

Sometimes in life, it can be hard not to assume the worst. Fear can be overwhelming; and sometimes it can lead us to assume the worst. But sometimes we just need to remember that through the storms of life, God is in our midst, and that He sees us through the storms of life, but so, too, do people who help us through those challenging and turbulent times. For when we trust in God, and also remember that He has given us tools to get to the shore - namely His presence, the presence of others, and talents and gifts, what we find is that we can get through the storms of life.

In the late 2000s, John Sherrill, an editor and writer for *Guideposts* magazine along with his wife, Elizabeth, was struggling with the anxiety of life changes. John passed in 2017 at the age of 94, and in his life he'd had plenty of storms including being part of the Allied Invasion of Italy and battling survivor's guilt upon return.

This particular storm was the unknown of what might happen now as he and his wife faced a move during the height of our last recession. And while for a time there was anxiety, he looked back and found a bit of wisdom knowing he could trust in God and also, remembering the wisdom of his

father who shepherded the family through the Depression, that he need not let anxiety take over.

In his story, he recalls once again straightening the “For Sale” sign in front of their house in New York. Although his wife, Tib, and John lowered the price again and again, two years had passed without a single bid.

To make matters worse, just before the recession hit, they’d bought an apartment in Massachusetts, intending, in their mid-eighties, to move near their daughter. Maintaining both places and paying taxes in two states was shrinking their savings alarmingly, undermining their retirement security.

As John went back inside one day he remembered an earlier time when a disastrous economy wiped out people’s nest eggs. The Great Depression, as it became known, locked the whole country in fear. He remembered they’d been there before as a nation.

He grew up in Louisville, Kentucky, during the Depression, and saw what financial ruin could do to families.

John was seven in 1929, too young to be concerned about anything but the changes in his own life and spent most of his time with his best friend, Van. But when the Depression began, there were changes. His mother no longer took him to Mr. Coppolo the barber, where he liked smelling the jars of ointment for “Gentleman’s Hair Styling.”

Instead, she perched him on a tall kitchen stool and cut his hair with the kitchen shears. His friend Van’s mother started cutting his hair too. They’d look in the mirror in his front hall to decide whose mother did the worse job.

More serious was the disappearance of school lunch money. Usually John walked to Belknap Elementary with 15 cents in his pocket, just enough for a sandwich, fruit and milk.

Now, his mother sent John and his sister off with sandwiches in brown paper bags. There was no way to save a few pennies by skipping the fruit, to stop at The Candy Lady on the way home for forbidden jawbreakers and Dubble Bubble gum.

John noticed changes in his parents' routines too. His mother no longer threw away scraps of soap but put them in a little wire box with a long handle, which she swished around in the dishpan to get suds and save the price of a new bar.

Dad stopped driving the Chevy down to the seminary where he taught. Instead, he rode the swaying, clanking trolley, which was slower but cheaper.

John liked visiting the seminary. He'd read the quote carved over the entrance of the big gray stone building: "Lo, I am with you alway." He liked the way the "s" was left off "always." God couldn't spell either, he reasoned.

There was evidence of the Depression there too. John's dad loved his Coca-Cola. His office was so hot in those pre-air-conditioning days that the papers on his desk would stick to his arm.

His relief was to walk down to Manny's newsstand on the corner—once every morning, once every afternoon—and bring back an ice-cold Coke.

One afternoon when John went to Dad's office he saw a warm, half-finished bottle of Pepsi on his desk. "You get the same amount," he explained, "and save a nickel."

Money seemed to be the topic of every adult conversation. One night when his parents had dinner guests from the seminary and John was supposed to be in bed, he crept to the top of the stairs and listened to the conversation down in the living room.

Much of it he didn't understand, but he followed enough to know that the entire faculty had just taken a salary cut. "Do you think," someone asked, "the whole school will have to close?"

As the Depression worsened...1930 ...1931...1932...everyone was afraid. Their friends the Carlsons had lived in a mansion with white pillars and a sweeping drive. In 1932 Dr. Carlson sold his mansion and moved his family into a little brick house even smaller than the one John's family had.

Dad's fear went all the way back to his own boyhood, growing up during the Great Agricultural Depression that hit West Texas in the 1890s. John's dad

told the kids about the dust storms, the dying cattle, the stores closing one by one around the courthouse square in Haskell.

John's father ran the hardware store in town, but hard-pressed farmers no longer purchased new tools. His dad said to his son, "My father and I dug up the backyard and planted a garden out under the windmill. Mother raised chickens. We lived on eggs and vegetables from our own garden.

"I think it would be a good idea," His dad went on in the controlled tone he'd come to recognize as his anxiety voice, "for us to start raising at least some of our own food."

He didn't add "in case the whole economy collapses," but at nine John was old enough to understand. Their yard was not large enough to grow anything, so Dad raided his last bit of hoarded cash and bought a small plot out in the eastern part of the county where land was cheap.

There, he and John planted a vegetable garden just as he and his father had done—though they skipped the chickens.

As November 1932 approached, all eyes were on the presidential race, which ended in victory for Franklin Roosevelt. The family gathered around the Atwater Kent radio on March 4, 1933, to hear Roosevelt's inaugural address.

John says he remembered 10 words, spoken in his measured tones, that made them all sit a little straighter: "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself."

Can 10 words change a nation, John wondered? Certainly they changed the family. The land Dad had bought as a safeguard against hunger, he now began to see in a more positive light. A tumbledown house stood on a corner of it. What if they refurbished it, and turned the place into a weekend getaway?

When a federal program was launched to put men back to work, Dad heard that one of the projects was the building of "sanitariums"—outhouses. Dad applied for a sanitary to be dug on their land, and one August day 10 WPA men showed up with their shovels.

They dug listlessly, though. “Never thought I’d end up digging latrines,” Dad overheard one of them mutter.

“Don’t you realize how important your work is?” John’s dad asked, trying to communicate the new spirit. “Why, you’re preventing disease, safeguarding families!” And sure enough, it did seem to John remembering that moment that they worked with a new energy.

Everywhere, people were being creative about their financial woes. Van’s mother was a single parent now. No longer able to afford a house, she approached real-estate agents with a proposition: “A lived-in place is easier to sell than an empty one. Let me move into an unsold house, fix it up with my own things, and show it for you.”

She and Van occupied house after house, as her selling strategy worked only too well.

Even John came up with an idea. He’d roam the neighborhood looking for the most overgrown yards and offer to cut the grass for ten cents—half the

going rate. John didn't have much time for baseball those summers of '34 and '35, but he made a lot of dimes.

The economy hadn't changed much; it was attitudes that were changing. Those 10 words had identified fear as the voice of the enemy and were inviting people to listen for a different one.

Some attribute this all-important sentence to Napoleon Hill, an FDR adviser. John visited Mr. Hill when he was in his eighties. He rose to greet him, adjusting the crease in his trousers as he sat back down.

A small thing, but John recalled that he'd grown up in a one-room cabin in the Appalachians; perhaps he never took nice clothes for granted.

The two men talked about that cabin and how, armed with nothing but trust in God and the determination to keep trying, Mr. Hill had carved out an amazing career, including his season as a presidential speechwriter.

When John told him what a difference his words had made to one family in Kentucky, he nodded.

“If I’d looked down at the fear, I’d still be in that cabin. You have to look up to hear the word God has for you.”

And for Tib and John in this current recession, he wondered? Are his memories of the Great Depression, and the 10 words that pointed the way out, helping them to weather this one? John believes so.

Even before their New York house finally sold (in 2011, after another year of waiting), he was able, some of the time, to take his eyes off the fear and ask God if he had a purpose for keeping that “For Sale” sign on their lawn month after month.

John looked back and says he could see that God was saving the house for the particular family who live there, and believe, with them, that God led them there.

They made it to their apartment in Massachusetts. Were money worries behind them? Of course not.

Their apartment complex was for people “62 and older” which meant they were surrounded by folks with the same financial fears they have—spiraling medical costs and inflation on fixed incomes.

But Tib and John were getting better at looking up instead of down. Most people there in his building were too young to have heard Roosevelt’s inaugural speech. John likes to tell them about Napoleon Hill from a cabin in Appalachia.

He tells them too about the words carved above a seminary doorway: “Lo, I am with you always.” Wasn’t that another way of saying what Napoleon Hill penned, he wondered? God is with us—in good times and in bad.

That has been the case forever, he says. We just have to remember to look up and notice.

Indeed, as we so often say at Saint Joseph’s school, God is good, all the time. So what to do when things get pretty stormy?

We've all been just through one of the most difficult storms of our lives, and though not completely over, the rain is beginning to let up a bit. We're seeing faces again rather than just eyes, we're getting together again, we'll have a State Fair again this year. But I think for so many of us, this past year especially, there was so much fear. What if I get sick, what if I die, what if I lose my job? Sometimes fear can be a good thing to cause us to make a better choice or think things through. But other times, when we sit with the fear, we lose sight of the fact that things can get better and we will ultimately make it to the shores of God's Kingdom. What then is the Christian to do? Because even if Covid is waning, there are plenty of storms we will face.

The starting point is the words over that seminary, that God is with us always.

In our first reading, we have a brief excerpt from the book of Job; a man who certainly has a lot of storms raging around him in his life, wondering what on earth is going on as he followed the rules and was faithful so understandably is frustrated and questioning God. I think many of us can relate to Job, as we all experience things in life that make no sense. Job

cries to God and God doesn't response as we might imagine. Job's difficulty and his pains don't go away. Rather, a bit like a loving parent who pulls their child close, God reminds job that he is loved and has been loved from the beginning. This same message is given to you and me. Note Jesus is asleep in the stern, probably the part of the boat that would sink first; and its not because Jesus is indifferent, but rather because He has complete trust in the Father. He knows things will work out. When the apostles say "teacher do you not care we are perishing," Jesus isn't disappointed that He was asked to calm the storm, it's more likely He's just a little disappointed that they seem to doubt that He loves them and that He is in control. Calming storms is part of His job description. And He loves each of the apostles as an individual. In our storms, it's worth looking on a crucifix or coming into the Church and looking at the tabernacle or just looking at the Host as the priest holds it up at Mass and remind ourselves Jesus is with us; He's given us Himself, and also His Body and Blood as our food for the journey. Through all the storms of life, we are forever in God's hands.

With that though, it's worth also looking at what we can do with our fears and to help the fears of others.

Sometimes we fear our past. Saint Paul in our second reading from 2 Corinthians talks of being a “new creation.” His past as we know was one of persecuting Christians; he even helps to kill the first martyr, Stephen. Yet God chose Paul for a mission. Just as Paul moved forward, and Peter did not stay weeping because of denial of Christ but went on to proclaim Jesus, we need to also make friends with our shadows so to speak. When we go to confession, our sins are forgiven. Sometimes we also learn from our mistakes that teach us life lessons we can pass on to others, or help us to become more empathetic. We can’t change the past, but God’s grace does change us when we respond to it and helps us to move forward. God can help us move past shame. And when our past creeps into the present, such as when we fall to the same old sins, God’s love and mercy can help us do battle against those temptations too and finally break the chains.

Related to those fears of the past, sometimes we try to bury them. We try to surround ourselves with our work, our pleasure; think of the emotion “Joy” from “Inside Out” who tries to get rid of Sadness which leads to all sorts of emotional problems for Riley. For John, the trauma of World War II was something he couldn’t deal with for years until he finally confronted it.

When we bury our emotions, because we are afraid of looking back or being sad or hurt, we never find true happiness. When we are silent, as Job is reduced to silence, we can hear the voice of God. When we are willing to talk to God, and talk to our spouse or family about the unpleasant things rather than escape, what we can also find is true peace and people a way through the storm.

Sometimes we also fear failure. Perhaps we look at the waves that crash against the boat and think there's no way out of this, we're going to sink. The fact of the matter is we will fail. As Thomas Edison said I haven't failed, I've just found 10,000 ways that won't work. We do let others down and ourselves down. But we pick ourselves back up and move on, knowing that God has given us the tools to ultimately do so much good.

Sometimes fears are caused by too much thinking. In our virtues class, our professor spoke once about the problem of too much brooding with respect to decision making; his point was we get counsel, we think, we pray, but we act. Some people spend too much time thinking things over they miss great opportunities in life, from a job or even a marriage. I know I'd sometimes fall into this as a kid; that water looks pretty deep not sure I can swim, it's

easier to have training wheels not sure I can make it balancing on two, or what if this or that doesn't work out. To be sure, some things blow up in our face and as I said, sometimes we do fail. But also to return to a theme I preached on in Lent, we aren't meant to stay in some safe space, but to produce fruit, which means taking that leap of faith. As Napoleon Hill said, he'd have still been in that cabin rather than working for FDR had he not taken the leap of faith and a chance on spreading his wings.

We also must remember the boat will ultimately sink; we will die. But Jesus doesn't leave us alone and will lead us home. So how are we going to live? Living means taking some risks. We're seeing this now with Covid beginning to wane; people taking the leap of faith in different ways. For me, there was some nervousness in getting the vaccine shot but I'm glad I did. For others, there's fear in leaving the house, taking off the mask, shaking hands. It's been a traumatic year. But we as humans aren't meant to be looking at one another on Zoom or giving virtual hugs. We are meant to be a community; we are meant to live life. For John's dad, one depression came and ended and then another came along with other catastrophes along the way. But he did not bury his treasure in the field; he lived his life

and in the process made others better because his fears did not sink him. May our fears also be governed by prudence and not paranoia.

Also when conquering our fears, we have to remember God put us here for a reason. We have gifts. Sometimes we get down on ourselves but when we look inside ourselves, what we find is there is talent there just waiting to be realized - so we need to find out gifts and focus not on what we don't have but on what we do have.

Lastly, we are in the boat together. We can do so much to build one another up. For John, his father taught him so much to give him hope and confidence. As we celebrate father's day this weekend, I'm sure many of you have similar stories of your own dads. I know I do. Sometimes when I'd worry my dad would help me believe in myself. And there has always been the example of his life; like John's dad, my own dad worked hard to provide for the family and taught me what faith looks like in action by always being there for me and doing so much for others in the family too. Through the stormy and calm waters as I'm in the boat going towards heaven, my dad has always been there and I know he always will be. May we learn from our

parents and the great people God gives us and never forget what a difference we can make by being there for one another.

As we all know from the past year and a half, sometimes storms can be pretty fierce. But just as the storms have come and gone against our Church which is still here because Jesus said the gates of hell would never prevail against her, we are still here too because Jesus said I am with you always. Let us not fear calling out to Him, and ask Him to speak that powerful command into our world: "Be still." His gifts to us are peace, love and mercy - so let us trust in Him and knowing that in the end, all will be alright, for He will lead us safely to the shores of heaven.