

As Frank Sinatra would sing, perhaps inspired by watching Vikings games, you're riding high in April and shot down in May. Needless to say, we all go through life's ups and downs. But how does one maintain a positive spirit through it all? The answer is through having an attitude of joy, knowing that no matter what life deals us, there is a lot to be grateful for, and God is with us through thick and thin.

As a novelist and writer of short stories, Jane Choate has always relied on having a double income in her family to keep things going. But that changed one day in 2008 when her husband came home and announced that they would not be getting a paycheck that week.

Jane wasn't too alarmed about her husband's words. After all, he had gone without a salary in the past, and they always made do. Mentally she congratulated herself and her husband for having no debt outside the mortgage on their home.

With two partners, her husband owned a small engineering firm. When times were tight, her husband and his partners went without paychecks, making certain their employees were paid. She was grateful to be married to such an honorable man.

But this time the situation was more disconcerting. Two weeks passed, then four, then six, all with no salary in sight. The bills arrived with depressing regularity, though, and they lived off their savings, a spotty food storage, and faith in the Lord.

The fall of 2008 marked an economic downturn for the entire country. Caught in the spiral, clients who had always paid on time in the past now failed to pay their bills.

Christmas was coming. And Jane wondered how they could find the means to buy even small presents. She didn't mention this to her husband, knowing he had enough to worry about on his mind. She searched bargain bins and put her creativity to work.

In the meantime, she joined an online organization dedicated to preventing more items from ending up in landfills. As a member of the website, she could post items that she no longer wanted or needed and other members would respond. In the same way, she could answer the posts of others if she saw something they needed. Think of "Craigs List" except these were things people were going to give away.

Four weeks into Jane and her husband doing without a salary, she noticed two messages listing pantry items. She e-mailed back immediately, saying that her family could really use the food.

On the site, the first person to answer is the first typically to receive it. When she noticed the time her listings were posted, her heart sank. Several hours had passed. Surely the items were taken.

To her surprise and delight, the posters responded to her, saying the food was hers. They gave her an address and they arranged a time for pick up.

Jane went through boxes of food like a child opening presents on Christmas morning. There were cans of vegetables. Potato flakes. A cake mix. Even fresh fruit. Her husband and teenage daughter feasted that night.

A quick friendship developed for Jane thanks to this website between herself and an older lady. She gave her the other foodstuffs when she had more than she needed. Jane drove the elderly woman to various stores and did errands for her, as she was unable to drive. They sent each other inspirational messages and discovered they had much in common, including a deep Christian faith.

Her membership on the website encouraged Jane to clean out clothes, books and household goods they no longer used. As she uncluttered the house, she felt as though she was also uncluttering her soul, ridding it of old grudges, resentments and fears.

She wrote their four adult children, explaining their situation.

She also mentioned how they would be cutting back on Christmas presents that year and suggested they do the same. As a gentle hint, she told them that the best present they could give their parents was to get out of debt.

In previous years, Jane had kept a "gratitude journal." Every day she used to record things, both large and small for which she was grateful. As often happens with good habits, this one slipped away in the busyness of life. But that year, Jane revived it, listing five things every night as she wrote in her journal.

Small occurrences found their way into her gratitude journal. A shiny penny found during a walk. A letter from a friend. An unexpected phone call from a long-distance relative. A hug from her usually standoffish teenager daughter. The feeling of sunshine on her face.

Everyday things all of a sudden became a cause for rejoicing. She asked herself when was the last time she had been thankful for a washing machine and a dryer?

When she, wondered, had she last given thanks for friends who listened to her complaints without sharing their own? (Shamed, she resolved to mend this habit). She also wondered when had she last thanked God for a strong body, even though it wasn't in the shape or condition she desired?

Her priorities began to shift. She stopped thinking of what she did not have and began to think more of what she had. At the same time, she looked around and realized that others were suffering as well. She took time to send notes to friends and church members who needed an extra dose of love. She prayed more and complained less. She counted her blessings.

Their financial situation hadn't changed yet. But her attitude had.

Nearly 8 weeks had gone by since her husband had gotten a paycheck and Christmas arrived. Jane had managed to make modest presents for family and friends. She refused to give into the temptation to apologize for the humbleness of the gifts, knowing those who loved her would understand and accept her offerings.

One evening, her husband came home and had a wide grin on his face. "Money came in the mail." He went on to explain that one of his customers, also a victim of the slow economy, had sent a long overdue check.

They had gone nearly 2 months without a paycheck. Not only had they survived, but they had thrived.

No, they weren't getting a windfall. But Jane took stock of their lives. They had friends, family and faith. As she puts it, "we were rich indeed."

As Paul says in our second reading this week, "rejoice in the Lord always, I say it again, rejoice." It's not a suggestion. It's a commandment Paul gives. And if anyone should have reason to be less than joyful, it's Paul - he's been beaten up, shipwrecked, flogged, left for dead, and is eventually martyred. But he is speaking of this joy to be a part of his soul; as we sing in the hymn, "no storm can shake my inmost calm, while to that rock I'm clinging; how can I keep from singing."

There is a certain emotional part to joy. I was joyful when the Vikings did not become the first team in NFL history to give up 29 points late in a game. I get joyful when I drive up north and find an owl to photograph. I have joy at seeing family and friends. I'll be joyful at seeing my nephew open his Christmas gifts I've bought him. But in all of our lives, there are moments like Jane's too - the suffering part of our lives. As a priest, as blessed as I've been I've dealt with challenges with people; been stressed out; been tired. But I've never once questioned I'm doing what God called me to do. And I try to remember how blessed I am and have the true Christian understanding of joy. What this understanding is is having God in the center of your life. The fortunes of life change day to day; but if you have Christ at the center, a person finds calm. Christ is the rock we cling to.

That's the starting point for joy. Pray daily. Think about how much God loves you. See God at work in your life. Sit in the silence and meditate. Gaze upon the host as the priest holds it up and the words "given up for you" that follow "this is my Body" and "this is my Blood." Think of how there is only one person like you in all of creation. God did not promise us a life free of suffering; quite the contrary; we take up our crosses if we wish to be His disciple. But we are given a promise: we are not orphans. Christ did not come as an infant and then grow up and vanish; He came and lived and loved us and died and rose, but remains with us always too. Find that peace, knowing that you can come to God with anything and that even when the storms are severe, He is with you.

Second, as we do this, like Jane, consider trying to find the blessings in your life. As she asked herself, when was the last time I was grateful for having a washer and dryer, or good health. Sometimes we think of only the negative things. And a little complaining is OK. But I think when we look at what we've been given, what we'll find is there's so much to be grateful for. I think of dinner with my loved ones or visiting family. I think of my dog who is always next to me. I think of the hard working people I work with and who volunteer to make our parish thrive. Looking at what we've got, you'll find it's a long list.

And third, remember the joy that comes from other people, and lift one another up. John points the way to Jesus through his words and actions. We should do the same. Jane had her husband, but she also developed a new friendship with an elderly woman who shared her own abundance with Jane. Two people helped one another out. Our connections mean so much, and whether it's a sibling showing a little patience with their brother or sister, or volunteering to bring Communion to the homebound, or shoveling out your elderly neighbor, we can do so much to build one another up - something that is more important than ever in a world where we so often just tear one another down.

Standard this time of year on TV is "It's a Wonderful Life," a movie I've certainly seen many times. And if you remember, George Bailey wants so much the happiness that he thinks will come from getting out of Bedford Falls and finding his way in the world to bigger and better things. In the end, he keeps coming back and goes through so much. Let's not forget at the end of the film he's still living in a run down, drafty house; he's still got the problems of the Building and Loan. But as his brother Harry toasts him, "to my big brother George, the richest man in town," what he has is joy. He's found peace with God, with himself, and he knows the future will be great, because all that he needs is right there around him. For you and me, our problems will always remain, and we don't know what the future will bring. We can live our lives being afraid; afraid of Covid, afraid of the economy tanking; afraid of people knowing the real "us" on the inside; or whatever it might be. We can live our lives being angry at how things are in the world. we can live our lives in sadness thinking things won't get better and people have lost their way. Or, we can live our lives with true Christian joy - knowing that no matter what life brings, God is in control, because in the end, it will all be OK. Yes, we'll have some rough days ahead - and many storms in our lives. But let us never lose sight of the fact that through it all, God will lead us home to him, and let us say with Paul, rejoice in the Lord always, I say it again, rejoice.