

I don't know about you, but one thing I tend to like is being "in control." I suppose it's one of the reasons I prefer traveling alone by car, or trying not to be tied down to a schedule or plans whenever I have free time. But one thing we come to realize in life is that ultimately, we aren't the ones in the drivers seat, and there are so many things we can't control. But what we can do is trust.

A few years back, a heart patient by the name of Rick Hamlin came to realize this.

As he was preparing for surgery, he says the thing that scared him most was the anesthesia. The fear was so overwhelming he couldn't sleep the night before his surgery. He layed there in his room on the cardiac ward with the lights off, trying not to keep checking the clock on the wall. But he couldn't help it. Every time he looked, only a minute or two had gone by. It seemed like morning would never come. He could accept that a surgeon would do the repair work his heart needed, but being "put under"? That sounded unsettling, close to being "put down," what you'd do for a pet that was beyond help. Too close to death.

Rick says he's not normally a fearful person. He feels comfortable with doctors and listens to their medical wisdom with a combination of awe and trust. That his heart had a valve defect was information he'd known for decades. Every year he'd go to his cardiologist, get his heart checked out, sit and chat about exercise and cholesterol levels—neither of which was ever a problem for him. He listened to the doctor explain that there was a weakness in the walls of his aorta and someday this could cause trouble. Someday, in his mind, was far off. People who had heart surgery, well, weren't they usually...older? Members of the "zipper club" like Rick's father, showing off their chest scars at the swimming pool.

Rick had always performed well on cardiac stress tests and was confident—perhaps overconfident—of his health. But then he did all those things you're supposed to do. He ran, went to the gym, ate well, slept well, had regular physicals. And he took care of his spiritual health. He's active in his church, sings in the choir, teach a rambunctious bunch of kids in Sunday school and makes prayer a part of daily life. He trusted the doctors to keep an eye on his body and God to watch out for his soul. It seemed like the perfect division of labor. Until now.

At his last visit with his cardiologist there'd been nothing alarming. Then Rick had a CT-scan for another doctor—she was worried about a cough he had. On a picture-perfect autumn Saturday, He jogged the 15 blocks from his apartment in upper Manhattan to Columbia Presbyterian Hospital, had the scan and jogged home. He felt great. But a couple days later the doctor called him back. “Your lungs look fine,” she said, “but that aneurysm in your aorta is really big. You’d better talk to your cardiologist about it. Right away.” An aneurysm? Rick felt a prickle of fear. Didn’t people die from ruptured aneurysms?

His cardiologist saw me right away. He tapped his pencil on his desk and pointed out the aorta in a large model of the heart. “You’ll need to have open-heart surgery,” he said.

The fear came over Rick like a cold wind. Open-heart surgery would be a huge ordeal. He’d be under anesthesia for hours, lying on a table in the operating room. The idea of it gave him the creeps. A machine would take over for his heart and lungs. He wouldn’t even be breathing on his own. “Isn’t there some less invasive way of doing this?” He asked.

“No,” he said simply.

Rick headed back to work. On the subway he took out his pocket Bible, a green volume he picked up years ago, now so battered he'd taped it together. He turned to the Psalms as he did every morning on his commute and tried to pray. But nothing would come. The rhythm of the cars careening along the track, the usual background for his spiritual ritual, jarred him and cranked up his fears. All he could think of was being in that operating room, unconscious, cut off from the world, cut off from God.

He called his old college roommate Jim. He and Rick had prayed each other through tons of situations over the years. They're godparents to each others 'kids. “It looks like I'm going to have to have open-heart surgery.” Rick said, filling him in.

“We'll keep you in our prayers,” he said before hanging up.

The news that Rick needed surgery traveled fast. His wife, Carol, e-mailed family and friends and more friends e-mailed back, asking to be put on her list for updates. Her collection of e-mail addresses started to look like a

Christmas card list that had gone haywire. They heard from people they hadn't seen in years, friends from college and high school, parents from their boys' kindergarten days.

Two days before the operation, they met with Rick's surgeon in his office. Still wearing his scrubs, fresh from surgery, he gave them a PowerPoint presentation on how he'd repair his aorta and replace the defective valve. It was a polished talk, meant to allay his fears. "I do this operation 200 times a year," he said, "and I've never lost a patient." Of course, that made Rick think, I could be the first.

"It's the anesthesia that worries me," Rick admitted. "All those hours that I'll be out of it. It makes me panicky."

"Talk to the anesthesiologist before surgery," he said. "The drugs they use these days are very good. There's no reason to worry." But to be told a fear is irrational doesn't make it go away. Rick couldn't get out of my head the image of me with a machine pumping my blood and breathing for me, my mind dead to the world.

He checked into the hospital and got prepped for surgery, his chest shaved and marked as though his heart was a bull's-eye. Carol brought him a big salad for dinner and the nurses were in and out of his room, checking his blood pressure, monitoring his heart. But then they all left.

He lay there in the cardiac ward feeling very much alone, unable to sleep, unable to pray. In his daily meditation he often recite an ancient prayer:

“Jesus Christ, have mercy on me. Rescue me and save me. Let thy will be done in my life.” That night he tried saying those words, but felt no sense of spiritual connection. All he felt was fear.

Carol came by in the morning with a friend who promised to distract both of them. We talked about everything but surgery. All too soon visiting hours were over. Carol kissed him on the forehead and was gone. The nurse came for his things. He took one last look at his Bible and handed it over. Any minute now he'd have to go to the operating room and be put under. He almost didn't answer the phone when it rang. “Hello,” he said.

“Rick,” came a warm, familiar voice; friends from work. They gave him comfort, and

prayed for him, right there on the phone. He didn't try to pray with them. He let go and let their words do the work for him. No, Rick says, he couldn't pray for himself—not right now and not during the surgery—but he could depend on all the people who had promised to pray for him. They would keep him connected to God. Just as a machine would do the work of his heart and lungs, he could trust his friends and family to do the work of his soul.

Saying “amen,” the technicians were at the door with a gurney, ready to take him to the operating room. The surgery went very well. It was long—he didn't wake up in intensive care until 2:30 a.m.—and the recovery was hard, but he felt cared for every step of the way. Not just by doctors and nurses, but also by clergy, his family, friends and colleagues. I felt sustained by their prayers.

A year later he was in good health again. He runs, goes to the gym, eats carefully and reads a few psalms from his battered Bible every morning. And whenever someone says, “Keep me in your prayers,” Rick takes the request very seriously. Prayer can be hard. Sometimes just trying to pray is enough. And sometimes you have to let go and trust others to do it for you.

“Do not be afraid.” We hear these words spoken by the angel to Saint Joseph in our Gospel today. The same words spoken to Mary. Words Saint John Paul II liked to quote a lot.

Fear can sometimes be overwhelming. We ruminate; we wonder what is going to happen to the world; to my family; to my health; with Covid; with so many things going on. And sometimes we try to control it. As we’ve found it hasn’t done much good with Covid; the virus does what it does; and when we try to control things on our own, ultimately we are overwhelmed.

And this is where I think Joseph has so much to teach us. A righteous man we are told, a man who has an understandable plan to quietly divorce Mary and get on with his life. But a man who trusts time and time again, on multiple levels.

First, we look to him and see his incredible trust in God. Not only is the message that his fiancée is with child, but this child will be born a Savior. A lesser man would have run for the hills, but Joseph without hesitation does what the angel tells him. He takes Mary into his home. He leads the family

into Egypt to flee Herod. And then he leads them back on the difficult journey to Nazareth. Through it all, it's about trusting in God. How about you and me? It sounds easy but when we sit in silence and listen to God sometimes He will really challenge us and move us out of our comfort zones. It might be a difficult journey as it was for Joseph and as it was for Rick after surgery, but ultimately God will always see us through.

Second, who are the Josephs in our life we can seek out? Joseph tenderly loved Mary and Jesus and kept them safe doing so much for them. Rick sought out family, friends and many people who helped him through his surgery. Sometimes we might feel like asking for help is a sign of being vulnerable. But through reaching out to others, and telling them what is truly on our hearts and what may be weighing us down or causing us anxiety, these Josephs can help us too on our journey to heaven.

And lastly we go forward with God and with others also knowing God can use us to do such great things. Because of Joseph, the Holy Family was kept safe and protected. Joseph never sought out glory for himself; we do not hear him say a word. Yet his actions did so much. In our lives, we can take a page from him knowing that we too can do great things, but it's not

for our glory. Sometimes we will stumble and fall on the way; I can't help but wonder if Joseph had nights like Rick waiting for surgery, wondering what have I got myself into, or when will we be able to leave Egypt, or what of this sword that Simeon spoke of that was to pierce my wife's heart? But he did not let the anxiety overwhelm him; he moved forward, he did his job, and in doing that he did great things. Things that aren't recorded, but things that made a profound impact for Mary, Jesus and all of us. May we too never forget what a difference we make when we live out our vocation and love one another, doing the simple things God asks us to do with great love.

A little over twenty years ago in front of a statue of the Sacred Heart at the Cathedral, I prayed quietly before a vocations discernment dinner with the archbishop. The following August after nearly bailing out, I entered the seminary. Six years later I was ordained and had my first blessings in front of the same statue. Now 14 years into my priesthood, like all of us I have ups and downs; I get nervous sometimes about the future; I worry about things in the parish; I worry about our world or sometimes someone on staff or even how Mass or a homily goes. I can't see the finish line, but I do know that God and many great people are guiding me every step of the

way. And my hope is that eventually, please God, when I get there, I'll have helped people who also helped me on the journey too. Unlike Joseph, I'm not a saint though I'm trying to become one. But he can help you and me to do just that, so may we seek him out and trust in his intercession and follow his example, knowing that with a little bit of trust, God will truly take us on an incredible adventure that leads to what eye has not seen and ear has not heard.