

With the invasion of Poland on August of 1939 by Germany, the country would be brutally occupied until the end of the war. Millions of Poles lost their lives, and one might think the people would just give up.

However, rather than being demoralized and capitulating, the Polish people had remarkable spirit and fortitude, and in 1944 there was an armed revolt. While not successful, it unfortunately resulted in Hitler ordering that any further idea for a revolt be crushed using any means necessary. That was August 6, 1944; Black Sunday as it was called.

SS and Gestapo stormed through the streets of the city, breaking down doors going house by house and they rounded up anyone who appeared even remotely capable of challenging the authority of the Third Reich. Before the night was through, more than 8,000 males, many young boys, were put in trucks and sent to prisons and camps. Not even an official work certificate deterred them.

Among the people caught up in this was a young man who was nicknamed Lolek; so called by his teammates when he'd play hockey or soccer on the frozen river.

He had lived a relatively charmed life, but it was also a life that had moments of danger.

At the age of 10 a friend was playing with a rifle and neither Lolek or his friend thought it was loaded; he took the rifle though, aimed it at Lolek and pulled the trigger, and the bullet missed him by a fraction of an inch.

Then one day in February of 1944 while walking home from the factory he worked at (he had been a drama major thinking about an acting career before the Nazis closed the university), he was struck by a speeding army truck; he laid there on the side of the road for 9 hours, unconscious, and woke up in the hospital with a concussion and multiple injuries and incredibly he was alive.

But on that August night, it seemed his luck was about up. He was living in the basement of his aunt and uncle's home, and it was there when they were alerted by shouts in the street and that Hitler's kidnappers were coming. His aunt said he had to hide in the thick bushes by the garden, but Lolek and his uncle said they were going nowhere without her. In the

middle of this argument they heard the sound of Gestapo soldiers at the front door just before it became crashing off its hinges. Boot heels thundered above them with angry voices and screeching furniture and more doors open and his aunt and uncle were trembling and wide eyed. Lolek though sank to his knees and began to pray. The chaos above grew louder; now kneeling was not enough, for Lolek thought if he had to surrender to the Nazis, he would first surrender completely to God. And deciding this, he lowered himself face down until his body was prostrate on the floor. Nobody could say for sure why the storm troopers didn't open the basement door that night and why they went away, but Lolek knew. For it wasn't merely good fortune that spared him so much as a boy; it was a higher power calling him to a higher purpose which he must honor. For the boy who was almost killed by the gun, the young man nearly killed by the army truck, or the wrath of Hitler in a Nazi roundup in response to an uprising in Krakow in 1944 is known as the priest, "Lucky Lolek," or Karol Wojtyla whom the world called Pope John Paul II.

While it might not have been at that exact moment he decided to become a priest, what a young Karol Wojtyla knew was that in the storms that were around him and the seeming hopelessness, that God was there. Hitler

might be able to do much evil, but no matter what he could do, he could never take a soul. And so what Karol did was to trust completely in God, knowing that God would not abandon him.

And this is because of the nature of who God is in Jesus Christ.

This weekend as we start Ordinary Time, the Church gives us the readings from the 1st part of John's Gospel where John the Baptist speaks, saying "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." It's something that we hear quite a bit - three times to be exact - at each Mass. But it's also worth thinking about what those words mean.

The lamb was one of many animals that were offered as sacrifice in the ancient world. Though rightfully abhorrent to us today, at the time animal sacrifice was in many religions, including Judaism. It was a way of offering back to God part of creation in atonement for sins, placed upon the animal; indeed the term scapegoat came from the goat bearing the sins and being sent off to go to the desert. Jesus though is something else: the new sacrificial lamb who comes to rescue us, to liberate, and to free us.

The problem for us is on our own, we can't save ourselves, for all of us are sinners; and though we are capable of great acts of love, we all at times sin. We are broken; World War II was an example of this, through the deaths of millions and what happened when people put their faith in humanity as the solution. Much like Communism and the ancient world when the Israelites wanted an earthly king over God, the result is always the same: disappointment at best, calamity and destruction at the worst. The eternal frustration would be never being able to get things right.

Into this comes Jesus. It goes back to what my theology teacher did the first day of foundational theology class - writing some say this and the words Jesus is on the board, and then the word "friend." He crossed it out; and then wrote "teacher" and crossed that out and then wrote "brother" and crossed that out, and finally wrote redeemer and then closed by saying "this is what you will learn in this class." I never forget that, because it is so important for us to remember what Lolek did in that basement; laying on the floor in surrender to God, as he laid on the floor and was ordained in 1946 a priest. The God we worship is not distant and far away; or just a great teacher. He has characteristics of that, but is willing to be there in the trenches with us and came to show us how to live and love. He knows us

inside out, and knows what our secrets, our fears, our shortcomings are.

And so this is why God becomes a human, to know us inside out and fix us by meeting us where we are at.

The challenge on our part is to get to know this God, something good to think about as we commence ordinary time. By trying to truly enter into the Mass and let God speak to us; and having a focus on Jesus as we pray together. It's why the altar, not the ambo is the center of attention at a Catholic Church; it's not to say the words aren't important, but the homily is meant to (ideally) help someone live their faith; and the words of Scripture help us to think about God's love, but where it's most on display is at the Eucharist, when we echo the Baptist's words and offer the sacrifice on the altar of our Lamb, who loves us so much that He wants to continually meet us where we are at and give us food for the journey. So let Him into your life through prayer and reflection, and through making a commitment to be here at Mass with Him, knowing that He loves you more than you could ever imagine and is your redeemer.

With this though comes the mission. John Paul returned to Poland and was a priest at various parishes and taught philosophy and theology; he then

became a bishop and pope in 1978. He went all over the world, but one of his most definitive moments came in 1979 when he again looked at tyranny and evil that had come to his homeland, this time in the form of the Communists. They had crushed the dissidents just as Hitler did prior to them in uprisings in 1956 and 1970. But when he did a 9-day pilgrimage to Poland in 1979, people suddenly saw they were not alone. They were not conquered by the Communists. People heard him speak by the millions and chanted "We Want God." The pope never mentioned economics or politics during his speeches in 1979, but rather cultural and spiritual matters, igniting a spiritual revolution. He famously said during that visit "Let the Spirit descend and renew the face of the earth. This earth." - his first words to the people of Poland as a Polish man on Polish land. The people who knew full well Communism lied to them, now began to have hope; they began to see themselves as people created in God's image with dignity and became more aware of their power to act and bring about change, which ultimately led to the collapse of the Iron Curtain. Being bold though was not without it's costs for the Holy Father; the Soviet Union's KGB in collaboration with Bulgarian intelligence services tried to have the pope killed in 1981. But John Paul would not hide in the Vatican; rather he'd go all over the world spreading this message of hope and peace. As

we hear in the Responsorial Psalm, “Here I am Lord, I come to do your will.” We are not just creatures who have happened to land in the world by chance; rather we are formed to serve a purpose. John the Baptist speaks of himself as having been sent to baptize so that Jesus would be revealed. Isaiah has come to realize his task is to make God known to the nations - to all the people, and Paul writes to his Corinthian brothers and sisters to remind them you are a part of something greater than just your little community here. You have a calling, and this is what John the Baptist realizes - that he points the way to Jesus, but he’s also meant to point others to find the Lamb of God. His service of God was not about his own task but about the one who would be revealed if he did his task. And this is what John Paul realized too. But again, the mission is tough; think of Frodo having to go to Mordor to destroy the ring. So on our part, how do we also join with the Lamb of God in doing what He does, namely joining with Him as His servant to help fix a broken world? How can we inspire hope in others by “getting our hands dirty?” Each one of us, through our actions of love and mercy, through carrying our our mission, can bring about so much good. We must never forget that we reveal the Lamb of God and point others to Him when we forgive; when we listen; when we remind others that they are loved by God.

The world can be a very dark place at times, and life can be hard.

Sometimes we get ourselves into a bad situation, or make a series of mistakes and think what a mess I've made, how can I get myself out of this; or perhaps other times we look at situations in the world where so many seem to reject God and that they can find true happiness doing whatever they want without God. But into this darkness comes the Lamb of God who takes away our sins. The Lamb who is sacrificed for us. Our God who loves us more than we can ever imagine; the God who pulled Lolek out of the basement and used him to inspire millions and change the world, because Lolek knew he had to say the words "Here I am Lord, I come to do you will." May we follow His example, trusting the Lamb of God liberates us and seeing in ourselves what He sees - such incredible potential and a great person whom He created - and listen to Him so we too like Saint John Paul and so many others who beheld the Lamb of God, both behold Him who loves us, and follow Him as we carry out the mission He has given us.