

6.2.2024 Trinity 1 (Adversity)

Once upon a time a farmer owned an old mule that tripped and fell into the farmer's well. The farmer heard the mule braying and was unable to figure out how to bring up the old animal. It grieved the farmer that he couldn't pull the animal out. He'd been a good worker around the farm. Although the farmer sympathized with the mule, he called his neighbors together, told them what had happened, and then had them help haul dirt in order to bury the old mule in the well, and quietly put him out of his misery.

As the dirt began to fall onto his back, the old mule was puzzled, and must have thought can this day get any worse, but then an idea crossed his mind, that he ought to shake this dirt off his back, and step up - and he did just that. Over and over again the old mule shook the dirt off his back and stepped up on top of it. It wasn't easy, the old mule could barely breath as he endured the painful blows of dirt crashing onto him, but through it all he just kept right on shaking it off and stepping up, and at the end of the day, the old mule stepped up and over the lip of the well. It turns out what could have buried him actually blessed him, all because of the manner in which he handled his adversity.

Whether it's grief, pain, or disappointment... hardship, trouble, or heartache... one thing is certain, the trials and sorrows of this world will find us all (John 16:33). The question is: When adversity finds us, how will we handle it? Will we be like the old mule shaking the dirt off our backs and stepping up, or will we allow that dirt pile up, and bury us in a grave of sorrow or regret? Let's take a moment to consider a few lessons from an old mule.

Lesson one: Cry out for help. Often the most difficult times in our lives are also some of the most difficult moments to call on God for His help. Sometimes when we're in distress God just seems so far away. We pray, but hear no answer. We open our Bible, but can't find a passage that speaks to us. We seek God, but it feels as if He can't be found. If you've ever felt like an old mule, forsaken, trapped in the dark at the bottom of a well, know that you are not alone. Holy Scripture is filled with examples of those who felt the same way.

Job is described in the Bible as a man that was “*true, blameless, righteous, and godly, abstaining from everything evil*” (Job 1:1 BST), and yet, at least for a time, in his sorrow and grief, Job felt abandoned by God. He said, “*If I go to the east, He is not there; if I go to the west, I do not find Him. When He is at work in the north, I do not see Him; when He turns to the south, I catch no glimpse of Him*” (Job 23:8-9). Job searched in every direction for God, but couldn’t seem to find Him. David provides us with another example. He was a man after God’s own heart (1 Samuel 13:14), but when his enemies sought to kill him, he also felt like God was nowhere to be found. In Psalm 13, David cried out, “*How long, O Lord? Will You forget me forever? How long will You hide Your face from me?*” (Psalm 13:1). Job felt abandoned by God, David felt as though He was nowhere to be found, and as our Lord hung on the Cross, He quoted Psalm 22 in an expression of human feelings of abandonment. With the weight of the sin of the world pressing down upon Him, Jesus cried out, “*My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?*” (Matthew 27:46; Psalm 22:1).

Clearly, when we’re in distress, it’s not uncommon to feel abandoned by God, but feelings are not facts, and because we know how each of these stories end, we know that God was not only present, but actively working all things together for their good and His glory (Romans 8:28). “*Out of the whirlwind*” (Job 38:1), God revealed Himself to Job, and in the end, restored all he had lost and blessed him with “*twice as much as he had before*” (Job 42:10), David, by the grace of God, triumphed over those who were out to kill him, and was anointed king of Israel, and “*God raised Christ Jesus from the dead*” (Romans 8:1), “*exalted Him to the highest place and gave Him the name that is above every name...*” (Philippians 2:9). When God seems distant, we must move past those feelings, cry out to Him, trust in His unfailing love, and remember His promise: “*I will never fail you nor forsake you*” (Hebrews 13:5).

Lesson one, cry out for help. Lesson two, have faith. Believe God is working all things together for your good - even hardship, trouble, or heartache. When the old mule found himself in a tragic situation, stuck at the bottom of a well, he cried out for help, but all he received from above was dirt shoveled on top of him. As the story said, at first he was puzzled, but as the dirt piled up on

his back, he had a thought: shake it off and step up. The dirt that the farmer and his neighbors intended to use to bury the old mule, became to this animal, a blessing. A blessing that saved him. As we journey through this life, adversity will find us, but if we believe that even the various trials we encounter will one day work together for our good, then adversity will never bury us. St. James even tells us to: *“Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing”* (James 1:2-4). As Christians, we are not crushed by the trials we face, we are perfected by them.

Lesson one, cry out for help. Lesson two, believe God is working all things together for the good of those who love Him. Lesson three, take the first step. If the old mule never took that first step, his life would have certainly ended on that day in the well, and we should also recognize that the longer he waited to take that step the harder it would be to take, because the dirt was piling up on his back, pressing him down more and more. If we don't handle adversity properly that's what it will do to us. It will hold us down, pushing so hard against us that it's a struggle to breathe, making it impossible to think about anything other than the difficulty and pain in our lives. Jesus told us that the storms of life will visit us all, those who build their house on the sand, as well as those who build it on the Rock (Matthew 7:24-27). Our enemy would have these storms drive us away from God, but it is our Father's desire for adversity to bring us closer to Him. We are strangers and pilgrims in this land (Psalm 39:12; 1 Peter 2:11), and the trials we face here should direct our hearts toward home, much like the adversity the prodigal son confronted turned his heart toward home, toward the Father who joyfully ran to welcome him.

When adversity finds it's way into our lives, when God seems distant, may we be given grace to cry out to Him for help, faith to believe He is working all things together for our good, and strength, as St. Paul would say *“the power of Christ”* (2 Corinthians 12:10) to take the first step, for we know that the grace of God, a steadfast faith, and the power of Christ will lead us up and over the lip of even the deepest well.