

*By James Walker*

December 19, 2020

*This column first appeared in Hearst Connecticut newspapers.*

# Faith? In dark times, 'the light will come'

I wanted this, one of my final columns of the year, to offer readers some encouragement about what lies ahead after a very turbulent year.

I turned to the Rev. Alfred Smith and Rabbi Alvin Wainhaus because in troubled times, many people turn to the clergy to find comfort in their words and strengthen their faith, which may be wavering as COVID-19, racial tension, high unemployment and political bitterness remain at the forefront of people's conscious.

But as is often the case when I write a column, I find the power of experience still resonates louder than words.

Smith is a regular reader of my columns and we are in contact most Sunday mornings.

He appeared on my podcast Real talk, Real people earlier this year to talk about how ministers were adjusting to delivering their sermons from a virtual pulpit.

When I invited him to appear again with an inspirational message for Christmas, I expected his message about keeping the faith to be pretty much the standard.

But it wasn't.

Despite our numerous conversations, Smith had never mentioned the personal challenge he was facing until I sought his words for this column.

And Smith said he could think of no better way to encourage people than to tell them how the power of faith got him through one of the most challenging times of his life.

It started in March when Smith, a type-2 diabetic, went to his doctor about an infection in his left foot. He learned the infection had spread too far to be treated and his foot would have to be amputated.

"That wasn't easy to hear and it also wasn't easy to do," said Smith, the senior pastor at Macedonia Baptist Church in Ansonia. "But I prayed and sought guidance from the Lord, and it's worked out better because I am on the other side of that lesson."

Smith said he spent 47 days in the hospital -- 22 at Yale, where he had two surgeries, and 25 days at the Gaylord rehab facility in Wallingford, where they trained him to adjust to life without his left foot.

Like so many people this year, the 66-year-old minister had to endure the challenge alone as he was separated from his family due to covid, which he said was tough on his wife.

He spent an additional 70 days away from his family while he healed before finally going home.

"I was virtually alone with the exception of the medical professionals who aided me so fantastically," he said. "So, I tell people that life doesn't play fair. But if it hadn't been for my faith, I wouldn't have been able to pull through."

I spoke with Winehaus, the rabbi at Congregation Or Shalom in Orange, prior to speaking with Smith. He does not know Smith or the challenge he faced, but said the message of having faith has never changed.

"You take the first step and leave the rest to God," he said. "Faith comes in when we're feeling hopeless."

Winehaus said he is dealing with these turbulent times when people are depressed by the state of the country by continuing to bring "the message of the Bible to my flock and the wider community."

"We are in a dark place in modern American history," Winehaus said, but urges people not to give in to "defeatism and negativism."

"Don't succumb to that," he said, advising people to hold strong to their faith. "Religion may not have the answer to unemployment or racial tension, but religion is what gets us through it."

Smith said while he healed, he continued to preach on the phone and deliver his sermons through Facebook Live -- and his story of perseverance encouraged his congregants to keep the faith.

"I was discouraged but encouraged because I wanted to get back up and walk again," he said. And with the help of a prosthetic, "I was able to do that."

"I believe better is coming," Smith said, noting that the vaccine for COVID-19 will go a long way in easing the anxiety many people are feeling as we enter the new year.

Winehaus said we all knew that "this winter will be challenging and difficult" but people should remember it is also the "season of light."

"Whether you celebrate Hanukkah or Christmas, the light will come," he said. "Together, we can shine bright."

And for these two men of the cloth, it comes down to the power of belief -- and a message from the clergy that has never changed.

"God did not forsake us," Wainhaus said. "God is with us."

Faith? In dark times, "the light will come."

*On a personal note to my readers, Merry Christmas, Happy Kwanzaa, Happy Hanukkah and happy holidays.*