

All of us as humans go through valleys where it can be hard to see the light in the darkness, or to rejoice in much of anything let alone in everything as our second reading tells us. But what we strive to remember as Christians is that God is alive in our world, and has a plan, and will ultimately see us through. Our task as a Christian is to open up our eyes and see this God who is alive, and also be people of hope and joy who like John in our Gospel testify to the light. Sometimes though all of this takes a bit of patience and opening our eyes to see the hope through the darkness, but also looking at ourselves and others and seeing the good, not the bad, realizing that all of us are capable of such good when God works through us.

Early on in life, Tom Colucci was a young man who was searching. Growing up in the Bronx, he went to a local Catholic school, played sports, and was an eagle scout as a teenager; as he puts it, an average kid. But college wasn't easy. He dropped out of college, majoring in physical education. He says he had fun, but too much fun, and was not good academically, dropping out with 1.8 GPA in physical education. He took a year off, his parents were horrified, and wondered will he amount to anything?

But, he says looking back, he always hopeful, for God had a plan. His friends were doing bigger things, but here he is flunking out of physical education. But He was hopeful God had a plan as God has a plan for all of us. He started working evening shifts at a mental hospital, and went to daily Mass to get grounded. He found prayer helps in your life, and gave peace and calm. He went to Mass, prayed, read devotional books, and was 20 at this point. The priest asked him if he ever thought of the priesthood. His response was "Father please, I just dropped out of college, with 1.8 GPA in physical education I'm not priestly material." The priest though said he sounded like he'd be a great candidate for the priesthood, and a mustard seed was planted. But he still didn't see himself as a priest. So he went back to school in Massachusetts, now a bit more focused. He got involved in campus ministry, taught CCD, served as a campus chaplain, and was hopeful that his life was turning around and God was with him. He even got to meet Pope John Paul II and have rosaries blessed on a college trip. He went to grad school and got a masters in physical education. A few years he worked as a teacher, then worked in fitness center.

It was at this center that a lot of guys there were training for the physical test for the New York fire department. He was in good shape himself and they said hey take the test, he said nah I've got this degree I hope it works out but they said take the test with 25,000, others. It wasn't easy. Two guys died taking it, and 1500 passed it. He was 400 or so on the list and was hired in February of 1985. Now a fireman, he admits he was very green. He was assigned to firehouse in north Bronx. Sitting on the engine on his first call looking backward, as that's where the rookie got to sit, he saw another guys eyes wide open looking ahead. He turned around, and sees that the whole top floor of a building is on fire. He gets there, and couldn't see a thing; he tripped on the floor, there's smoke everywhere, but the fire went out. He eventually moved to a Lower Manhattan firehouse and became Lieutenant 9 years later, and he was still there working on the morning of 9/11 when he was relieved at 9 a.m. and headed home.

When the attacks happened, they recalled all cops and fireman to the scene; he turned around got back to city; reported to firehouse and grabbed his gear. There were firefighters running in from all over. He went to the north tower and was digging through rubble and looking for bodies and recovery. Then, the second tower came down, and he also saw Fr.

Mike Judge die that day, the fire chaplain who died giving last rites. He knew most all of the firefighters who were killed. He spent most of the time crawling around looking for bodies in the rubble. There was asbestos everywhere; and looking back he says he and the others weren't thinking about their health, they were just looking for anyone they could find, but there very few survivors. They were frightened but they had a mission to do. He remembers no air; breathing through his coat; being covered with white. He ran when the next tower began to fall, ducked behind a car and a plume of dust in the air. Fr. Mike was in north tower lobby, praying in the lobby and a firefighter was killed and giving last rites to a firefighter and at that point the south tower came down and debris killed all outside. The firefighters dug his body out and carried it to St. Peter's Church two blocks north. Fr. Mike's body was laid on the altar. That act helped inspire him Tom.

He worked on north tower till midnight and got to stairwell hoping to find survivors; but just found death. He was relieved, and took a long time to walk down and he remembers about midnight, a surreal scene. He looked around and saw thousands of firefighters all over the rubble. Then he looked at the west side highway and saw ambulance rigs for miles, along

with nurses, doctors, police, and EMS people. He slept a few hours and went back in the morning and was there at Ground Zero for 3 weeks; he kept trying to be hopeful of finding someone, but it was a recovery effort mostly. He also went to funerals too. And of course fires still kept being called in, but they were pretty short on equipment as 90 fire trucks had been destroyed. Nobody took a day off. But communities and towns helped replace those trucks. And in the darkness, Tom began to see a light.

For all of the evil that we saw that day unfold, and so many of us asked where was God that day, for Tom, it solidified his call to the priesthood. As he put it, he saw the worst of humanity, but also the best. The answer to where was God that day.

The most impressive image he could think of is how people responded to scene; fireman, police officers; ambulance workers; a lot of people came to help on that scene and they all responded. Firefighters, police, EMTs, doctors, nurses. Where was Christ that day people asked. He says that was the Body of Christ that day; all the people that showed up. He, Jesus, was with us in our grief and sorrow. Fr. Tom says he thinks it was the Lord and Spirit that sustained us to get through the tragedy; to go through the

funerals; the grief and sadness; to dig through the rubble. God was with us on that day. He sees how God helped pull the country together; people in the weeks that followed started coming in all over to fire houses. Firemen got tickets to Mets, Yankees, dinners, and were treated like celebrities.

He was promoted to captain in 2002. A firehouse was open in lower Manhattan but no one wanted the job, as all the firefighters were killed there. He got call from the batalion chief; he said we know you want to go back to the Bronx, I'd like you to put in for that station. I think you'd be good for the house. You'd be the right guy. Tom could have told the chief I've got other plans, I want to take it easy, but he just said "yes chief" as he said "I heard the voice of God speak through that chief." He took the assignment and did 3 years there that were great. Firefighters can retire in 20 years, and Tom was thinking what to do. And he was thinking of priesthood.

So why become a priest?

He says it inspired him to become a priest because he saw that in this tragedy we are involved in something larger; we are all interconnected and one big human family; there is something larger and another purpose in

this life and Fr. Tom felt he wanted to do something that would help a lot of people. He was always thinking about being a priest but that day solidified his decision.

It didn't come easy. In fact after all he went through on 9/11, while fighting a gas fire in Manhattan in 2003, he was seriously injured. A huge explosion tossed him backward and he struck his head. A blood clot formed in his brain, and he suffered from physical ailments and slurred speech. The injuries were so serious that he received the anointing of the sick as it was quite possible he was going to die. He underwent two brain surgeries and was in the hospital for more than a month.

But again, in all of this, there was no bitterness, no "why me" or blaming of God. He says, "I think God gave me a special grace to survive the explosion and gave me another life, essentially." "9/11, the gas explosion - I think he was leading me all along in the direction of the priesthood."

He retired in 2005 after 20 years with the department. Entering the seminary in 2012 in Yonkers, he was older than most of his professors. He wasn't crazy about 6 years of study. But on May 28th, 2016, he was

ordained with 8 others by Cardinal Timothy Dolan. About 1,000 firefighters were there. He even got a flyover over the cathedral arranged by one of his fire department friends. His first Mass was where he served as an altar boy.

He loves what he does, as he wants to help people; as a fireman, helping save lives; as a priest; helping to save souls. And through it all, being an agent of hope.

So what about the evil that tried to destroy hope on 9/11? He says a lot of people ask how do you forgive people; forgive the guys that did this; or evil people in our lives? It's important to move on in life he says and we also have to do that for if you hold onto the anger and hurt it eats you up, destroys your life; we need to forgive from the heart and let God ultimately judge people who hurt us in our lives. He points out that God asks us to forgive people.

A lot of people he says where is God and why can't God stop tragedies; Fr. Tom says rightly He is with us as he suffered greatly, and we have hope; we are part of a larger picture in life. We all have tragedies and disappointments but we have hope and trust that God is ultimately in

control. He sees God as always having a plan; we are his children; we just have to trust in his graces and He has a plan for us. We have to remain hopeful and that God is with us. Communicate with God, listen, and follow through. It's not always easy, but God he says will give you the grace to see it through to completion. God does not call the worthy, he makes worthy those whom he calls. We remain hopeful he has a plan for us. We, like him, just have to find the plan.

This year it's been hard to make sense of the plan. A pandemic that has upended people's lives. Ongoing evil in the world. Many people suffering their own personal tragedies. Sin impacting our lives and the lives of others. In it all, it can sometimes be tempting to give up. But what we remember as Christians is that God is not distant, but is truly with us. And this theme rings out through this week's readings.

Isaiah says how the spirit of the Lord God is upon me, and the Lord has anointed me. He is pointing the way to the Messiah as a king was someone who is anointed. Jesus will cite this passage as He begins His ministry and say this passage today is fulfilled in your hearing.

But what kind of Messiah? Isaiah gives us insight. He brings glad tidings to the poor. Yes, the economically poor. But also the poor in spirit; the people who are on the margins; the people who are sinners who have fallen away. A Messiah who enters into our poverty to make us rich with grace and love. This is why we rejoice, because God stands with us.

He is also a Messiah who will heal the broken hearted. The heart is at the core of our being; the broken hearted. The heart is meant to be in union with God; but sometimes evil destroys that. We are heartbroken over loss and pain. The heart is broken sometimes because it is alienated from God. Or a heart is compromised and divided because of evil and sin. So who is the Messiah? One who is here to restore our relationship to God.

He also proclaims liberty to captives and release those who are in prison. Sin imprisons a soul so they can't get out. A person gets caught up in addiction to drugs, alcohol, pornography. They can't break out. A person can be imprisoned by pain and hopelessness. They doubt their self worth. But then what happens? The Messiah comes to liberate; to stand with the sinners; to enter into evil by dying on the Cross. So many of us know the

pain of being imprisoned with sins of habit that we keep to ourselves or that cause us shame. The good news for us is God comes to set us free.

The year of favor from the Lord Isaiah speaks of is the Jubilee year; a year when slaves would be set free. The Messiah announces this to set us free from our sins; He pays the debt for us. On our own, we can't get out of it. Like someone going into greater debt, we so often just fall deeper into sin. Jesus though gives us that unmerited forgiveness because He is the God who is love.

How this happens is through what Isaiah says the Messiah clothing us with a robe of salvation and wrapping us in a mantle of justice; Jesus the bridegroom, the Church the bride. Jesus envelops us with His love.

So as a way of preparing for Christmas, we can sit with this reading and find comfort. We will leave this church and there will still be a whole lot of pain in the world. There will still be difficult times ahead. We will still suffer loss; we will still sin. But in the darkness of it all is love; Jesus being with us to take these things away; to help us; to liberate us and to love us. All we need do is to do what Tom did in that church all those years ago; not

thinking himself a failure for dropping out with a 1.8 GPA of a physical education program, but resetting his life, listening patiently, and doing that throughout his life that ultimately would lead him to helping so many people.

With that, we, like Fr. Tom, point the way to Jesus who is the Good News. We work in the world and demonstrate how Jesus is with the poor, the broken hearted, the imprisoned and oppressed. And this should fill us with hope. Yes, we look into the world and see evil. But Fr. Tom did not see that on 9/11; he saw the evil overshadowed by the Body of Christ who was there helping those who were hurting, and the outpouring of good that continued in the weeks that followed. Inside all of us is this good; we've seen it this year in the sacrifices of the front line workers, the doctors, the nurses, the police, the fire fighters, the nursing home workers, the people who are doing all they can to give others comfort. The people who are not giving up. And when we are seized by Jesus, when we rejoice in all things, when we testify to the light, we make that mentality a way of life. We give people comfort. We talk about Jesus and our faith even if people ridicule us for it or maybe are hostile, because we are pointing the way to a higher

realm and want to help people get there. We do acts of mercy. We listen to what God wants us to do and carry out the mission.

In the Shawshank Redemption, when Andy Dufresne is wrongfully convicted for murdering his wife and is dejected, early on he says “let me tell you something my friend. Hope is a dangerous thing. Hope can drive a man insane.” But he finds hope; he brings hope to others in that prison, most notably Red who is played by Morgan Freeman, who keeps having his parole denied. When he finally is paroled, he finds a letter from Andy that has the famous line: “Remember, Red, hope is a good thing, maybe the best of things, and no good thing ever dies. I will be hoping that this letter finds you, and finds you well.”

Stephen King, who wrote the novella the movie was taken from, wrote that “fear can keep a man in prison. Hope can set him free.” So how about you and me? Are we going to stay in the prison of fear over the unknown whether it’s our politics, Covid, the year ahead, our sins, the way of the world? Or are we going to turn to the Messiah and our God who gives us hope? The God who looked at what He created and saw that it was good and then did something to show us how much we are loved? What a great

thing hope and love are, and what an amazing God we have. Let us rejoice in that and let His love truly set us free, and like Fr. Tom, live a life of service to Him helping to bring that hope into the world as we fill it with light and set one another free from the prison of sin, anxiety and pain. Let us rejoice in the Lord always, for the Lord is near. May he wrap you in the mantle of justice and the robe of salvation, and truly set you free.