

Speak, Lord...

By Mary Carol Wall

Speak, Lord, your servant is listening.

But, do we listen? Do we really want to listen, to hear what we don't want to hear, be asked to do what we don't want to do... or at least, not the way we seem to be called to do it?

We are all called to joy. Sometimes that's easy. Parenting has hardships and worries, but most parents can speak to the joy of the experience, the growth of person and of faith that come with the job. There are heartaches, too, though. The loss or feared loss of a child through death, addiction, crime, illness, or other cause can freeze a parent's heart and mind. Yet we are called to walk forward, with love, and with trust in God, and somehow, **SOMEHOW**, with joy. It seems impossible.

We enjoy our health and take it for granted, until illness or injury slows us down or stops us in our tracks. Marriage, priesthood, or religious life are each anticipated with joy and eagerness, but living out the commitment can at times be heart-rending. Yet we are called to live with Christ's joy. How?

Being aware of God's presence in and around us gives strength, reassurance, and confidence that all is in his hands, and his love and his joy will hold us up. But it is pretty difficult, sometimes, to sense that presence. Even Mother Theresa struggled. But before her 'dark night of the soul', she had a long time of close communication with God.

John and Andrew followed Christ because of the words of John the Baptist. They decided to spend time with Jesus, and thus came to know him... and to know his Father. The priest, Eli, had gotten lax in listening to and following the Lord. Even though he was a kindly man, he did not properly exercise his responsibilities as a priest or father. He failed as a leader, and his people and family suffered. However, he had listened enough to recognize his failings. Recognizing God at work with young Samuel, he gave good counsel to the boy. "If you are called, reply, 'Speak, Lord, your servant is listening.'"

And that, I believe, is the crux of the matter. "I waited, waited for the Lord, who bent down and heard my cry, and put a new song in my mouth." (Psalm 40, vs. 2,4). Through the course of his lifetime, Samuel learned to take the time to center himself in God, to listen for wisdom and direction... as well as for love and support that would carry him through hard times and help him celebrate good times. John and Andrew left what they knew and went to learn about Jesus. They spent time with him, found out how he thought, learned his priorities, learned his disciplines. Mother Theresa had a joyous and loving relationship with God for many years before she entered that 'dark night of the soul,' also endured by Saints Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross. Together, these two saints recognized what that dark night is... opportunity.

When a little one is learning to walk, sooner or later, they take steps without holding anyone's hand. When a child learns to ride a bike, eventually the training wheels come off, and Mom or Dad has to let go of the seat while running behind the bike... so the

child can do it alone. Mom or Dad is still there... and the child is successful as he or she does what was taught... and then takes it to a whole new level ("Look, Mom! No hands!").

Saint Teresa and Saint John say that is what happens during those dark times. As much as we wish to feel God's hand in ours as we stumble along through pain and darkness, as desperately as we wish to know his steadying hand is at our back as we ride the bumps and dips of life, sometimes we just can't feel Him anywhere near. It is so easy to despair. If, however, we develop a habit of sitting and listening, even for just a few minutes, and if we make it a habit to take a little bit of time to read Christ's words in the Bible (just a line or phrase repeated through our day so it can sink into us) then we will know that God IS hand in hand with us, He IS steadying us on our journeys through life. That dark night is just us learning to move forward on God's path even if it feels like He isn't leading us. Thus do we learn, to our surprise, our faith is stronger than we knew. And while we may not realize it, this is exactly how we encourage and inspire others to travel forward when their roads get difficult. They have seen us struggle and prevail. They know our faith carried us, and they become hungry to know the God we know.

Some folks say Christians spend too much time thinking and talking about suffering. Maybe the truth is that we aren't to hide from it. Whether you believe in God or not, it is not a matter of if you will ____ (fill in the blank: lose a job, get cancer or heart disease, lose a friendship or a marriage, worry over a child or a parent or a spouse, etc., or even die). These things happen to everyone or the people they love. Christianity teaches that all these things are part of the journey, and they are leavened with happy birthdays and weddings and ordinations, with the arrival of new babies, and baby teeth, and the eventual need for the tooth fairy! We know that even through illness there are still visits with good, loving people, lovely sunrises and sunsets, the flash of a cardinal on the wing, the warmth of a cat curled up on one's lap or chest... or a baby falling asleep on your shoulder... the graduation of someone you love. Life doesn't stop living. We shouldn't stop celebrating.

And so I offer a challenge... enhance or initiate that contact with God. You are loved and never alone... you need only to awaken to that love. Paul reminds us that we are one with Christ, who chose to listen, actively, to the Father. As we walk his path, and live as his Body, so we need to listen and commune with the Father. We need to be like Samuel, willing to set aside other distractions and needs, for a while, and say, "Speak, Lord, your servant is listening."