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PRAYING SO AS NOT TO LOSE HEART

DECEMBER 4, 2011

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[Second of a four part Advent Series]

One of the reasons we need to pray is so that we don't lose heart. We all do sometimes. We lose heart whenever frustration, tiredness, fear, and helplessness in the face of life's humiliations conspire together to paralyze our energies, deaden our resiliency, drain our courage, and leave us feeling weak in depression.

Poet Jill Alexander Essbaum, gives us a poignant example of this in her poem, *Easter*. Reflecting on the joy that Easter should bring into our lives, she shares that Easter can instead be a season of defeat for us because its celebration of joy can highlight the shortcomings of our own lives and leave us with the feeling that: Everyone I've ever loved lives happily just past my able reach.

And this feeling can drive us to our knees, in bitterness or prayer; hopefully prayer.

There are many examples in scripture of men and women being driven to mountaintops or to their knees in prayer because they are paralyzed by fear, discouragement, or loneliness. For our purposes, I will highlight two, highly illustrative, examples of this.

We see an example of praying so as not to lose heart in the prophet, Elijah, when he is being threatened because of his prophetic message. Elijah had been a true and a courageous prophet, but at one point in his ministry he became dangerously disconsolate. His own people had ceased listening to his message, he had witnessed some of his fellow prophets being martyred, and his message had deeply upset Jezebel, the most powerful woman in the kingdom, who had now sent out men to kill him. To flee Jezebel, Elijah climbed up Mount Horeb. However as he retreated into a cave, he was confronted by God's voice, asking him what he was doing there. Elijah confessed his discouragement, his fear of losing his life, and his loss of heart. Having confessed his fears, Elijah retreated into the darkness of the cave, to sit paralyzed in his own fear and depression. But God, through the sound of a gentle breeze, lured him out to the mouth of the cave where Elijah again confessed his depression and fear; but this time in the form of a prayer. And, through that prayer, he regained his strength of heart and came down the mountain ready to face his ministry and all its dangers with renewed energy and courage.

When all of his own strength had dried up, Elijah approached God with his weaknesses and that movement renewed his heart.

We see the same thing in Jesus when, facing his passion and death, he prays in the Garden of Gethsemane. It's the low-point of Jesus' life and ministry: The people have stopped listening to him, the religious authorities are conspiring with the civil authorities to have him killed, those few, his inner circle of disciples, who are still listening to his message, are not understanding it, and he feels utterly alone, "a stone's throw away from everyone". So as not to lose heart, he drops to his knees in prayer, a prayer so intense that he "sweats blood", but that prayer eventually ends in consolation, with "an angel from heaven coming down to strengthen him". He brings his beaten-down, misunderstood, fearful, and painfully isolated heart to prayer, and he is strengthened, given all the sustenance he needs to regain his courage.

And, in that, Jesus is contrasted with his apostles. At that very moment, they too are discouraged, lonely, and fearful. But they are asleep while he prays, and their sleep, as the gospels hint, is something more than physical. They are, we are told, “asleep out of sheer sorrow”. In essence, they are too depressed to be awake to the full strength of their own lives. This loss of heart has them paralyzed in fear and when they finally do act they act in ways contrary to what Jesus had taught them. They attempt violence and then flee. They couldn’t face impending suffering as Jesus did because they didn’t pray as he did. They lost heart.

No matter who we are or how rich and blessed our lives may be, it is impossible to go through life without, at times, feeling bitterly misunderstood, becoming deeply disconsolate, succumbing to a paralyzing tiredness, and simply losing heart. We are human and, like Jesus, we will have days when we feel “a stone’s throw away from everyone”. And what’s paralyzed inside of us is what’s highest in us: our capacity to forgive, our capacity to radiate huge, generous hearts, our capacity for empathy and understanding, our capacity for joy, and our capacity for courage. Frightened and discouraged, like Elijah, we retreat into the inner darkness of a cave.

But in moments like this, we might understand ourselves this way: Like Elijah, we are in the darkness of a cave, paralyzed by loss of heart; but God is at the mouth of the cave, a gentle breeze, luring us back out where everyone we love will be back within our reach.