Over the course of his life, Bill Irwin had accomplished quite a lot. A blind man, in 1990 he hiked the Appalachian Trail with Orient, his seeing eye dog. Blind since the age of 27, he battled alcoholism, family struggles, and eventually became a Christian. But as he found out later in life, it was one thing to profess a belief in God; it was another to surrender to God and to trust in him completely.

One of the things Bill had hoped for for years was to finish a home. And one day, the housing inspector came by but Bill knew the news would be bad. He could hear the inspector cutting into the walls of his half-finished, handcrafted log home, muttering under his breath. “Hmm.” Bill heard him say. “Uh-huh.” More scraping, each scratch more excruciating than the last, as if he were slicing into his heart.

It was frustrating to not see his face. To be in the dark. Literally. He’d been blind for 40 years, over half his life. Most of the time he more than compensated. But then there were times like this.

Bill spent over a decade building this log home in rural Maine. Of course he wanted to see everything the inspector was doing, to see if his expression was as grave as his voice. To see if this dream had gone horribly wrong.

“Is it bad?” Bill’s wife, Debra, asked. For months she’d been telling Bill the wood was rotten. But he had stubbornly refused to believe her. They’d suffered so many setbacks already. Bill says he couldn’t accept that God would have this in our plans too. No way. But finally Bill agreed to call this inspector.

He heard the inspector’s feet shuffling toward him. “The logs are rotten,” he said. “I’m guessing you used an inferior preservative. I’m sorry. I wish I had better news.”

Bill held Debra, her body slumped against her, long after he’d left. Bill had gotten bad advice on the preservative. Not that it made any difference now. “It’s going to be okay,” he said. “I’ll figure something out.”

“It’s too late,” she said. “Didn’t you hear him? It’s too late.”

Yes, Bill heard him. But this was his grand plan. He couldn’t let it die.

He admits he is a little strongwilled, but it’s important to him to do things on his own. He never wanted his blindness to be a barrier. He’d proven that. In 1990, he thru-hiked 2,167.9 rugged miles of the Appalachian Trail. It took nearly nine months, three months longer than average.

He fell thousands of times, even with the aid of his guide dog Orient. But he persevered, reaching the end in Maine at Mt. Katahdin the day before Thanksgiving. There he dropped to his knees and thanked God for the chance to glorify his name. He’d shown Bill not what a man can do, but what God can do with a man.

Bill met Debra just a few years after his epic journey. Eager to start a new life together they moved from North Carolina to Maine after they married, not far from the trail's end. They had a new dream, a challenge beyond anything they had done before, to build their own home, log by log, like the pioneers.

In Bill's mind he could see it perfectly, a beautiful, rustic cabin, made of timbers notched and fitted by hand—their hands. Debra would be his eyes. Externally. Internally his vision was perfect. It would be just the two of them, building a dream together. Literally.

On a cold, snowy October day they took possession of 72 acres of beautiful timberland and one long-abandoned tumbledown shack. "We can tough it out for a couple of years," he told Debra.

Come spring, they bought plans for a big, two-story house and 200 white pine logs. They'd work at it between Bill's engagements as a motivational speaker.
Bill taught Debra how to use a chainsaw. She made a rough cut for each connecting notch then used another tool to outline where the edges should be. Bill chiseled out the wood until he reached her mark. "Do you really think we can do this all on our own?" Debra said as he chipped away. "It seems like a lot of work."

"One step at a time," he said. "We have to be patient and believe in ourselves."

They'd studied do-it-yourself videos over the winter. Plus they had taken a home-building course, working with their classmates to construct a house using beams, posts and prefabricated panels, a process known as timber framing.

It was slow going. It took them nearly two days to finish a single log. Once the notches were cut out Bill had to plane the wood with hammer and chisel, following Debra's indentations, until it fit perfectly against the log above it.

The final piece was putting the log in place using a forklift. Debra wasn't strong enough to pop the clutch, so she guided Bill while he drove and maneuvered the lift - A blind guy driving a forklift with a 2,000-pound log on it. They made it work.

By fall, walls nearly four feet high surrounded a beautiful, tongue-and-groove wood floor. They were on their way.

In March the floor collapsed, buckled by five feet of frost underneath it—like nothing they had ever experienced in balmy North Carolina.

"That's okay," he told Debra. "We can fix it." Bill knew from hiking, when you stumbled you just had to get up and keep going. Stumbling is part of learning. He drove in deep support posts that held until the next winter, when heavy snows crushed the floor again. So much for learning, he thought. A thick steel I-beam ultimately proved the solution. As the walls grew higher the work of fitting the logs together grew ever more difficult. Debra and Bill were short with each other, their halcyon days when everything was new

and exciting fading as time went by. They spent the next 10 years slowly working on the log home whenever they could.

There were frequent interruptions. Between work and day-to-day life it was hard to dedicate the time that was needed. Still, they kept at it. He thought they were near the end.

Now, the inspector's words still burning in Bill's ears, he paced around their home, feeling the logs with his hands, digging into them with his knife. There was no saving them. He climbed the ladder to the top of the scaffolding and jerked the starter cord to his chainsaw. It was late evening when they toppled the last wall.

That night Bill lay in bed thinking. The vision had been so clear. To build a home by hand from scratch. It would be almost an extension of his soul. He'd seen it so clearly in his heart. Now all he could imagine was a pile of rotting debris. If It was a blessing, Bill couldn't see it. He might just give up he thought.

The next day friends invited Bill and Debra to their house for lunch. The husband, Sam Francis, was a builder. He dreaded telling Sam what had happened. They weren't five minutes through the front door when Sam asked, "How's the log home coming?"

"I cut it down yesterday," Bill said. "The wood rotted on us."

The room went totally silent. "You must be devastated," he said.

Bill shuffled his feet. "What if you tried another approach?" Sam said hesitantly. "You could use beams and posts, prefabricated panels for the roof and walls." Bill knew that. Everyone knew Bill knew that.

But that wasn't his dream. And the panels were huge, unwieldy. No way could Debra and he could handle them on their own. After all, pioneers didn't use panels!

"I can knock out some plans for you on the computer today," Sam said. Bill heard Debra clear her throat. She might as well have punched him in the back. "Lord," Bill prayed, "if this is your will…"

Somewhat reluctantly, he followed his friend's advice. Debra and Bill worked nearly every day that summer, cutting notches in the beams and putting them in place with a hoist, one every couple of hours. They quickly fell into a comfortable rhythm. It was fun again. A labor of love.

By fall their home's beautiful exposed wood skeleton was nearly complete. One chilly afternoon Bill bolted in the last roof beam. Time for the panels. It was critical to get them on before winter. Yet they had not made any arrangements.

What now, Lord?

Again Bill tossed and turned in bed. He thought of those hard days he'd spent on the trail. The worst was near the end, winter closing in. For three days Orient and Bill were trapped in a snowstorm near Mt. Washington.

He'd taken comfort in the words of an old hymn, "Count your blessings," and began thanking God for all the people who'd helped him on his journey. Then he'd heard a voice: "Bill Irwin? Boy, am I glad to see you!" God had sent rescuers. Someone had always been there for him.

The house was no different. There'd been Debra, of course. And Sam. And Bill. He was always there. Maybe too much there.

The next day, like heavenly clockwork, a friend called. "Say, could you use an extra hand or two on your house?" he asked. There was a note of hesitation in his voice, as if he half expected Bill to blow him off.

"Uh, sure," Bill answered, a little ashamed at the surprise in his voice. "Actually that would be great."

A few weeks later a convoy of pickup trucks drove up their road, bringing 19 men and women. It was amazing, an old-fashioned barn-raising just like pioneers used to hold.

It took time, but their dream home got there. When he walks through it Bill can see every beam, every post in his mind, the floor to ceiling windows, snow-capped Mt. Katahdin in the distance.

Once Bill stood atop that peak with Orient, blind but feeling he could see for miles. All that long hard journey he'd kept my eyes focused on a light that burned inwardly, brighter than any he'd ever known when he could see, the light of the Lord. It had not failed him.

Now, though, Bill admits, he had almost failed it, blinded by his own will, and willfulness, possessed of a dream instead of possessing it. He could not build his house until he got right with God, with Debra, with his friends and neighbors. Like the beggar in John's Gospel, Bill says he was blind but now he can see.

Like Bill, Abraham has a plan too. Not for a beautiful house, but for the promises of God to come to fulfillment. God has promised Abraham that great things would happen; namely that he would have a son, and his descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the sky. But years go by, and the promise remains unfulfilled. Finally in old age, Abraham and Sarah have a son in Isaac. And now we have this very difficult reading where God asks Abraham to sacrifice him. Calling it a difficult reading would be a pretty big understatement. Surely if anyone today did harm to someone and said it was God's voice, they would be deemed either insane or a criminal.

The point though of the reading is not about a God who is trying to be sadistically and cruelly amused by one of the humans He created. Rather the shocking story is meant to get our attention, to grab us, which it certainly does. And, when taken in conjunction with the Gospel, what it reminds us of is the importance of ordering our lives around God, putting Him front and center. And with that, once we do that, what we are reminded that our journey to grow closer to Him is a life long one, one that, much like Bill's journey of nine months on the Appalachian Trail, will entail suffering and patience, but one we can make when we trust God, are willing to do the hard work, and also like Bill and like the apostles, remember we make that journey with one another.

The first part of trusting in God's plan. Like Bill, sometimes we can become stubborn and want to do things our own way; as he said he had to get right with God. The Bible tells us to love God with our whole heart, mind and soul. Lent gives us a time to think about how we are doing in that regard. Abraham's faith is so deep, that God is first and foremost in his life; note Genesis doesn't talk at length about Abraham's feelings or doubts; rather he simply goes, he does what the Lord has told him. So how about you and me? Are we at times a bit like Bill, stubborn, wanting to do things our own way? If we are honest do we put a lot of focus on our wealth, on our power, on our influence over others, over being honored? Or how about even family? You see, with God first, all else falls into place. We can understand what's ethical at work; we can remind the kids and our spouse that Mass and developing a true relationship with God are more important than sports and even school and treat others with love; we can use our wealth for ourselves but also to help others; we can not lord authority over others but use the authority we are given to help others grow. But doing this means being honest and asking ourselves the hard questions, looking at these areas in our lives and making sure they aren't getting too prioritized over God.

The second is the suffering component. Peter in the Gospel is happy to be on the mountain top with James and John; he gets this preview of heaven. And it comes at a good time, because just a few verses prior at the end of Mark's 8th chapter, Peter confesses his faith in Jesus, but then Peter rebukes Jesus when he speaks of suffering. Jesus than says "get behind me Satan" to remind Peter that suffering is a part of the journey and his mission. Jesus converses with Moses and Elijah about what is to come; and just as He journeyed up the mountain, Mount Tabor to be transfigured, He will journey to Mount Calvary to die. In our lives, it's important on the one hand to cling to the moments when we see God's glory; like Bill feeling this incredible joy at the end of his long journey to build that house and finish the Appalachian Trail. I've had those moments where I feel God's closeness, at a Mass I've offered, or like Bill in nature at a national park taking a picture of a mountain with a orange and purple sky with beautiful pink clouds and a clear mountain lake. They are incredible. But they are a glimpse of what awaits which will be even more beautiful. At the same time though, we have to be willing to suffer to get there. The apostles go down the mountain and face the reality of suffering in the world when a father is desperate for a cure for his epileptic son pleads with Jesus to help. Of course they too will suffer greatly for Jesus as they carry on the work of the early Church. Bill had to suffer to finish the trail and his house along with many other things he got in life, but he realized they were well worth it. Far more

important than building a home though is building a soul; and we should also use this sacred time to ask ourselves do we take on the suffering in our lives. And here what I mean is the kind of suffering that results in something wonderful at the end; such as the suffering of parents who provide for their children; the suffering of a couple who sacrifices things they might want for things they need; the suffering that comes in giving of our time to help people or volunteer; or to go without something because it makes us better by setting it aside. The short-term suffering can ultimately lead to incredible things.

Third, we remember we are not alone. Peter had James and John and the other apostles. Jesus was with them too, always. The Spirit comes to strengthen them. Bill had his dog Orient for his trip, and his wife as his eyes, but he needed more than that. He just had to say “help me.” Sometimes in our stubbornness we want to do it all on our own, but we must remember we need to seek out people who give us advice and counsel on our Christian journey.

And lastly through it all, we strive for patience. Bill fell many ways along the Appalachian Trail, but kept getting back up. He built a house that fell apart but rebuilt it. Abraham waited many years but ultimately the promise of God was fulfilled. We can’t always see where we are going; and often times it’s easier to see the storm in front of us. But what we do know is that things will be okay. We will get to stay with Jesus not just on a mountaintop experience but eventually with him forever. It is hard when we are trying to better ourselves, or trying to help others grow in their faith, and we see so many setbacks. But ultimately God will never go back on His promise; He loves us so much, and will see us through, so lets trust Him. For indeed, if God is for us, who can be against us?

As our lives go on and we try to build ourselves up, sometimes like Bill found out, the wood is rotted. Sometimes we don’t see it because we are stubborn or don’t listen to others; other times a soul can fall apart because the builder doesn’t use the right materials. The materials God gives us are grace and love; so let’s listen to the instructions the master builder gives us, and realize that while the process might be quite long, trusting in the Architect and working hard day in and day out with the guidance of others at our side, ultimately what a beautiful mansion we will find awaits us in the heavenly kingdom, built through the sacrificial love of Jesus, and through a soul responding to that love through the testament of their life.