

Mary was driving home from one of her business trips in Northern Arizona when she saw an elderly Navajo woman walking on the side of the road. As the trip was a long and quiet one, she stopped the car and asked the Navajo woman if she would like a ride. With a silent nod of thanks, the woman got into the car. Resuming the journey, Mary tried in vain to make a bit of small talk with the Navajo woman. The old woman just sat silently, looking intently at everything she saw, studying every little detail, until she noticed a brown bag on the seat next to Mary.

"What's in the bag?" asked the old woman.

Mary looked down at the brown bag and said, "It's a bottle of wine. I got it for my husband."

The Navajo woman was silent for another moment or two. Then speaking with the quiet wisdom of an elder, she said: "Good trade....."

I love it. The Navajo woman misunderstood. She thought the husband was traded for the bottle of wine. Mary was going to give it as a gift to share with her husband.

Do you ever misunderstand? Do you ever wonder why something is happening? Do you ever just wonder, God, where are you? What is going on here?

I do. In fact, I find that it is easy to get caught up in wondering and questioning when the unexpected happens. I find that it is easy to feel misunderstood when the surprising occurs. When the surprising happens to you, what do you do? How do you get through it?

In our scripture for today we are offered something to think about and hold on to when the surprising occurs. The scripture starts

off with a word of assurance for when the surprising, unexpected occurs. *God is our refuge and strength, always ready to help in times of trouble. So we will not fear, even earthquakes come and the mountains crumble into the sea. Let the oceans roar and foam. Let the mountains tremble as waters surge.*

The image that is offered to us is that when our world is changing, even when our world appears to be falling apart, God is there, ready to be our help in times of trouble. This does not mean that God will necessarily spare us from trouble. This does not mean that just because we love God, God will remove all difficulties from us.

I wish that were true. But it isn't.

It does mean though, that we don't have to walk through those difficulties all alone. It means that when the worst imaginable things happen to us, that God is there to walk with us and lead us through them. For me, knowing that God is walking with me through the difficulties I may face, is really helpful. It frees me up to be myself. It frees me up to be honest.

When difficulties/disappointments come my way, I actually have a process that I walk through. ***First of all, I allow myself to be disappointed by what has happened.*** It is a way of being honest and saying, this thing, this tragedy, this hurts. And I feel the sting of it. Now, I don't want to wallow in that pain. But I know that when God is with me I can be honest about the hurt.

The second thing I do is I offer that hurt and pain to God. Often it comes with a prayer, "Lord, I don't know how on earth I am going to make it through this, will you help me through it?" This prayer of giving my pain, my disappointment to God helps me to understand I am not alone. God will walk with me no matter what. It

helps me remember that I don't have to face this challenge/difficulty/disappointment alone either.

Often times, this prayer happens through my regular time of quiet and devotion. I sometimes even write it out in my time of journaling.

The third thing I do is I begin to look for what I can do, proactively, to work toward health and healing, to work toward moving beyond the pain and disappointment. It is so easy, when life offers us hurt and pain, for people to absorb that and say, "Well, there is nothing I can do. I guess I am just a victim."

Many of us are victimized by terrible things. But we don't have to stay stuck in being a victim, always expecting something bad to happen, then when it does live off of the sympathy that is garnered by how bad others feel for us. I refuse to live as a victim. I want to be a person who is experiencing the healing and hope that God wants to offer me. So I look to God, and I work for health and healing.

This Psalm has a constant theme and refrain, it is that *The Lord Almighty is here among us, the God of Israel is our fortress.* This is meant to remind us when times are tough, that we are not alone. And holding on to this promise, gives me courage and hope.

There were once two cancer doctors visiting over breakfast at the hospital. One complained bitterly, "You know Bob, I just don't understand it. We used the same drugs, the same dosage, the same schedule and the same entry criteria. Yet I got a 22 percent response rate and you got a 74 percent. That's unheard of for metastatic cancer. How do you do it?"

His colleague replied, "We're both using Etoposide, Platinum, Oncovin, and Hydroxyurea. You call yours EPOH. I tell my patients

I'm giving them HOPE. As dismal as the statistics are, I emphasize that we have a chance."

I like that. Challenges, tragedy, difficulties come. We may not always understand why. But when we do as the psalmist suggests, when we lean on God. When we understand that God is with us to walk with us through whatever we have to face, we have a chance. We have hope.

The Lord Almighty is here among us, the God of Israel is our fortress.

Thanks be to God.

Amen