

Journeying with the Lord and One Another on the Road to Heaven

A number of years ago, a future Christian author named Margaret Nava found herself with her friend Susan on the highway. They had just passed through Amarillo on their way to Oklahoma City when they noticed something large and white rising high above the flatlands bordering Interstate 40. At first, they thought it was some type of silo or maybe even gigantic oil rigging. But upon nearing the structure, they realized it was a cross.

Even though she hadn't been to church in several years, Susan suggested stopping as they had been driving for hours, and she suggested they might have a gift shop and loved to browse.

They pulled off the interstate and drove the short distance to the cross. Casting a shadow almost twice its height, the 19-story white cross was surrounded by paved walkways, life-sized bronze sculptures of the Stations of the Cross and the three crosses of Calvary. Fully expecting Susan to make a beeline for the gift shop, Margaret was somewhat surprised when she walked towards the crucifixion scene.

It was late afternoon, and most of the cars on the highway were headed toward home or a place to call home for the night. Possibly noticing they were two of the last visitors remaining at the site, Susan knelt beneath the center cross and bowed her head. Fearing she might be hurt or something, Margaret rushed to her side and asked if she was okay.

"Yes," she whispered. "It's just that I've been so wrong. Ever since college, I've been afraid to show my faith because I thought it would make me look weak and people would ridicule me. I quit going to church, and whoever someone asked me what religion I was, I said I didn't believe in religion. I turned my back on the Lord, but look - He placed this huge cross in my path just to tell me He's still here." She hung her head and cried.

As difficult as it was to watch, Margaret understood what Susan was going through because she had experienced something similar after her dad died. Hoping it might encourage her, she knelt down and told her story, sharing about the pain of seeing her dad die of cancer, and then her mom dying soon thereafter, and how she blamed God. As she put it, "Where was the compassion in taking both my parents? Why hadn't He answered my prayers? How could I go on believing in a God that had turned His back on me? I couldn't, so I turned she continued: "One day, I looked in the mirror and didn't like what I saw. My hair was perfectly coiffed, my make-up was flawless, the diamonds on my ears sparkles brilliantly, but my eyes were empty and cold. In Matthew 6:22-23 it says 'the eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are healthy, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eyes are unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. 'My life was in darkness, and I knew I had to find the light.'"

The sun was beginning to set, but neither Susan nor Margaret hurried to leave that place. They found peace and serenity there, a feeling of acceptance and safety.

Susan reached for her hand and asked her what she did after she felt that her life was in darkness.

She says she found a church and started going again. That she started praying and reading the Bible. And it didn't take long before her husband noticed a change in her, and didn't like it and said to her she could choose him or choose God. Margaret chose God.

When Susan asked her what she would have done if God had not taken her back, Margaret remained her of the words from Timothy, which says if we are faithless, God still remains faithful, for He cannot disown himself."

As they looked across the horizon with the setting sun casting an amber glow on the cross, Susan reflected "God works in mysterious ways, doesn't He? He knew there would be thousands of people passing this spot every day and that many of them needed His help, so He had someone build this cross just to remind them that He is the Way, the Truth and the Life. He always has and always will be here...all we have to do is look for Him."

Rising from her knees, Susan smiled and said to her friend "I'm glad we stopped here. This was exactly what I needed. Now I'm ready for the rest of the journey." And so was Margaret.

Life is indeed a journey, and we hear about that in our Gospel for this week. Jesus appears to two disciples, who are initially a bit lost, stuck on Good Friday. Jesus though comes to them in the darkness, and gives them the message of hope. He eats with them, and opens their minds. And then, they presumably continue the journey.

This is the journey we go on too, but sometimes that can be a hard journey, for we deal with pain in life and setbacks. So what then are we to do to keep moving forward?

I'd suggest several things are helpful in particular when the going gets tough.

For one, we pray and come to Mass. It is here where Jesus comes to us in a special way, and we receive the peace we long for, in particular in the Eucharist. Even in times of spiritual dryness, God is still there journeying with us to give us His love, His strength. When we get away from it, little by little, it can be like joining a gym after New Year's Day - we skip one day, then another, and all of a sudden we never go at all. By making prayer, Mass, and regular confession to experience God's mercy part of our spiritual regimen it helps us so much.

Second, some words of wisdom from Mary and the Angel Gabriel. Last Monday, April 8, was the Solemnity of the Annunciation. Normally it's March 25, but when it falls during

Holy Week its moved to the first Monday after the Easter Octave. In the Gospel for the day, Mary is told to not be afraid, and that nothing is impossible for God. And then she has that profound statement of trust, "May it be done to me according to your word" in Luke 1:28. What a great blueprint for going forward. Do we have trust that God has a plan and has our best interests at heart? Do we trust that even when things look bleak, God will help us through and we can participate in that? Do we have the humility to truly "let go, let God" and do things His way?

Third, picking up on that, how do we effect change in our lives? Hopefully we emerged from Lent better. It takes work though to keep persevering in faith and living it out through challenging times. On the way there are setbacks for sure; but as we reflected on last week on Divine Mercy Sunday, God's love is always there to help us find the way again and get back on the right track.

Lastly, how do we evangelize others? Susan and Margaret's story is one of how this happens; two friends who each had points of a rut in their faith life, but also one helping the other to have hope, the other realizing that she need not be afraid to talk about the faith anymore. Post-Easter we read a lot from Acts of the Apostles about the evangelizing being done by the apostles. Susan needed to no longer be afraid to talk about and live out her faith; and neither do we. We had 1000+ here at Mass on Easter at 10:30 a.m. alone - what a great turnout! But how do we invite some people back, or reach out to people to help them see the love of God in their lives and how to respond to it? Do we help people think more deeply about their beliefs and how to grow in faith?

Our journey to heaven is a marathon, not a sprint, and sometimes on that long marathon the miles will seem so hard and we will want to give up. Through every mile though is our Lord to help us on that journey. Let us look up, open our eyes and realize He is with us, and help one another to run the race to it's completion.

God bless and have a wonderful week,

Fr. Paul