

In this season of Advent, I was asked to reflect on this season and reflect on my faith of this year. Faith, according to the oracle of google, is by definition “complete trust and confidence in someone or something”. Complete trust and confidence in someone or something is a powerful statement and it takes an extreme amount of courage to perform.

2022 for me started off with a bang, quite literally. On January 3, an 80 foot pine tree crashed into my house. Thankfully, no one was hurt, however I still vividly remember frantically grabbing the belongings that were most important to me as the cold air began sweeping through the gaping hole in our roof. The large tree slowly moved with the breeze as I hoped it would stay fixed on the main beam of the house long enough for my family and I to retrieve our belongings. Knowing full well that our pets, three cats and one very lovable dog, would have to be shuttled to my grandparents for a nonspecific amount of time gutted me. Living out of a hotel room teaches you a lot in the form of humility as well as a lot in what truly matters. Materials can be destroyed, but your connections in life with people are what hold you up when all else fails.

When the news got out about my house being destroyed by a pine tree, it was no more than five minutes before my roommate called me and offered any and all assistance he could offer. Mother Gaelyn and Chaplain Kelsey also called to offer any assistance and check in on our safety. This church came together for a gofundme, to which I will always be grateful for. I saw first hand what faith truly should be seen as. I realized over the course of that week that God, if I may be so bold, exists in the people around us. God’s spirit exists in those closest to us and those that we may not even know.

Moving forward from this, my family was able to receive an apartment and they settled in as I went towards another semester at Western. A grueling spring semester if I am being honest. I had chosen to throw myself into work, school, and other duties around campus. Upon reflection,

I now see it was more of a coping mechanism in light of the many changes that had taken place in my life up to that point in time. I was lost, felt as if I was being swept up into the stream of life and had no way to slow down life with classes piling up. My mental health took a decline and it showed in my school work and ability to complete tasks. I felt if I could be useful, I would have purpose.

As the semester finally ended and the summer came around, I began work here as Parish Administrator and continued my work at Ingles as well. Over the summer, I was able to spend time with my family which was great and spent time with friends as well who I had not seen in many months. The summer was one of healing and regrouping. Despite the work and despite the chaos of the beginning of the year, I truly felt like I had found my groove again so to speak and was taking the time to heal from everything. Every step I took towards this, my faith kept me tied to the hope of better days around the corner and upcoming happiness.

The next few months went by quickly. My sister began her first semester at college, my family was able to move into our repaired house, and I began the semester with a new motivation I had not had in a long time. Then my family was dealt a brutal hand. At nine in the morning in October, I was informed that my grandmother had passed suddenly from a massive heart attack. Our bags were not even fully moved into the house and we would be organizing a funeral.

It was a sad and gloomy day, one where I was reminded of many things that I had never truly come to grips with. The lessons of loss. I felt angry and frustrated. Why? Why had this happened to us? First the house and us being uprooted and now a tragedy of this kind.

Twenty-two years of my life, my grandmother had always been someone to lean on. She would check in on me when I moved up here and always would brag to her friends at church about my

sister and I and how proud she was of us. She would always say to people that her grandkids still cared about her and checked on her despite being far away.

My grandmother was a woman of immense faith. Faith carried her through the death of her husband from cancer and through the deaths of many of her close friends and her sister, all within less than a decade. The strength she displayed through it all was something I have immense respect for and was quite honestly in awe of. She read her Bible and prayed almost daily and wouldn't hesitate to lend a helping hand to those in need, even to those she didn't know. Her faith in God was one of the purest I have ever seen and it still is one I aspire to have myself.

In this season of Advent, a time of reflection and waiting, I believe it is fair to say we all in this congregation have had a whirlwind of a year. However, I also believe that it is fair to say our faith has been tested and strengthened throughout this year as well. Faith is such a funny thing. It is this invisible force that seems to bind us to a root when the winds of the world try to blow us over or topple us. Faith in God is something that is so strong and yet so easily tested. Tests that none of us sign up for and yet are subjected to over and over again, at times in quick succession. Despite this, faith endures.

Faith does not endure though purely through determination, not always. Even the strongest foundations will crack and break under the right circumstances. Faith instead is held up by the manifestation of The Spirit in those around us. Our family, friends, and sometimes, complete strangers. God manifests in others and our faith is given the nourishment it needs, even in the most arid of deserts.

I could spend all day here talking about the intricacies of faith and philosophy, however, I know every experience with this subject is different, not to mention who would want to sit through such a lecture at this time of day?

Faith, according to the dictionary, is having complete trust and confidence in someone or something. I would argue that this is not a correct definition of faith at all. It is missing one key part, a part that makes faith a uniquely human characteristic. Courage. Faith is having the courage to continue, the courage to believe in something greater than ourselves and greater than the challenge we are faced with. Faith is believing in others, believing in God, believing that it will indeed get better and you will get through it.

Psalm 46, verses one through three states, “ God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam and the mountains quake with their surging.”. This is faith. The refusal to crack and bend even as the ship sinks and crashes against the shore. Even as the walls fall and the chaotic cruelty of the world seeks to break us, we will not yield or break for our faith is our truest strength. Faith in others, faith in our God, faith in ourselves. I have seen it first hand this year the power of faith and I say this to anyone who is ever in doubt of it. Continue moving forward and you will find it. Having the courage to continue, having the courage to believe and having the courage to hope for it is a brave and courageous thing to do.

I am thankful to have the blessings of family and friends this year and as this season of Advent begins, I ask all of you to not only look to faith and have the courage to believe, but to also take the time to be thankful. Reflect, feel all of the feelings, but most importantly, celebrate the new life and celebrate God’s gifts to us. Celebrate those around you, celebrate complete

strangers and celebrate yourselves for the power and faith of God is within all of them and within all of you. Thank you all, may peace find you this Advent season and may God protect all of you, encourage all of you, and fulfill you during this season of reflection, waiting, and remembrance.