

One of the things that we all battle is fear and anxiety; and though it isn't quite obvious, Nicodemus who Jesus is conversing with in our Gospel has quite a bit of it. He's meeting Jesus at night to talk with Jesus because he is attracted to what He has to say; but he also does not want others to know he is meeting with this rabbi who a number of other of his fellow Pharisees and members of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish high council ultimately dislike. But as we get to know him a little better, we'll see that he grows and confronts his fears; he reminds the others that a person should be heard before judged, and he will assist in preparing the body of Jesus for burial, no longer just being hidden.

Like him, Jesus is calling us too - giving us a message, a mission. But we are also called to listen to that message, and go on the adventure of life and carry it out. And how hard this can be; our anxieties can at times be overwhelming. But when we truly confront our fears through the virtue of fortitude, and journey with our Lord, we can be such agents for hope in the world.

This past week at our school Mass, I read a short story called "Moses," a recent book that was a Caldecott Honor Book telling the story of Harriet Tubman, and her spiritual journey that led her to lead so many into freedom as a conductor on the Underground Railroad.

The Railroad itself began in 1831 when a Kentucky slave named Tice Davids made a break for the free state of Ohio by swimming across the Ohio River. His master trailed close behind and watched Davids wade ashore. When he looked again, Davids was nowhere to be found. Davids's master returned to Kentucky in a rage, exclaiming to his friends that Davids "must have gone off on an underground road." The name stuck, and the legend of the underground railroad was born.

It was another two decades before the underground railroad became a part of the national consciousness, mostly because of the heroic exploits of the underground railroad's most celebrated "conductor."

Black Moses as she came to be called, Harriet Tubman was raised in slavery in eastern Maryland but escaped in 1849. When she first reached the North, she said later, "I looked at my hands to see if I was de same person now I was free. There was such a glory over everything, the sun came like gold through the trees and over the fields, and I felt like I was in heaven."

Tubman was born Araminta Ross in 1822 on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. When interviewed later in life, Tubman said she started working when she was five as a house maid. She recalled that she endured whippings, starvation and hard work even before she got to her teenage years.

She labored in Maryland's tobacco fields, but things started to change when farmers switched their main crop to wheat.

Grain required less labor, so slave owners began to sell their enslaved people to plantation owners in the the Deep South.

Two of Tubman's sisters were sold to a slave trader. One had to leave her child behind. Tubman too lived in fear of being sold.

When she was 22, Tubman married a free black man named John Tubman. For reasons that are unclear, she changed her name, taking her mother's first name and her husband's last name. Her marriage did not change her status as an enslaved person.

Five years later, rumors circulated in the slave community that slave traders were once again prowling through the Eastern Shore. Tubman decided to seize her freedom rather than face the terror of being chained with other slaves to be carried away, often referred to as the "chain gang."

Tubman stole into the woods and, with the help of some members of the Underground Railroad, walked the 90 miles to Philadelphia where slavery was illegal. The Underground Railroad was a loose network of African Americans and whites who helped fugitive slaves escape to a free state or to Canada. Tubman began working with William Still, an African American clerk from Philadelphia, who helped slaves find freedom.

Tubman led about a dozen rescue missions that freed about 60 to 80 people. She normally rescued people in the winter, when the long dark nights provided cover, and she often adopted some type of disguise. Even though she was the only "conductor" on rescue missions, she depended on a few houses connected with the Underground Railroad for shelter. She never lost a person escaping with her and won the nickname of Moses for leading so many people to "the promised land," or freedom.

After the Civil War began, Tubman volunteered to serve as a spy and scout for the Union Army. She ended up in South Carolina, where she helped lead a military mission up the Combahee River. Located about halfway between Savannah, Georgia, and Charleston, South Carolina, the river was lined with a number of valuable plantations that the Union Army wanted to destroy.

Tubman helped guide three Union steamboats around Confederate mines and then helped about 750 enslaved people escape with the Federal troops.

She was the only woman to lead men into combat during the Civil War. After the war, she moved to New York and was active in campaigning for equal rights for women. She passed away at the age of 90.

Tubman's Christian faith tied all of these remarkable achievements together.

She grew up during the Second Great Awakening, which was a Protestant religious revival in the United States. Preachers took the gospel of evangelical Christianity from

place to place, and church membership flourished. Christians at this time believed that they needed to reform America in order to usher in Christ's second coming. She felt compelled not to just escape, but that God was calling her to help people come to the freedom she found in Philadelphia; the children's book focuses on her fears and worry, and throughout God assures her to be not afraid, and that she can accomplish so much and help others by letting go, and letting God, which is what she did.

An enslaved person who trusted Tubman to help him escape simply noted that Tubman had "de charm," or God's protection. Charms or amulets were strongly associated with African religious beliefs, somewhat similar to a scapular we might wear or a religious medal.

A horrific accident is believed to have brought Tubman closer to God and reinforced her Christian worldview.

When she was a teenager, Tubman happened to be at a dry goods store when an overseer was trying to capture an enslaved person who had left his slave labor camp without permission. The angry man threw a two-pound weight at the runaway but hit Tubman instead, crushing part of her skull. For two days she lingered between life and death.

The injury almost certainly gave her temporal lobe epilepsy. As a result, she would have splitting headaches, fall asleep without notice, even during conversations, and have dreamlike trances.

Tubman believed that her trances and visions were God's revelation and evidence of his direct involvement in her life. One abolitionist told a biographer of Tubman that Tubman "talked with God, and he talked with her every day of her life."

This confidence in providential guidance and protection helped make Tubman fearless. Standing only five feet tall, she had an air of authority that demanded respect.

Once Tubman told a biographer that when she was leading two "stout" men to freedom, she believed that "God told her to stop" and leave the road. She led the scared and reluctant men through an icy stream – and to freedom.

Harriet Tubman once said that slavery was "the next thing to hell." But because of her fortitude, she helped many transcend that hell.

As we near Holy Week, when we will hear again the story of the Passion, we get a glimpse of the hell that awaits Jesus - or rather the confronting of the powers of hell - when he says to Nicodemus "Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life." The reference is to the serpent on the pole that the people were called to look at after being bitten by serpents in the desert; Moses prays and God says put a serpent on a pole, have the people gaze upon it, and they will be healed; it's what doctors often

wear as a lapel on their white coats to this day. Jesus will be lifted up too, on a wooden cross, brutally executed.

The point is that fears must be confronted; we can't run from what scares us, but have to look at it. We can run away for a time, but it does not make the problems in life go away. So how can we transform fear into hope as Tubman and so many courageous Christians have done?

As a starting point, it's important to think about what we are afraid of. Sometimes it's obvious, perhaps as a child being afraid of the dark. But sometimes fears are more hidden; it could be a fear of a sin that has become a part of our lives; a fear of job loss; a fear of letting others down; a fear of failure. Sometimes through prayer and meditation we can think about what it is that we are really afraid of.

With that, we pray. Remember fortitude is a virtue; the Catechism describes it as the moral virtue that ensures firmness in difficulties and constancy in the pursuit of the good. It strengthens the resolve to resist temptations and to overcome obstacles in the moral life. The virtue of fortitude enables one to conquer fear; even fear of death, and to face trials and persecutions." As the Cowardly Lion was told by Oz, the medal he was given didn't give him courage, it's something he already had. When we pray, we link ourselves to Jesus as Tubman did time and time again. Jesus can transform our fear into hope - for the Lord promised that He would not leave us orphans, and promised us eternal life. As Pope Benedict XVI put it, we put our trust in God's will for our lives and know all things are for our good in His time. If we then continue to learn about our Lord by spending time learning about our faith and trusting Him, fear fades away and is replaced by hope. We will see this on Palm Sunday; the agony in the Garden and Jesus praying for the cup to be removed, but then "not my will but your will be done," and His firm resolve to go forward, not knowing why the Father's plan was what it was, but this ultimately leading to Jesus triumphing over the forces of darkness. We can too, because Jesus is with us.

We then confront our fears and act. Bishop Robert Barron recently in speaking on fear noted a Buddhist principle he liked, invite your fears in for tea. When we do this, we begin to distance ourselves from these fears. We confront them. If you are afraid of some sin you battle or your past, name it in confession and know God loves you. Maybe you are afraid of confronting a person in the family making some bad choices; go talk to them with love. Maybe you are afraid of something your body is telling you; go to the doctor and make an appointment. Maybe you are afraid of a secret; talk about it with your loved one. Maybe you are afraid of failing when you've thought about trying something new; go and do it. The more one ruminates and frets, it prevents us from acting and truly living and enjoying life. But even more importantly, when we act, the fear is transformed into hope - hope being the beacon of light that inspires others. We have so much power to do this, to give people hope and peace. But to do this it requires being not afraid to talk about our faith; to encourage people to come back to the faith; to look at their life choices and make a change; to be the voice saying "this is immoral" and speaking out against things like abortion, racism, and immoral images of the human

body that are abused. Indeed people will tell us we can't do it, or to keep our faith to ourselves at times, but that's not what Jesus tells us to do - rather our light must shine before others to give them hope. God in the Son goes down into the depths of it all - suffering betrayal, rejection, physical pain, the most horrible things imaginable that happen to a person, all because of His love for us. So too we must have the same love for one another.

We also journey together. A number of parishioners are in faith sharing small groups that have just started to meet. On the Underground Railroad, it was a network of people who helped others to lead people into freedom. And beyond that, it was a growing network of abolitionists who finally changed hearts and minds for people to understand the horrors and evil of slavery. In life, it's so important to be vulnerable; to talk about our fears with trusted loved ones and friends, and also to be a rock for others to lean on, letting them know we are there for them. Jesus gave us one another for a reason and it's why He is so adamant about loving one another as He has loved us. When people join together, it's such a powerful way to keep fear at bay and to help hope and mercy spread.

Lastly, we persevere. The mission is hard; and there are setbacks. People may ignore us, yell at us; we may try something only to fail; we may fall back into the sin we want to confront; or change may be slow. But when we see the big picture, and what is possible, we hopefully realize that change can indeed happen and while the devil may knock us down and want us to stay down, Jesus is there to help us back up and with Him, we can do so much. Tubman didn't end slavery on one journey, but through many years of suffering and enduring so much she did save so many lives and changed the world.

How paralyzing fear can be at times, and how tempting it can be to stay stuck in the night like Nicodemus. God though shines the light of His love on us, and we need not be afraid. But like our Lord in the Garden, we also have to confront our fears, and as we do so let that fear be truly transformed into hope. Bad things will happen in our lives, things we can't control, and we will let ourselves and others down too. But through it all, while we may go through more than one Good Friday, this will ultimately lead to Easter. So as we prepare for Communion, may we strive to truly let go and let God, letting His love dispel the fears that consume us, and never forget that He is with us. The powers of evil in the world may seem so strong, and sometimes we may think we are so powerless - but His love and grace are no match for sin, evil and death. May we not be afraid to confront them, and like Tubman and so many like her, change the world letting hope and mercy, not fear, have the last word.