

A Spanish Catholic priest, the venerable Saint John of the Cross, wrote, "Live in faith and hope, though it be in darkness, for in this darkness God protects the soul. Cast your care upon God, for you are His, and He will not forget you. Do not think that He is leaving you alone, for that would be to wrong Him."

We are probably familiar with the concept of the "near death" expression. Well, Dr. Mary Neal knows God is real without a doubt. But before her near-death experience where this skeptical scientist visited Heaven, she had a lot more doubt than faith.

As a child, Mary's parents made sure she went regularly to church. But as she grew up, her claims to Christianity were purely superficial. When Mary went off to college, she joined "the religion of the intellect" and traded her spiritual beliefs for truth grounded in scientific facts. For her, most scientific facts were proven or in the process of being prove. Faith called for acceptance of ideas that cannot be proven. Still, she called herself a Christian and tried to be a "good person" but lacked faith in Jesus as her Lord and Savior.

That would soon change. God had a particular plan for finding a way into Mary's heart! One day she took a trip to Chile. While kayaking, her craft went over the waterfall, capsized, and pinned her under ten feet of raging water. The pressure of the current pushed Mary into the front of the boat, where she could do nothing to free herself.

Mary experienced what she describes as a "radical shift in time and dimension." Despite her lifetime fear of drowning, Mary found herself at peace.

She says, "I was being held and comforted and being reassured that everything was fine, regardless of whether I lived or died." She also remembered knowing it was Jesus comforting her. "I was taken through a life review that was the first of many very profound parts of this experience for me." (inspirational-short-stories) After her friends recovered her body, they flew her back to the United States, where she slowly recovered from her injuries.

Our faith doesn't build a fence around us to protect us from all the harm and hurt that comes our way. We all must deal with troubles and failures that come to us. But faith in God gives us hope for the transformation of tragedy, just as He comforted Dr. Neal. God works in mysterious ways to bring something good out of the worst of what happens to us.

We shouldn't take this Gospel story of Jesus raising the dead to guarantee that every tragedy has a happy ending. We may have to live with difficulties and disappointments that do not go away. But God can give us the grace to bear those burdens without bitterness. (Luke 7:11-17)

In our Gospel reading, Jesus entered a village and encountered a funeral procession. A grieving widow, helped by friends, must bury her only son. Jesus stopped the

procession and spoke directly to the deceased son, saying, "Young man, I bid you get up." Our reading says: "The dead man sat up and began to speak. Then Jesus gave him back to his mother." We are then left to determine the meaning of this story. The point of the story is not that suffering, and death suddenly vanish when we pray. Life doesn't work that way. No miraculous intervention will save our souls from death and replace everyone's grief with instant gladness.

It seems far more likely this story is a dramatic way of saying that God helps transform tragedy. Have you ever been struggling through some crisis, and a friend says to you, "I am sorry for what you are going through, and I want to share a part of your pain"? Were you surprised at how much that helped? We know tragedy cannot be averted, but it can be redeemed. We believe God is present in the world and shares our pain and suffering. In ways too mystical for us to understand, God feels our pain. St. Augustine affirms that "God does not expect us to submit our faith to Him without reason, but the very limits of our reason make faith a necessity." (St. Augustine)

Luke tells us that when Jesus saw the lonely woman weeping over losing her only child, he "was moved with pity." Jesus felt what she was feeling. Her pain was His pain. What is true of Jesus is true of God. Although God has never eliminated tragedy, He always sought to transform it. Jesus called God "Father" and taught His disciples to do the same. In the Apostles' Creed, we say, "I believe in God the Father Almighty." Think about what that means.

Finally, God uses our pain. Pain, an unavoidable part of life, has merit. If we entrust our pain to God, He can use it in at least three ways. Pain can make us stronger, more sensitive, and sympathetic to human suffering, and it can motivate us to correct any social conditions that inflict needless pain on so many people. With Covid-19 looming large we can prevent more suffering. We can wear masks in public gatherings, maintain social distancing, wash and sanitize our hands regularly and stay at home if we need not go out. In the hands of God, He will transform the most painful, troublesome affliction in life into strength for ourselves and sympathy for others.

It is common for us to face problems that do not go away, even when we have prayed to God for relief. Our faith in God becomes more critical when no happy ending is in sight. What we need is patience and perseverance to stand firm in our faith no matter what happens.

We all experience difficulties and disappointments in life. As Christians, we must try to help those in need or become preoccupied with our pain and struggles. Let us find the patience and the power of Jesus Christ to trust more fully in the Father to save us as He saved His Son, Jesus

Amen!