

Advent "Faces of Christ" Reflection
The Lord Sustains Me – Ryan O'Connor

In the M. Night Shyamalan movie *Signs* starring Mel Gibson, Gibson's character poses the question: "do you believe in signs, or do you believe that people just get lucky? Or, look at the question this way: Is it possible that there are no coincidences?" We could rephrase the question: do you believe that God is actively working in the world and in your life to bring love, healing, and a deeper relationship with Him? Does he hear us when we pray? Even if he hears us, does he answer?

It is perhaps easy to answer yes when things are going well for us. But what when we suffer the loss of something – our job, a relationship, or a loved one? Our hearts are broken and full of grief and perhaps we can identify with the biblical character of Job, who lost his children and all that he valued and suffered great physical pain as well. Like Job, we may sit, spiritually at least, in sackcloth and ashes, and with tears, anger, hopelessness, and fallen, ashen faces telling the story of our hearts. In those times, it can be difficult to see how God is working.

A few weeks ago, I had a sackcloth and ashes experience. I experienced the loss of something very close to me. My hope was devastated and I felt both broken and helpless to do anything that could heal the situation. I tried to turn to those around me and contacted a few close friends, desperately wanting an immediate response to let me know I was not alone. But I got virtually none. I was devastated all over again, now also questioning the strength and care of my friendships and community. I felt abandoned and alone, and this sense of loss hurt almost more than the first. I openly asked God "do I really have people in my life who care? If so where are they when I need them most?"

I had been trying to do the scripture readings for daily mass, and turned to them the next day with a heavy heart, calling on God's name that he would hear my cry and answer my prayer for support to send friends to my aid. One of the readings was from Psalm 3: "You are a shield around me, O Lord; you lift up my head. To the Lord I cry aloud and he answers me from his holy hill. I lie down and sleep, I wake again, because the Lord sustains me." The word of the Lord pierced the dark cloud over my heart and flooded it with light and truth. He lifts up my head, He answers me; the Lord sustains me.

These were not just vague, encouraging words, however. My prayer was heard: Within 72 hours five friends contacted me to see how I was doing. Two I hadn't spoke to in nearly a year. None of the five knew each other. Only one was someone I had contacted initially; to the rest I had sent no emails, texts, facebook messages, or phone calls. They all reached out to me of their own initiative. Was this coincidence or God?

The novelist Annie Dillard writes that "all points in time and space are always connected through the points in between." Our culture calls these connections coincidence or fate. But I firmly believe it is the power of the Holy Spirit moving in the body believers not only to listen to the voice of the Lord but also to act on it. Somehow, my friends were moved to reach out to me that week. They heard the voice of the Lord and felt the movement of the Spirit in their hearts and responded to it. Is God calling to you to reach out to someone? Is someone or something on your mind that you cannot shake off? Perhaps it is a friend, neighbor, coworker, or family member.

Or perhaps you are in a difficult place, suffering the loss of something, and feeling broken, or without hope? Is there a way in which you need to reach out to those close to you? This advent season, let us lean on God and each other, following the prompting of the Holy Spirit who still speaks into our lives just

as he spoke into the heart of Mary, just as he spoke to Joseph, just as the angels spoke to the wise men and the shepherds. For just as God came into our world, so he wants to come more fully into your heart- that you might hear his prompting and respond by being his hands, feet, and voice; and also that you might cry aloud to him when you are in need, knowing that He wants to bring you to a place where you can say "He lifts up my head, He answers me; the Lord sustains me." God is still actively working in our world wants to work in your heart; let us listen to Him. There are no coincidences.