

Third Sunday in Ordinary Time

January 26, 2025

It's pretty easy to believe in God when things are going well, right? Well, maybe I need to put that in a different way. Let me try again. It's easy to believe in a God who loves us and is continually caring for us and watching over us and providing for us when things are going well, right? And that's no surprise. When life is pretty good we can imagine a God whose plan for the world is going along well, for lack of a better word as planned.

For example, when our marriage is solid and life-giving we can imagine that God brought the two of us together. And when we are happy in our jobs and are making plenty of money we can imagine that God had a hand in that, maybe steering us in that direction. And when we are healthy it's because God wants it that way. And when our kids grow up to be good people it's because God knows how hard we tried and wants to reward us. Yes, when life is good, the God we believe in is good too.

But what about when that is not the case? What do we believe then?

I wonder what went through the minds of the Jewish people when they were exiled to Babylon, forced to move from their homeland to a strange land. In case you don't exactly remember or maybe never knew, let me refresh your memory. Like many ancient peoples, the Jewish people faced much danger and uncertainty as they strove to establish their own place in the world, in this case, a kingdom.

This unified kingdom founded and built up by David and Solomon, comprised twelve tribes. Over time, the kingdom was split into two, Israel in the north and Judah in the south. In the year 722 B.C. the northern kingdom fell to the Assyrians, and the ten tribes who lived there were lost to history, that is why today we call them the Lost Tribes of Israel.

These were scary times for the southern kingdom, Judah. The people wondered if they might suffer the same fate. But they desperately hung on as long as they could for about 150 years before they eventually fell to a rising power in the east, the Babylonians. A significant portion of the Jewish population (probably the most educated, wealthy, and influential) were not allowed to remain on the land, and were marched off to Babylon, not knowing if they would ever return and not knowing what would happen to those left behind.

It would have been easy for them to give up hope. It would have been easy for them to give up their faith. It would have been easy for them to presume that the God they believed who had chosen them and who had rescued them before was apparently no longer interested in doing so. Had God abandoned them? They must have wondered.

Yet, the story didn't end there, of course. They did their best to keep the faith. They did their best to remember their traditions. They did their best to cling to hope, that is, to still believe in a God who loved them. One year became two became five became ten became twenty-five and still they believed, still they trusted, still they waited for a better day that they were confident God would help bring about.

And so, about fifty years later, King Cyrus of Persia who had recently defeated the Babylonians let them return to their homeland. All of what I just said sets the stage for what we heard in our First Reading from Nehemiah. We see Ezra the priest-scribe reading to the people from their sacred texts, The Law, writings that many had feared were lost forever. Yet, here he was reassuring them through these sacred words that God had once again delivered them, that once again they would have an opportunity to be the people God called them to be, that they would once again get a chance to rebuild the temple, restore Judaism, and begin living out their faith as they had for generations after generations. And the people wept.

Put another way, fifty years in exile was not enough to put out the flame that God had lit in each one of them. The Jewish people somehow were able not to only believe in God when things were going well for them, but also during some of their darkest days.

Sometimes I hear people talking about how they feel that we are living in the worst of times, that the world is coming undone, that everything people have worked to build up might be gone in the blink of an eye. Like what's going on in Los Angeles. I get it. It's hard to remain optimistic when so much seems fragile and uncertain and in disarray, whether that be our relationships, our families, our work, or society as a whole.

And yet we must, not in a naïve or unrealistic way, but in a faithful way, in a way that reflects our confidence in a loving God, a God whose plan for the world continues to this day, whose care for the world continues to this day, a plan that hinges not on an idea, but on a person, Jesus, the one who assured his listeners that,

**“Today this Scripture passage is fulfilled
in your hearing.”**

And so, we take comfort and strength from the witness of the Jewish people long ago. And we take the hand of the One who will lead us to where we need to be, the One who will dry our tears, the One who will pick us up and dust us off each time we have fallen. God has not abandoned us. His plan continues. And we are part of that plan, people called to give witness to a God who is still doing marvelous things in our midst.

My dear friends, there are better days ahead. It might not be tomorrow or the next day or the next, but it will come. Our faith assures us of that, assures us that our crosses will be followed by resurrections.

But when things are truly difficult or painful or heartbreaking it's not always easy to hold on to those beliefs, hold on to that sort of faith, hold on to

that beautiful image of God, a God who still only wants the best for us, a God who loves us more than we could ever think of or imagine.

And so let's pray for the grace to continue to believe and trust and hope even when . . .

Someone we love is seriously ill.
Our marriage is on rocky ground.
The world seems to be in constant conflict.
Our child keeps making really bad choices.
Crime seems out of control.
We have no friends and feel all alone.

These things only look hopeless from our perspective. In reality, they look completely different to God, the God who stepped into history in the person of Jesus, and changed not only the world's history, but each of our individual histories too.

So let's wait patiently not idly, not doing nothing but simply doing our part to remain faithful while trusting that God will always do his part.

And the incredible thing is, before you know it, someday, our captivity will end, the captivity of our sorrow and disappointment and pain and even sin, and we will be set free and once again be allowed to return home into the loving arms of our God. . . who has been with us all along.