

Admittedly, over the past year like for most all of us, I've had many moments of struggle as we all deal with Covid. When it all began last Lent and Easter was celebrated with a small group of people; to the surreal holidays where I wasn't seeing as many families to our Christmas Masses which had about 20% of a normal crowd at each, to even the other things like the continued lack of parish events and sea of face masks and lack of singing, Covid has certainly taken a mental toll on me as it has for you too.

But long before Covid, there were many other challenges too. Don't get me wrong I love being a priest. But there was the challenge of seminary and evaluations; there's the challenge of being a public person of sorts, visible to people and being at times judged for what you say or don't say, and challenges that came with being a pastor when you got to deal with fun things like personnel matters and having to make a change with an employee, a capital campaign, or changing something in a parish that your predecessors ignored and left to their successor. Again, we all have moments in our vocations as a parent, in our careers, or in our lives where we just want to get away from it all.

For me, my escapes are my photography and getting out into nature, or just turning off the media and hanging out with my golden retriever friend and putting on an old game show. But the reality is even if Covid comes to an end and we see more normalcy, there is no escaping the responsibilities of our vocation. All of us have a job to do, and all of us share in the call to being a prophet like Samuel in our first reading, and like the apostles who are called by Jesus in the Gospel. In doing it, what we find is there are others who spur us on, and teach us the kind of attitude we need to live out what God has called us to do.

Jodi Severson, who studied psychology and today is a writer living in Wisconsin, learned this from her mother growing up.

In a story she wrote about her mom called "Unbreakable Faith," she writes that like with most moms of her generation, her family's Italian mother had a mantra for every life event. For medical ailments, whether a broken bone or toothache, her advice is to "take two aspirin and grease it with Vicks." When something she predicted didn't exactly happen the way she believed it would, their mom's reply was "I may not always be right, but I'm never wrong."

One of the most inspiring attributes her mom had she was was her ability to face adversity and not come out defeated. She would always emerge with a renewed spirit and infectious sense of hope. Her outlook on tragic events would typically be met with "Hey, nobody died, nobody has cancer, we'll get through this too!" But by far, their mother's most widely used mantra was, "For the love of God, count your blessings! It could be worse." And Jodi admits, her mom would be one to know. Four of her parents five children, herself included, are afflicted with a rare genetic bone disease known as brittle bone disease. Over the years Jodi and her siblings had 300 broken bones. And while she says it might lead some parents to question their faith, not so for her mom. Instead she refused to let others pity Jodi and her siblings. She would say "Hey, it's just

a broken bone...it'll heal There are worse things children could have. If this is the worst thing I ever have to deal with in my lifetime, I'll take it."

Jodi on the other hand needed a bit more convincing than her mom.

She illustrates a typically day in her life.

She woke up one morning and slipped on something innocuous, fell and broke her wrist. After her dad splinted her arm, they went to the ER, and she was sporting a heavy white plaster cast before 10 a.m. Most parents would allow their injured child to stay home from school for the rest of the day, but not Jodi's mom. As Jodi puts it, her mom would point out that she scrubbed floors to pay for all five of the kids to get a Catholic education, and by God's grace, she was going to see to it that they did not miss a day. Whining was out, and so was reason when it came to dealing with mom.

"But mom, I have a broken arm, Can't I just stay home"

"It's just an arm, Jodi. You still have two good legs - not get out of the car and use those good legs to walk into that school."

Jodi would protest. "But mom, it's my right arm...I'm right handed. How am I supposed to write?" She found protesting to be fruitless because her mom had an answer for everything.

"Hey, that's why God blessed you with two hands - use your other one" she'd say.

Jodi eventually became ambidextrous, not by birth but by counting the blessing of her two hands. Years later, when she learned that she was carrying twins, her joy became short-lived when they were born 16 weeks early. Weighing in at one pound, three ounces each and just under 12 inches in length, her daughters had a large medical mountain to climb. But Jodi's mom was there with her positive spirit.

Holding her rosary in one hand and Jodi's own hand in her other, she told her daughter with great conviction, "They may be tiny, but they're mighty. Count your blessings." Even after Hayley succumbed to pneumonia and died three weeks after she burst into their lives, Jodi's rock of a mother was there to help her go on in spite of her incredible grief.

"I know you want your baby here with you," she said in a gentle, loving voice, "but God must have another plan. Maybe He needs Hayley in heaven to be her sister's guardian angel here on earth. Hayley will watch out for Hanna so Hanna can survive." Hanna did in fact survive, and at the time Jodi wrote her story was 17 and Jodi said she looked into her daughter's eyes and knew that she was blessed.

When Hanna was diagnosed with brittle bone disease too, and people around them started to feel sorry for them, Jodi replied, "Hey, she's not dying and she doesn't have

cancer - she'll survive this. Broken bones heal." Then she had to laugh, as she realized she had turned into her mother.

In 2003, Jodi's mom took ill and had to have surgery. When the doctor relayed the unthinkable diagnosis to the siblings while mom was in recovery (post menopausal ovarian cancer) her sister called and said, "Now what do we tell her? We can't say, "No one's dead and no one's got cancer!"

As it turned out, they did not have to say a word. Their mom knew even before she was told, and Jodi says she soothed the kids when they should have been comforting her. "Hey, let's count our blessings; the doctor got it all and I'm not dead yet. Let's have some faith." As usual Jodi says, mom was right. She survived not only that bout with cancer but five years later she rebounded from another bout with colorectal cancer. She never needed chemo or radiation because miraculously both cancers were contained and surgically removed; she remained cancer free.

"Faith, that's all you need," she would say firmly as she'd tap the table. "Feeling sorry for yourself doesn't help anything or solve the problem...pity just adds to your problems. Spend your time counting your blessings instead. You'll see just how well off you really are. That's my motto."

And now, many years later, Jodi and her siblings say they all have the good sense to reply, "Yes mom, we know."

Counting blessings isn't just a mantra drilled into her head says Jodi; rather its become a way of life so much so that when she counts her blessings, her mom is one of the first ones she always names.

Like Jodi, we all need reminders to count our blessings, but also to look inside ourselves and remind ourselves that yes, we can do this. Yes, we can get through this. Yes, we can move forward. But this takes both encouragement and guidance and, much like Jodi's mom, a true "can do" attitude as we embark on our missions.

In the first reading, we meet a very young Samuel. His mother, Hannah, had begged God for a child. She goes to the Temple to pray; one day Eli who is the priest hears her and thinks she is drunk early in the morning when she explains she is praying. Eventually her prayers are answered; and in response after nursing the child as an infant, she brings him back to the Temple to be raised by Eli. It is here he lives in the Temple, and the context of the first reading when Eli is about 12. He has a revelation, being called by God three times; thinking it is Eli he wakes him up three times only to have Samuel realize he is being called by God. The reading ends, but the story continues and it's not all that romantic - the message is Eli and his sons will die, Israel will suffer. But Samuel will go on through this and be a spiritual beacon to the people, ultimately helping the people through the suffering, and anointing king Saul and David. He'll do great things, but much like for Jodi, her mom and all of us, these don't come easy.

Such is it for the apostles too. Called by Jesus in the Gospel, they will follow, but there will be much suffering as the mission unfolds.

This is true for us all. We are here for a reason. And that reason is not to complain, or to look back to some bygone era and wish we were in the past. Escapism and leisure are good things. But the Christian lives out hope by being active in the world. So what are we to do? Three things: Listen to God; Listen to the guides God gives us; and carry out the mission.

With respect to listening to God, think about the words of Samuel, “speak, for your servant is listening” and “what are you looking for,” the words of Jesus to Peter and Andrew. Eli could be best described as a “punch clock” kind of priest. He’s not a bad guy, but he could be a little more deep in his spirituality; perhaps that’s one reason Eli can’t figure out God is calling Samuel. He has sons too, Phinehas and Hophni who are corrupt priests who take advantage of the people they are supposed to serve. Sometimes things get in the way of hearing God’s voice. We’re too busy; we surround ourselves with the wrong people; we never make time for prayer. Other times we are looking for the wrong things, or we don’t realize that God has something bigger and better in store for us that we just can’t see at the time. Some people get caught up in addictions; others in materialism or seeking personal glory. When we make the time to listen to God, and discern that He has called us to do something, we can start to go in the right direction.

But we need people to keep us going in the right direction; we need people like Jodi’s mom. Samuel had Eli, and Eli raised him and helped him become the man he became. So do we have people who will keep us on the right track? Do you have people who will give you good advice, who will challenge you, and who will ultimately make you a better person? It’s important we pick these people carefully. As I said, there are people who can also get us on the wrong track and demoralize us, bring us down, or cause us to do things we shouldn’t do. There are also people who can be manipulative or controlling. Finding a person or persons who has a deep faith like Jodi’s mom; someone who will listen, who will challenge, who will teach and inspire, these people are so important to have so we can rely on them to help us on our journey through life.

Lastly, the mission. Samuel’s vision is horrible; bad things are imminent. Israel is conquered by the Philistines. The Ark of the Covenant is lost. Eli learns his sons are dead and dies upon hearing the news. Peter and Andrew will experience the death of Jesus; and then their own martyrdoms for the faith. But what they share in common is they do not give up. Because of that, each plays a significant role in salvation history in building the Church and proclaiming the faith. As I said, life is hard, but so is our mission. It’s hard to proclaim the faith when so much can be counter-cultural. It’s hard to work at a marriage. It’s hard to raise kids. It’s hard to see people we care about make bad decisions. It’s hard to keep pursuing a vocation God has called us to when we have setbacks. But when we discern God has called us to something and say yes to the mission, we must carry on knowing God is with us. We must also have hope knowing

that things work out. It's what caused Jodi's mom to keep going through all the setbacks she faced, because she knew she was called to finish the mission God gave her as a mom. So many of the saints dealt with so many obstacles, but what made them saints is they were undeterred from doing their mission - may we follow their example.

"What are you looking for" is a good question for us all to sit with. Hopefully most all of us would answer heaven and sainthood. The problem is obtaining it can bring with it much suffering, heartache, and pain. But just as for Jesus there was no detour around Good Friday to get to Easter Sunday, the same is true for us. I'll always have my photography, my old game shows, my down time. But God hasn't called me to spend my life in the woods. He has called me to be a priest, something I'm trying to live out better every day, and something that can have valleys like any vocation, but a journey God makes with me, and a journey I make because there are "Elis" that God has put in my life to encourage, to advise, and to spur me on. If, like me, you are looking for heaven, trust that God is with you. But also seek out the people who are there to guide you. Listen to them. And carry out your mission. So what do you seek? God is waiting for your answer. Is it to stay with Christ and follow Him, or to give up when the going gets tough? It's up to you and me to answer.