Perhaps one of the darkest periods in history was what transpired after the Communist Revolution in Russia, that resulted in the deaths of millions under Stalin, but also the attempt by Stalin to destroy religion.

Joseph Stalin himself was raised in the Orthodox Church. His parents actually wanted him to be a priest. Unfortunately, his father abused the young Joseph mercilessly. Stalin once described his childhood as having been “raised in a poor priest-ridden household.” He came to renounce Christianity altogether, reportedly saying, “You know, they are fooling us, there is no God… all this talk about God is sheer nonsense.”

Years later when he came to power as a Communist, Stalin did everything he could to crush Christianity, closing down thousands of churches and violently torturing, killing, and imprisoning Christians. He was reputed to have said, “One death is a tragedy; one million is a statistic” so you can imagine the merciless persecution he mounted against Christianity. He even destroyed a beautiful Cathedral, the Orthodox Cathedral of Christ the Savior just before Christmas of 1931. He planned to build the Palace of the Soviets there, a mega-building, the tallest in the world, to replace it;

interestingly that building was never completed. The Cathedral would be rebuilt in 1995 and completed in 2000.

So why did he do what he did? For the Marxist cause, in Stalin's mind; the cause which would replace God. In fact, his daughter Svetlana once wrote of her father, "Many people today find it easier to think of [Stalin] as a coarse physical monster. Actually, he was a moral and spiritual monster. This is far more terrifying. But it's the truth."

And she was right; it was more terrifying.

Stalin established as the goal of the 'five-year plans of atheism 'directed by the League of the Militant Godless eliminating all religious expression in the country. Reportedly, during just the purges of 1937 and 1938, well over 168,300 Russian Orthodox clergy were arrested, a majority of whom were shot. And that was just during two years.

But Stalin did love his daughter. Stalin adored Svetlana and was playful and affectionate with her. And she reciprocated. As a child she looked up to her father as a wise hero. When she was born in 1926 her father was already General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist

Party and anyone she came into contact with spoke of her father in strictly laudatory tones. She later came to understand that few dared to even whisper criticisms. She lost her mother at the age of 6; but her relationship with her father remained strong, at least for a while.

Doubts about her father would soon begin though. In school, Svetlana would sometimes be handed notes by classmates whose mother or father had been “disappeared” by the state. They were begging her to pass them on to her father. It was an odd thing about the USSR that while so much pain and violence was inflicted on the people by the government many persisted in believing that Stalin was blameless and that if he knew about the abuses going on he surely would have stopped them. These children sending notes to Stalin through his daughter simply wanted to know where their loved ones were. The dictator coldly instructed his daughter not to act as a “post-office box.”

Later, Svetlana noticed that sometimes even her own relatives disappeared. Even then, Svetlana attributed it, as did so many Russians, as things which Stalin was either unaware of or unable to fix. But years later, her father would flatly tell his daughter that her relatives had been

killed simply because “they knew too much. They babbled a lot,” he said, and it “played into the hands of our enemies.”

When Svetlana found her first boyfriend her father considered him unacceptable and condemned him to a Gulag. Later, she attended Moscow University and received a marriage proposal from a young Jewish man. When she told her father about the proposal he coldly said, he did not care, and she should “Do as you like.” He told her that she could marry him but only on the condition that her husband never set foot in his house. The two had a son but their marriage broke up after a few short years. Shortly after, she married the son of a man who had been high up in the Kremlin. Joseph approved of this marriage but it too ended rather quickly.

In March 1953, Stalin died a difficult and terrible death. She was there at his bedside for days.

Reportedly, he died raising his fist in anger. “The death agony was terrible. He literally choked to death as we watched,” Svetlana wrote. “At what seemed the very last moment he suddenly opened his eyes and cast a glance over everyone in the room. It was a terrible glance, insane or

perhaps angry and full of fear of death. Then he suddenly lifted his left hand. The gesture was incomprehensible and full of menace.” All his energy went into did what evil always does; it consumed him.

A few years after her father’s death, Svetlana changed her name to her mother’s maiden name. She said the name Stalin “lacerated” her ears. She was now Svetlana Alliluyeva. Joseph Stalin had changed his last name to make it sound strong. “Stalin” means steel. The name “Alliluyeva” was a form of “Allelujah” which fit Svetlana better at that time because in 1962, she was baptized in the Orthodox Church. Svetlana rejected the materialism and violence of her father. Of her decision, she wrote, “The sacrament of baptism consists in rejecting evil, the lie. I believed in ‘Thou shalt not kill, ’I believed in truth without violence and bloodshed. I believed that the Supreme Mind, not vain man, governed the world. I believed that the Spirit of Truth was stronger than material values. And when all of this had entered my heart, the shreds of Marxism-Leninism taught me since childhood vanished like smoke.” Much of this faith believe it or not came from her paternal grandmother, Ekaterina. She was an almost illiterate peasant, but she still trusted in God and loved the Church; she dreamed of

her son's conversion, and while it never materialized she was able to teach Svetlana the faith.

After the death of her father, Svetlana was officially out of favor with the Kremlin. In fact, when she applied to the state for a marriage license to a man named Brajesh Singh she was promptly denied. Svetlana and Brajesh lived together for three years before he died in 1966. His wish had been to have his ashes spread on the Ganges. So she applied to the Kremlin for permission to travel to India. Much to her surprise, she was given permission to temporarily leave the USSR to go to India for one month. While there, Svetlana stunned the world when on her trip she walked into the U.S. embassy and requested asylum. A stunned American on duty reportedly said to her, "So you say your father was Stalin? The Stalin?"

From there, she was flown to Rome and then on to Switzerland. She liked Switzerland but was told that could only remain there on the condition that she never speak publicly about politics. She would not agree to that. She could not. "To remain silent for another 40 years could have been achieved just as well in the U.S.S.R.," she wrote.

In April of 1967, Svetlana Alliluyeva landed at Kennedy Airport in New York carrying a manuscript that never would have been published in the USSR. It was titled “Twenty Letters to a Friend” which was about her life in the Soviet Union. It was a huge success and a bestseller. And then, just two years later, she wrote another bestseller about her life since defecting titled “Only One Year.”

She was famous but her personal life was still a wreck. Switching from religion to religion and once again marrying, having a child, divorcing, and moving often, she found herself disenchanted with America and wanting to return home. In fact, she did return to the Soviet Union but almost instantly regretted it.

When she returned to America after over a year in the USSR she said, “I had to leave for a while to realize, ‘Oh, my God, how wonderful it is.’”

At some point, Svetlana met Father Giovanni Garbolino, who lived in the United States but had done missionary work in Russia, but their relationship would change her life. Svetlana received a letter from Father Garbolino inviting her to make a pilgrimage to Fátima. Then later, he visited

her in Princeton, New Jersey. The two were in frequent contact. Father Garbolino also gave Svetlana a cross that had been given to him by a Russian student whom he met during his missionary travels. Later, Father Garbolino had given that same cross to Col. Edwin “Buzz” Aldrin for him to take to the moon with him.

Svetlana, with the guidance of Father Garbolino, read books by Catholic authors and on Dec. 13, 1982, she converted to the Catholic faith. Svetlana wrote about her conversion: “Only now I understand the wonderful grace that the Sacraments of Penance and the Holy Eucharist produce, no matter what day of the year, and even on a daily basis. Before, I was unwilling to forgive and repent, and I was never able to love my enemies. But I feel very different from before, since I attend Mass every day.”

She added, “The Eucharist has given me life. The Sacrament of Penance with God whom … we abandon and betray each day, the sense of guilt and sadness that invades us then, all this makes it necessary to receive it frequently.”

This woman, who grew up essentially motherless, wrote, “I was taken into the arms of the Blessed Virgin Mary. … Who else could be my advocate but the Mother of Jesus? She suddenly drew me close to her.”

She traveled to Europe and back to America often and then moved to be near one of her daughters in Oregon. In the end, she did not die raising her first in anger at the world as her father had done but peacefully in a Wisconsin nursing home in 2011 where she had enjoyed sewing and reading and praying.

Her story is a reminder that life is hard; and the power of the devil, and the people who are influenced by him, to create world of darkness is strong. But it’s a reminder too of the power of God, and with that the power of hope - and of how while it at times may seem to take a while, God is indeed coming and there is so much we can do to find Him in the world and in our lives.

On this Third Sunday of Advent, we light the rose colored candle and refer to it as Gaudete Sunday, or “Rejoice,” but admittedly can’t it be so hard to rejoice? For like in C.S. Lewis’ “The Chronicles of Narnia” winter can seem long, and indeed this time of year the night is the longest. Certainly the

night was quite long for so many suffering Christians in the USSR but also this continues in many parts of the world to this day. How then do we strive to see the hope in the world?

With respect to the first part, patience, how frustrating it is when we don't see results right away. We want to make changes but fall back into old habits. Our goals don't seem to be realized. Or perhaps this is the case with people we are trying to help; the just don't seem to figure it out and will they ever? The answer is that we need to realize that things don't just get handed to us; they take time. As we hear in that second reading from Saint James: "You too must be patient. Make your hearts firm, because the coming of the Lord is at hand." The heart is at the center of our lives; when it is ordered to God, we can persevere. As we sometimes sing "No storm can shake my inmost calm while to that rock I'm clinging." God is our rock; it's what led Svetlana to persevere. Her heart was in God, and she found Him; her father's heart was in himself and in his anger and ego, and he was ultimately destroyed by that hate, dying in anything but peace. When our hearts our set on God we know He is with us, but we also can learn about what He wants us to do as we strive to listen to Him.

But here's the thing too: we have to keep running the race, looking ahead, not at others. What happens when you lose sight of God? Exactly what happened to Stalin. Obsession with power, and destruction of so many lives. Had he kept his eyes focused on God, perhaps he could have built up his country and realized the evils of Communism. Instead he saw others as a threat to his power. This is what James gets at when he says "do not complain, brothers and sisters about one another that you may not be judge." Sometimes a danger can be when we are going through the challenges of life to focus on others; to think why is it easier for him or her, why did they get that job or why do they have more than I do. Sometimes the wheel of fortune spins so that a person hits it big or has an easier time. God did not say that it would be easy to follow Him, but He did promise to be with us. May our eyes be focused on God knowing that He is with us. Sevetlana was a seeker; she was always seeking God out, and never gave up, even when she drifted, and it's what led her to the Catholic faith.

With that, the question for you and me is how are we going to transform ourselves working with God? This is what Svetlana did by finding God through the help of her grandmother, but continuing to do so throughout her life. The psychologist Jordan Peterson, a best-selling author of self-help

books notes we all can come up with a list of so many stupid things we do that we need to stop doing. Our problem is as humans we play the blame game - we get angry at the world, our parents, our kids, the boss. At it's worst you have Josef Stalin as the end result of that. Things don't work out like a test we bomb in school or something at work, and a person can become bitter. But maybe in life, a setback is the best thing that ever happened to us. We can work harder, and became the best version of ourselves. We can either wallow in shame or self-pity, or get back up. We can say yes I made a mistake, I'm going to confess it and work harder. We can say I've messed up here; the life I am living is not who is the real me, and I'm making poor choices. I can't fix the past, but I can work on the future and doing what I need to do to get my spiritual house in order. Or I've discerned God's called me to this and it's so hard to do this job as a parent, or to study, or to do this job, or to get in shape and better my health, or to talk about my faith when so many seem to not care, but even if if is hard, I'm going to keep on doing it and run those miles. It's not easy - life isn't. But God calls us all to run to win - however getting there requires constant practice and training.

And lastly, listen to what Jesus tells us in the Gospel. We are to tell others of what we see and hear. Svetlana wrote two books, and refused to stay in Switzerland because they wanted her to not speak about politics. She knew she had to talk about the horrors of the USSR. Do we see God in our lives and His love? Do we realize that we can do so much to help others run the race too when we speak about our faith, when we give of our time, when we help others to see their gifts, especially kids?

Yesterday we had the funeral of a remarkable man who I've been honored to know since I came to Saint Joes, Bruce Falkenberg, who was at Mass faithfully week after week setting things up as sacristan, often serving as a lector or Eucharistic Minister too, helping servers, and then working after Mass. He passed unexpectedly at home last Sunday night. He was somewhat soft spoken, much like Saint Joseph, but in his own way, using what he had, he brought so much love and hope to our parish and the lives of others. He never once complained about anything, and because of what he did so many were brought closer to God. Individually, he didn't build the church - though his family said he offered to operate the crane as it was being built, and I know he was even in a cherry picker changing bulbs in our sanctuary a time or two. And on a deeper level, that's what he did for

this world, because he saw a world that wasn't in darkness, but that just needed to see God at a deeper level, and he brought it to them through how he lived by daily striving to become a better man and doing that for others. His whole live was lived in an active waiting for the Lord as I know he was a man of deep faith and prayer, and he was always seeking out Jesus with whom he now walks, the Lord who drew Bruce out of himself to serve Him and one another. Before he was here he served our country in Vietnam, and did missionary work for people there too, andthen continued it as a husband, father, and remarkable servant of God for his family and us at the parish and for anyone who knew him. This is hope. This is letting God transform you - by always keeping our eyes open to seek Jesus. As we continue our journey, may we see that light too of Jesus, shining no longer as a star over a manger, but in our world day after day to guide us with His love, and in turn fill the world with that light of His love.