

February 7, 2021

11:30 a.m.

St. Augustine Cathedral

Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time (Super Bowl LV)

If the month of January that just ended last Sunday, with mostly moderate temperatures and very little accumulation of snow, lulled us into a sense of thinking that Winter was letting us off the hook, these first days of February have made it clear that is just not the case. Even Punxsutawney Phil on “Groundhog Day” this past Tuesday confirmed the fact that Winter would continue its tight grip on us for at least the next 6 weeks. And the severe weather alerts today are predicting that the snow will keep coming, the temperatures will be falling, and the polar vortex will make itself felt over the next several days to come.

The weather has a lot to do with how we feel. When the sun is shining and the temperatures are pleasant, life seems better; but in these cold and blustery days of February, we can quickly develop a case of the “winter doldrums”, and life can feel a lot more bleak. Of course today we have a bit of a “bright spot” since this is “Super Bowl 55” Sunday, the celebration of what’s become the unofficial mid-winter holiday. Whether you’re a “Chiefs” or a “Buccaneers” fan, or even whether or not you like Football, “Super Bowl” Sunday usually helps to bring some joy into an otherwise rather dull time of the year. However, with the ongoing restrictions in place and the need for not gathering together with anyone outside our own “bubbles”, perhaps even the Super Bowl doesn’t help us to feel all that “super”.

Of course, there are many more factors other than the weather and the Super Bowl that impact how we feel about “life”. First and foremost is the pandemic that has flipped our lives upside down for 11 months which is the main contributing factor; but, there are many other factors as well: our own health concerns or concerns about our loved one’s health, financial crises, struggles within our family relationships, work worries----any and all of those factors can strongly influence our view of “life” as we come together to celebrate this, the Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time.

Providentially, the Readings from God’s Holy Word that we’ve just listened to focus our attention on “Life”, and what our life-purpose in this world is. I’m sure that we’ve all, more or less, developed our own “philosophy of life”, and have spent a lot of time reflecting on what our own life purpose is. Whether we’ve already decided on a life vocation of marriage, priesthood, religious life, or

committed single life, or are still in the process of discerning that major life choice, “life” itself can be impacted by all those other external factors I mentioned earlier. Depending on particular circumstances, all can seem right with the world, like “a bowl of cherries”; at other times, life might feel more like a “rat race”, or “the survival of the fittest”.

The question is: how do we navigate our lives, both in the good times when life’s “waters are calm”, as well as in the times of life’s storms and challenges?

Today’s First Reading from the Book of Job made it clear that Job was in the midst of not just a “storm” but a “category 4 hurricane” of life’s storms. The Book of Job is one of those in the Bible that we’re all very familiar with; we know the gist of the story; we’re familiar with the outcome. Job was a man of strong Faith in God, and enormous wealth and many earthly blessings. In Biblical days, those two realities were almost considered to be “cause and effect” ----because Job was such a faith-filled man, God blessed him with tremendous earthly blessings. While we all know that is not the way “it works”, that was a very common philosophy of life in former times. The premise of the Book of Job is that the Devil and God entered into a wager of sorts. The Devil “bet” God that if Job endured enough suffering and loss of his worldly possessions, that Job would blaspheme God and give up his faith. God “bet” that Job would remain faithful. So, in the first pages of the Book, Job experiences a series of disasters and catastrophes that took away his children, his possessions and all his earthly wealth. And that is where this morning’s Reading picks up. The words we heard this morning are from a man who is broken apart and beaten down, which leads him to describe “life” as a *drudgery*, which is why he talked about his *sleepless nights, his hopeless days*, and concluded: “*I shall never see happiness again.*”

While I hope that no one here has come close to Job’s awful plight, I’m quite sure that all of us have struggled with those same kinds of feelings. At times, life can be just “too much”. At one time or another, we’ve all probably laid awake at night because of some crisis wondering if the daylight would come again, or on occasion because of some problem or another walked through the daytimes with a sense of hopelessness. Perhaps at those moments, we might have, metaphorically speaking, looked at our “neighbor’s grass” and wondered why theirs is so much greener than ours? Sometimes in those dark moments, we might even be tempted to try to “run away” by turning to drugs, drink or other escapes, which as we all know, just make things worse. At those times, our life purpose gets lost, and we might ask ourselves “what’s the point?”

But that takes us back to the question I posed earlier: how do we navigate our lives both when the “waters are calm” and even when there are “storms”? As awful as Job’s life became, Job never gave up; he didn’t lose the sense of his life’s purpose which was to remain faithful to God, even when it felt like God no longer cared. And while Job complained and spoke angrily to God, at least he kept speaking---that was the key. Job’s Faith in God and his sense of Hope that God would guide him to a safe harbor is what navigated him through those awful storms, and eventually back into the calm waters of a life renewed with happiness and many blessings.

That’s such an important lesson we can all learn from Job: life’s circumstances can, and do, change. But God is a constant! Just like Job, we need a strong Faith in God, we always need to hold onto Hope, and we must always keep praying; never stop communicating with God. And when that little voice inside you tells you (as it told Job) “you’ll never be happy again”, don’t listen to it because it’s the Devil tempting you to give up.

And that brings us to today’s Gospel. Actually today’s passage picks up right after last Sunday’s Gospel ended. After Jesus had taught in the synagogue, gave an “amazing” teaching, and “astonished” them by freeing a man possessed by an evil spirit, which identified Jesus as “the Holy One of God”, today’s Gospel passage picks up as Jesus leaves the synagogue and comes to Peter’s house for a meal and some rest. But immediately he is asked to help Peter’s mother-in-law who is quite ill. We are told that: *“Jesus grasped her hand, and helped her up. The fever left her, and she waited on them”*. And then after sunset (when the Sabbath was over), the entire town came to Jesus bringing Him *those who were sick with various diseases and He also drove out many demons*. Jesus had to have been exhausted. But, as we heard, the very next day *“Rising very early before dawn, Jesus went off to a deserted place where He prayed.”* And when the Apostles tracked Jesus down to try to bring Him back so He could keep doing in Capernaum all the good things He had done there, Jesus made it clear that was not His “life purpose” when He said: *“Let us go to the nearby villages that I may preach there also. For this purpose have I come.”*

So that gives us a very clear insight into how Jesus Himself navigated the “waters” of His own life ---- it was by maintaining a strong, vibrant, prayerful relationship with His Father, so that He remained very clear about what His life purpose was. He had not come to be some sort of celebrity; He had come to proclaim the Kingdom; to teach the Gospel; to proclaim the life-saving message of

God's Love and Mercy. He had come to bring salvation to humanity, and that would cost Him everything.

For us who are followers of Jesus---for all of us gathered here in person or participating virtually---for all of us trying to keep a clear sense of what our life-purpose is---what Jesus stated His purpose to be is really the same for us. Through our Baptism, we are called to live in union with Christ, and to see the world and our own lives with the eyes of Faith, and with the same sense of purpose: to live in union with Jesus, and to do all that we can to be witnesses to that vibrant relationship with Jesus in all that we say and do.

So, when we think about our life purpose, one simple, but very profound, summary of our life purpose is the one I learned off by heart as a child from the Baltimore Catechism: "to know, love and serve God in this world, and to be happy with Him forever in the next." Over the years and generations, that "purpose" has been articulated differently and perhaps with words rooted in Vatican II theology---but the purpose remains unchanged: to love God, to love neighbor and when our life in this world is over, to spend Eternity in Heaven. No matter what else is going on in our lives, or in the world; despite whatever factors in our own personal lives we're having to face; in life's calm waters and even during life's storms---we must stay focused on that ultimate life-purpose.

St. Paul told us in today's Second Reading that "preaching the Gospel for him was an obligation"----he had no choice; and doing so was his "recompense". That should be the same with us as we live our lives as people with a sense of our life-purpose being rooted in Faith and Hope in God. Like St. Paul, we see that we have no choice but to do what is right because of our love for God and our desire, as followers of Jesus, to give witness to Him in our lives.

My sisters and brothers in Christ, we all know that we're living in very turbulent times. The Pandemic seems to be unrelenting; even with the availability of Vaccines, it's clear that we will remain restricted and separated and not return to "the old normal" for some time. However, even more significant than that, our Society seems to be losing a perspective on what is morally/ethically right, and the redefinition of the values of life, liberty, equality and the precious value of unity. Our culture appears to be losing sight of "the common good", an understanding of objective Truth.

So, how do we navigate our lives and keep focused on our ultimate life-purpose in the midst of these societal and cultural storms? It has to be by trying to have an even stronger Faith in God, with that sense of Hope that God is guiding us through the Grace of His Holy Spirit. As today's Psalm Response assures us: *"Praise the Lord who heals the brokenhearted...Great is our Lord and mighty in power; to His wisdom there is no limit."*

We need to re-commit our lives to faithfully follow Jesus. That will not guarantee that our lives will be free of suffering or even Job-like catastrophes; but that will guarantee that our lives will have purpose. Like Job, who even at times spoke angrily to God, but always kept speaking, we too need to deepen our regular, personal prayer with God---to pour out our hearts, and yes, at times to express our anger; but also to spend time to listen to what He might be telling us. And like Jesus, Whose life was as busy and demanding as it could be, but Who took time regularly to spend with His Father in prayer, let us make sure that even when our lives are busy, or filled with problems, we too take time each day to spend with Our Father.

Jesus was clear about His life purpose: it was to be "God with us", to show us how to live with Love, and how to give ourselves completely to following God's Will. And having won for us the Gift of Salvation, He left us this most precious Gift for us here on earth: the Gift of the Eucharist. May our gathering together here today allow God's Word and the Eucharist to be our spiritual Food for our life-Journey; and especially, to be that which helps us to keep in mind our own life-purpose: to love God, to love neighbor, and, when our life-journey in this world is completed, to live with God and the Communion of Saints in Heaven forever. Amen!