

A couple weeks ago, I heard my mom saying to one of my cousins that our family should be more than ready to be done with this 2019 year. A few months ago, that cousin's father, my uncle, died after a bout with cancer. Then, going back, at the start of summer my father suffered what was called a subdural hematoma, a massive brain bleed that his doctors said, for most cases, would have meant a life without much function at all going forward. Of course, when my mom was expressing her dissatisfaction with this respective calendar year, my father was finishing up yet another harvest down on the farm; perhaps, still, doing a bit too much physical labor than his doctors would like.

However, for myself, looking back: it is rather interesting, to say the least, how different people's most basic theology comes to the forefront when they or a family member hits absolute rock bottom. Because, we need to find some way to explain it, what often is the *unexplainable*. We need to find some semblance of comfort when we are thrust upon what are completely *uncomfortable* circumstances. Sometimes, we, quite frankly, just need that space-filler, to fill the silence of our fears and worries and frustrations; as if all of that needs to be kicked out of the room entirely for there to be any hope of

improvement. We desperately search for any sign of hope, any sign from God that this present form of debilitating brokenness can be made whole, again.

And so, as my father was in the intensive care unit for two weeks, there tended to be some familiar faces in the hallway and the waiting area. I remember one woman and her sister, who were there because the woman's husband had, at that time, been in the ICU for six weeks, and they were not sure if there was any end in sight. Even between the two of them, you could tell the difference in how they viewed the situation from the perspective of God's intervention. One was very much clinging to the mindset of "everything happens for a reason" and "this must be part of God's plan." The other was okay with thinking that we live in imperfect human bodies surrounded by an imperfect environment with imperfect foods going into us all the time, and well, stuff happens (with, of course, a four-letter "s" word used, instead). Different takes on God, on signs from God, on how our lives operate, and yet, they were both there together, not just supporting the patient, but each other.

When my father was transferred to the step-down unit before, eventually, moving on to the rehab center, and later on, to home, even to the seat of a combine a few months later; I still remember walking out of his ICU

room, after hearing another round of good news from his doctors, what would be considered a direct sign from God for many; I still remember seeing those two women in that waiting area at the end of the hall. And I wondered, “What sign did *they* have from God, other than another day of suffering and frustration and fear for their loved one and each other?”

This is by no means limited to the time of Joseph or Mary, who desperately search for some kind of sign from God in order to help them determine what they should do next, in this cataclysmic whirlwind for their lives. We are as much in the constant search for God’s guidance, and, in doing so, we all have our different takes on whether or not what happens in our life is because God orchestrated it exactly that way or that our human free will had its fair share in shaping the outcome. We do not possess the mind of God to know the exact ratio of responsibility.

Nevertheless, as the story so goes for Joseph, the carpenter is rather blessed, to say the least, to get a sign from God in the form of a life-altering memorable dream, but I like to think the most life-altering sign is Joseph himself to Mary, to his child. Joseph gets to embody a bit of Emmanuel to people he loves, to those he’s more than willing to drastically alter the rest of

his life. Joseph is called to be a comforting, sustaining presence for a woman who's about to take on a ride of a lifetime, not just for her own sake, but the sake of the whole world. Joseph gets to be a sign of God being right with her throughout each step of the entire journey.

And so in today's world, in the ICUs, nursing homes and rehab center rooms of patients, who will not be able to join any family festivity this week, they will yearn for signs from God in the form of test results and expert takes from doctors on their daily rounds. And yet, with each time *I* walked onto such a floor this summer, I saw just as powerful of signs in the form of Emmanuel: families and friends, who wanted answers too, and kept on showing up even if there were none. As if *their* love refused to give up. As if God was determined to bring hope into the bleakest of places through them day after day after day. After all, that is what the ultimate sign of Jesus Christ was for: our Emmanuel through absolutely everything this life will throw at us, even in death itself. No matter what, Christ will remain right by our side into all eternity. And for that Great News, we most certainly give thanks to God, indeed! Amen!