sold houseware door-to-door. He got to know guitarist Luther Perkins and bassist Marshall Grant. They put together an act; they rehearsed a lot; they worked whenever they could, whether or not they got paid. After a year, they agreed that the only way they could find out if they were ready for the Big Time was to audition for somebody big.

They auditioned for Sun Records, which led to their first recording. This led to a two-year contract at the Grand Ole Opry.

They made more recordings. They went on the road. They became known. By 1960 they had advanced enough to put together a show of their own. Then Johnny moved on to the high of pills.

By 1967, he was on the verge of a nervous breakdown, and I knew it. He was usually on a hundred pills a day, but got no pleasure from them, no peace. He couldn't stand his life, but he couldn't find his way out of it.

One day his friends talked to him about entering a mental institution, and the thought of that completely shattered him. He got into his car, well supplied with pills, and headed south. He remembered crossing the Georgia border. Next thing he knew, he was staring at a ceiling and an elderly jailer was asking him if he felt better.

Johnny got up. The jailer unlocked the door. Johnny asked, "How did I get here?"

He said, "One of the night men found you stumbling around the streets. He brought you in so you wouldn't hurt yourself."

Johnny followed him down a corridor and into his office, and he asked, "How much time do you think I'll get for this?"

He shook his head. "You're doing time right now, Johnny, the worst kind." He handed him an envelope. "Here are your things." As Johnny was putting things into his pockets, he said, "I'm a fan of yours, Johnny. I've always admired you. It's a shame to see you ruining yourself. I didn't know you were this bad off."

He wanted to get on the right track. But it wouldn't be easy.

A year later In 1968, he went to a cave, under the influence of drugs, and he tried to take his own life. He went deeper into the cave, and passed out on the floor. He later said he was exhausted and felt like he was at the end of his rope when God's presence came to him, and he started the road to sobriety and turning his life over to God. He made a public profession of his faith later that year in a small Nashville Church.

But accepting God wasn't a one-time thing for Cash. Rather the rest of his life would have high points and setbacks where he would need to reach out to God again. The

drugs stopped for 7 years, but by the late 70s, he started taking them again and went into rehab in 1983, only to become dependent again by 1989 and go through a final rehabilitation program, which was finally successful. But through it all, he tried his best to stay focused on his faith, and one of the ways he did that was by never forgetting about where he had been.

Friends and his wife also helped him greatly. He once said to June Carter and Marshall Grant: "I'm kicking pills, as of now. I don't expect it to be easy, so I'll need your help. See to it that I eat regular meals. See to it that I keep regular hours. If I can't sleep, sit and talk to me. If we run out of talk, then let's pray."

They prayed a lot. And from that cave eventually emerged someone who found freedom. As he wrote: "I am a free man now, as I have been since that morning when I discovered that I could be once again."

In later years when he'd meet an addict who would ask him for advice, Johnny would say "I tell him what I learned, "Give God's temple back to Him. The alternative is death."

Each time we gather for Mass, we celebrate how God comes to us on this altar. Mass is called a sacrifice because we celebrate what happened at the Last Supper and on Good Friday, when God gave Himself for us all out of love. But then we take Communion, and invite Jesus to be in our temple, the temple of our bodies. God wants to journey with us, to give us food for the journey. To give us a mission. But the reality is there can be many things that distract us from completing that mission. Namely just as for Mr. Cash and for all of us, our demons and our fears. But the answer us to turn these things over to God, and to use the strength He gives us and the help of others to truly find freedom.

We see both in our readings this week. In the first reading, we meet Elijah, perhaps the greatest of the Old Testament prophets. But Elijah is also a man who is both afraid, but also prone to mistakes like we are too. The contest is he is on the lamb from King Ahab and his wife Jezebel. Ahab is a Israelite king who has turned from the Lord and worships the false god of Baal. Earlier on in Kings, we learn that Elijah confronts 450 prophets of Baal on a mountain, Mount Carmel. He invites them to call on their god if he exists, and he does not show up. It's a little humorous in that he taunts them too, saying maybe he's taking a nap and just needs to hear you more loudly. Elijah though erects an altar and God shows up and takes the sacrifice he offers. But then Elijah, even though victorious, we are told slits the throats of all of the prophets and moves on. It's almost like a footnote in the Bible. People are now after him, and he hides under a broom tree, is given food and drink by an angel, and goes to the mountain where he hears the voice of God, perhaps a bit like Mr. Cash many years later, in a cave. But the message is one uniquely tailored to Elijah. God doesn't come out and condemn him for killing the people, but Elijah does have this encounter and he's told to anoint his successor now. In a sense it's as if he's being fired, and his actions have a consequence. God will of course welcome Elijah; he'll go directly to heaven. But Elijah also had to confront his fears and his actions.

In the Gospel, we have Peter who is also afraid. They are in a storm, and they do not know where Jesus is. No one recognizes Jesus at first on the water, and Peter bids Jesus to call him and if it's Jesus, he'll be able to walk on water. He does, at first. But then his faith is shaken, and he begins to sink. Jesus though is there for him and pulls him out of the water, and will continue to help Peter become the man who he eventually becomes, the saint who will lay down his life for the faith.

Fear and our actions. Two things we have to confront. But two things that we can be make sure have their proper place with respect to trusting in God.

With fear, as I've invited us to do before, we have to always ask ourselves what is it we are afraid of. Maybe it's people knowing the real us; maybe it's sins; maybe it's Covid or things out of our control like our future death. We sometimes try to ignore our fears, and other times we might ruminate on them and they may drive us crazy, or we may make poor choices to try to control them like Johnny Cash did with using pills to fight fear, these days people use alcohol, pills, sins of the flesh and pornography, gambling addictions, whatever it is to help people forget. The antidote to fear though is trusting in God. Some fear can be legitimate, to avoid certain things. But fear can take over, and it can ruin us. So seek out God knowing He is your shelter in the storm.

With actions, these are things we have to confront too. Johnny Cash's actions almost destroyed him. Elijah though also made a mistake too in killing 450 people. Peter will have to confront his past when Jesus asks him after the resurrection "do you love me?" three times. We so often want to hide from the past, or ignore it, but the healthy thing to do is to look at it. To look at ourselves and say, who am I, where am I going, and what kind of person do I want to become? This is where we listen to our conscience and form it, where we go to confession or make a good act of contrition. God is speaking to us, and is there to help us. But our past always catches up with us. There will be judgment. This should not fill us with fear, but with a desire to say what in my life needs to change? What do I need to do? Sometimes it's obvious and we know what we are doing is wrong, but other times bad habits or how we treat others, especially family, can just be something we don't think about. God wants us to get on the right track, which we can do when we think about what it is that needs to change.

And lastly, the means to do this are God and others God gives us to help us. Elijah would have Elisha; Peter had the other apostles and the Holy Spirit and of course Jesus. Johnny Cash had June his wife and a circle of good friends. We need to make time for God; sometimes we hear God in the silence of things like Elijah in the cave; other times it's in the bigger things that happen in life. So seek God out and make time for him. And do not be afraid talking about the real you to others. Make yourself vulnerable and find people who will not tell you what you want to hear but what you need to hear to keep you on the path to heaven.

In life, there are many storms and trials. As humans, we have at our disposal many means of escapism. Some of these aren't so bad, but others can be quite destructive.

Each makes us forget for a little while about our troubles, but when one storm ends another one will begin. On our own, like Peter we will sink. But God didn't want Elijah or Johnny Cash to stay in the cave. He wanted them to move on, and so He helped them, and just as Peter was pulled out of the water, Jesus is there to pull us out of the depths of our sins, our struggles, our fears. So let go, and let God, and let Him also use you as a witness to others to help them in their challenges as too. Whether it's Covid or our demons or just the storms of life, the waves can be overwhelming. But remember, we do not have a God who leaves us to sink, so reach out and take His hand, and help one another get into the boat that will lead us home safely to the shores of heaven.