

Advent 4
12.22.24

If you follow international soccer, you know that the fans in Liverpool sing the song “You’ll Never Walk Alone” before every home game. The tradition started after 97 fans were accidentally killed there because of a lack of crowd control during a match in 1989. “You’ll Never Walk Alone” was sung to support the many families who lost a loved one in that tragedy. The scene of thousands of men, women, and children singing that song with all their might before each match moves me to tears every time I see it.

Some think the song was first sung by the group **Gerry and the Pacemakers** in 1963. But it actually debuted as one of the more powerful songs in the Broadway show **Carousel** which opened in 1945. It is sung when the lead character’s husband is tragically killed. That character, Julie Jordan, begins singing the song, but after a line or two can’t continue. Her cousin, Nettie a kind and strong woman, finishes the rest of the song for her. The lyrics go like this:

*When you walk through a storm
Hold your head up high
And don't be afraid of the dark
At the end of a storm
There's a golden sky
And the sweet silver song of a lark
Walk on through the wind
Walk on through the rain
For your dreams be tossed and blown*

*Walk on, walk on
With hope in your heart
And you'll never walk alone
You'll never walk alone....*

While Julie, the main character tries to be strong, she simply can’t do it. I love that Nettie, her cousin, embraces her and supports her with the words and melody of that song. It is that song which comes back to Julie and her grown daughter at the end of the show just as they are both beginning a new phase of their lives.

In today’s gospel, we are introduced to two cousins – Mary and Elizabeth. Both experience their fair share of hardship. At the very least, Mary sustained harsh judgement and ridicule for her unexplained pregnancy. Elizabeth would have been roundly mocked for most her adult life since she and her husband Zachariah were unable to conceive and bear a child.

In the midst of their sorrow, these faithful souls reach out to one another. Elizabeth greets Mary, not with a lament over this too-long-in coming event, but with praise for Mary because of how she serves God. We know Elizabeth’s song and pray those words every time we say a Rosary: **Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb.** Even the baby, John the Baptist, joins in the song by dancing in Elizabeth’s womb. Mary responds to Elizabeth, not with a woe-is-me tune, but with a soulful song of praise. You know her words: **My soul magnifies the Lord; my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.**

In the direst of circumstances, each woman – Mary and Elizabeth – finishes the other’s song. They lift each other’s spirits. They provide the support the other needs in their dark hour and become beacons of light for each other. All this is better than a Broadway Show. It is a life giving and lifesaving drama for every Christian who embraces Christ, the one who wants nothing more than to be the main character in each of our lives.

As I look out at this congregation today, I know there are some of you who have received devastating news – maybe about the death of a loved. Maybe you’ve just received an unexpected diagnosis which stopped

you in your tracks. I know some of you are still displaced and still traumatized by the storms which came ashore here just a few months ago. I know some of you are worried about your children. Others are worried about your parents. Or your jobs. Or your future.

Jesus came to Mary, Elizabeth, and to all of us to walk with us. Though divine, he was fully human. And being fully human, he knows what it is to suffer ridicule, pain, and loss. But with the Father's grace, he faces it all, conquers all, and gives us a share in his everlasting life, even as ***we walk in this dark valley and in the shadow of death*** as the writer of Psalm 23 so poignantly describes. He knows the grace we need to get to the other side. He knows how to calm our anxieties, soothe our hearts, and strengthen our weakened knees and spirits.

Mary and Elizabeth brought those gifts to each other, they finished each other's songs, because Jesus Christ first sang that song to them when he found a home in Mary's womb by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Today, some of you might sing a song of joy because of the blessings that are yours. If that is you, then your song gives glory to God. For others, the words of the song might get stuck in your throat because you are sad, worried, or even angry over what you face in life or because what life has thrown your way. If that is you, this congregation will stand with you arm-in-arm and help you to finish your song. For you'll never walk alone – as long as you stand in this place, stand here with us, and let Christ stand with you. That is the message of this fast-approaching Christmas Season and the message of our salvation. Despite what we face, despite the worry which sometimes settles upon our hearts as we start walking toward his Kingdom, we'll never walk alone.

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