

On a spring morning one day, Polly Swafford's slender 10 year old son asked his mom for the 20th time as he stared out the window toward the pasture, "Mom, where do you suppose they are?"

"They," were their pony mare, Ginger, and her three-year old offspring, Charcoal, who had been missing for four or five days - maybe even more.

They had 50 acres of pasture and woods in Miami County, Kansas, that had plenty of grazing for six horses. But spring thunderstorms during the past 10 days had swollen creeks and forced the nearby river out of its banks. The other horses had come to the barn during the downpour, but not Ginger or Charcoal.

Danny had learned to ride on Ginger, or as she puts it maybe she taught him. At first he had to climb on cement blocks to reach the stirrups. Charcoal, so named for his beautiful black coat, was now Danny's horse, being trained to take a saddle and rider.

The day before when the downpour had subsided, she took Spot, their foxhound, to do some firsthand searching. They sloshed through trees and brush in swamped lowlands near the river. She could smell the fetid water.

All her calling and whistling and Spot's sniffing were in vain.

She explained to Danny that she was sorry but couldn't find the horses.

She dialed every sale barn in a radius of 100 miles hoping someone had found them as strays. Each time the answer was the same. "No ma'am, we haven't seen either a dappled sandy mare or a black colt."

Without another apparent course of action, Polly could only worry to herself. She wanted to spare Danny this sorrow.

The next morning the sun struggled to shine through gray clouds, but dampness hung in the dismal air.

Suddenly, Danny burst in the door. "Mom come quick! There's Ginger!" he cried.

The mare stood at the pasture gate, whickering impatiently and trotting bak and trotting back and forth as if to say, "Follow me."

She told Danny to Hurry while she got a bucket with some oats and a halter and rope.

Ginger trotted ahead, stopping frequently to look over her shoulder to be sure Polly and Danny were following. She led them down the same path where Spot and Polly had hiked previously. Overhead, three vultures circled - an ominous sight. When they reached the bottomland, the mare left the path, picking her way through soggy brush toward an inlet creek.

Danny shouted that he saw Charcoal, and he was lying on his side, not moving. His right back leg was badly injured, bones protruding and skin blistered. His left leg was seared. Only lightning could have stripped away the hair on his legs, leaving long, ugly open sores. Flies swarmed about his legs.

Danny asked his mom with tears in his eyes how long she thought he had been lying there with no food and nobody to take care of him. His mom said probably several days but they would never know. Ginger had taken care of him though, warding off hungry coyotes. Or maybe that wild cat the neighbors saw Polly thought to herself.

Danny worried aloud what they could do now as there was no way to drive the pickup to where Charcoal was in the mud.

Polly told him she would just have to get him up and lead him out, trying to stay confident.

So with their cajoling and the lure of oats, Charcoal struggled valiantly, finally managing to stand unsteadily on three legs. Polly slipped the halter on him. His eyes were dull with pain, yet he was spunky enough to respond to their efforts. She realized that this was surely the force of life over death.

What a sight they must have been, Polly thought to herself - Ginger, her beautiful flaxen mane and tail mud-soaked and tangled; Danny with the bucket, marching up the rocky, slippery path through the woods; and Polly, steadying the injured colt, encouraging him to follow. The hike, ordinarily about 30 minutes in duration, took over 2 hours. Charcoal could only hop on three feet for a few yards and then rest, while Polly and Danny coaxed him to continue.

Polly cautioned that they couldn't let him stop, for if he went down again he would not make it.

A few more hops and Charcoal stumbled, but Danny helped to steady him. Polly said a prayer to help them save the horse.

They crossed the lakes grass covered dam with water lapping only a foot below, spurring Charcoal onward. The horses began to realize they were almost home.

Through the pasture, at least they straggled back to the barn. Relieved, Polly gave her son a big hug.

Although their bodies demanded rest, Danny started clearing a corner of the barn to create a stall for Charcoal and Ginger. Polly hurried to the phone to call the vet to come as soon as possible.

After cleaning and medicating Charcoal's wounds, the vet said that he should heal, but they had to treat his legs every day for several weeks, maybe longer. He showed Danny how to apply the medication and cover the wounds.

Then he shook his head and said, "Mares usually detach themselves from their offspring once they're weaned. It's a miracle that this mare, Ginger, who had Charcoal nearly three years ago - and even recently weaned her second foal - stayed with him through all the recent storms."

Danny smiled and said to the vet, "Haven't you heard the old proverb, 'God couldn't be everywhere and therefore he made mothers?'"

How true that is, because in all of our lives, we need not only amazing moms and dads, but people to be shepherds, for we are so often lost, but also need to lead one another.

This weekend in our Gospel, we have the image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd of his flock. A few lines prior to where our Gospel begins Jesus describes Himself as the Good Shepherd, and we are probably familiar with the image of Christ carrying the sheep on his shoulders.

Like Charcoal, we suffer in life and can get lost, be it from things out of our control or through our own decisions. But through it all is the love of God that never leaves us. And it's so important to remember that when things seem overwhelming, or when we maybe feel like we've lost our way, God's love is always there. This is why we need to turn to Him always, and receive His mercy. But it's also why we need to trust the Church; note a bishop often holds a crosier, or staff, symbolizing how he is a shepherd. The Church is there to lead us and help us understand the faith, which is why faith formation is so important.

But with that, we also must remember too that while we are loved by God, this does not free us from suffering. In fact, sometimes being a believer means suffering increases, for such is what happens in a fallen world. John in our second reading has the vision of the multitude of those who stand before the Lamb holding palm branches while wearing white robes. These would be the martyrs, and up and down through the ages we have had so many, from Peter and Paul, to Thomas More to Maximilian Kolbe and others. The forces of evil tried to get them to be quiet, but they spoke up because they realized there was something greater that could not be defeated. So how about us? On the one hand, there is the suffering that comes from testifying to the truth. As Catholics, we testify to what is right, and whether its talking about why ending an unborn child's life is a grave moral evil, not joining in with the crowd who gossips or makes fun of people, or talking about why we go to Mass and live out our faith, there can be a cost to this. But we have to be aware that as the vultures were flying overhead where Charcoal was waiting to swoop down, so do the evils of the world want to swoop down and steal souls. The devil is working hard. As Jesus says, some want to steal the sheep to stop them from following Him. In the first reading from Acts, Paul and Barnabas proclaim the word of God, and some react by trying to persuade listeners to turn on Paul and

Barnabas to kick them out of their territory. So it's worth thinking about how might we stand up to the lies. How do we testify to the truth without fear and be a shepherd? It's not easy in a world that says anything goes; just look at the anger from the pro-abortion crowd this past week and how who a person is has been redefined in recent years. Yes, we will be hated for being a shepherd, just like a mom or dad is often treated with anger when a child doesn't see their parents wisdom when they say "no" or "this is wrong," but if we truly want to win souls for Jesus, we'll be willing to do what needs to be done and follow His example.

Lastly, we should ask ourselves how far are we willing to go for our brothers and sisters? Moms, whom we honor today, are amazing. And I'm so thankful for the vocation of parents. Thinking about my own mom, I think about how she has done so much for our family over the years. She worked hard to help support our family. She worked hard around the house. She made time with me to help me learn things as a kid, from my faith, to getting a leg up at school, to learning how much I was loved. She did things for other people. She was patient as I tried to sort out my life. Both she and my dad are true heroes to me, and I suspect many would say the same about their own parents. So today's readings also remind us that as Christians, we are called to daily take up our crosses; to ask ourselves am I loving like the Good Shepherd. Never forget for all you do, from getting up in the middle of the night, to helping your kids with homework, to driving to the games, to giving of your time to help those in need, whatever it might be - our actions truly do so much.

Saint Paul says nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ, and this is true. But it is also true some events, some people, test our hope. But God never gives up on us, and that is why in His wisdom He also gives us the Church and one another. As Fr. Timothy Radcliffe, a Dominican preacher and teacher puts it, "Without being conscious that some would want us not to be heard, there will be no lasting perseverance in telling the good news. Without knowing at what cost some are in heavenly glory, we will not make risky ventures for Christ." Christ though did not back down from the hard work that being a shepherd entailed, for He loves us so much. Let us surrender to that love knowing He will always find us, but also like Him know what Ginger showed Polly, Danny and that vet - that her job of being a mom was anything but over, for God may indeed be everywhere, but He also gives us mothers, and fathers, and people like you and me to be shepherds of one another. Sin and hardship in life can do to a soul what the storm did to Charcoal, but within us is the power of grace so we can stand, it just takes others to help us get home to heaven. Yes, sometimes in life we can be overwhelmed. But God will always come for us and never leave us; may we follow Him, and also strive to help one another hear the voice of the shepherd through our words and actions, restoring them to spiritual health and helping them find the pasture that is the Kingdom of Heaven.