Columns
Spirituality



The love of God that watches over us, the love of God that guides and protects us was revealed each day of this season. God does not want us to die under the weight of sin. (Unsplash/Yudi M. Alyiv)



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A season of grace, Lent, has called us to a new life of Easter as we journey through it day by day, through fast and abstinence, and acts of good works.

A little incident sharpened my awareness of the redeeming grace of God and his unconditional love during this Lenten season.

The 6-inch-tall lime plant was before me looking dry, without any leaves on it. I was devastated. I said to myself, "I can't let it die."

There was a story behind my attachment to this insignificant plant. It was the result of an experiment during the lockdown period. I had peeled off the skin of a lime-seed, wrapped it up in a wet napkin, and allowed it to sprout in my small "laboratory" — a table drawer in the dining hall. It was with much joy and expectation that I placed the sprouted seed in the flowerpot. Each morning, I visited to watch its progress. As it grew and wore tiny elegant green leaves, I felt proud of my experiment and its success.

One morning, on my usual round, I noticed a tiny worm on one of its leaves. I left, thinking it would go away.

Two days later, on my next visit, it had no leaves; all eaten up by the dot-like worm, which I had considered insignificant. Worse still, without the leaves, the plant looked dead. I sat beside it and looked for any sign of life. I spotted a tiny dot of green color in the middle of the stem. My heart was thrilled. There was life. Nothing can destroy the precious life I was nourishing, protecting, I said to myself.

Next I moved the flower pot to a shady spot in my garden, where it could be watered and sit in the cool shade under other plants. My visits continued. The little life hiding in the dying stem began to resurrect. When I noticed a bud of leaves on the stem once again, my joy knew no bounds.

I was thrilled again. It is alive! I wanted to shout.

How much more would our heavenly Father rejoice when we turn to him with a repentant heart!

Each day of Lent, as I meditate on the stories of Noah, Job, the Israelites, the Roman official, the prodigal father, the lost coin, the Pharisee and publican — the story of the lime plant flashes through my mind. The stories speak of God's loving care over each of us little plants.

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The expression of God's unconditional love is an unforgettable story in history: how God took care of his chosen people, guarded and guided them, warned them and punished them — above all, how he loved them through thick and thin in their desert journey — as they murmured over every little thing they lacked on the way.

The love of God that watches over us, the love of God that guides and protects us was revealed each day of this season. God does not want us to die under the weight of sin. He constantly calls us back. "Listen to my voice" (Jeremiah 7:23), he exhorts. "You are not far from the Kingdom of God" (Mark 12:34). And we repeat, "O God, be merciful to me, a sinner" (Luke 18:13).

We realize that often we fall short of God's vision for our lives. We let the worm of greed, envy and jealousy eat us up, and blind us to what God wants. Even then, rather than condemning us, God sent his Son Jesus to be "lifted up" for us and give new life to those who believe in him.

God protected the Israelites from the poisonous snakes, when they cried out to him (Numbers 21: 4-9). When we feel dried up, eaten up by worldly attractions, we must first acknowledge our need for God, our desire for salvation; we must become aware that our God — full of love for us — is ever watching over us, and gifted us with his precious Son.

The salvation Jesus offers us is greater than the healing the Israelites received. Jesus heals us spiritually. He catches onto the little signs of life left in us after the worms of unfaithfulness disfigured us; he forgives us, strengthens us, guards us under the cool shadow of his cross, raised high. He restores us to a right relationship with God. And he gives us a real hope for heaven. He infuses his graces abundantly in us.

He knows that on our own, we are weak. But when we make the decision to lean on him, he gives us the grace to overcome every challenge we face in life.

The Roman official at Capernaum, begged for help when his son was nearly dead. Jesus promised him: "Go home. Your son will live" (John 4:50). This pagan centurion trusted what Jesus said and began his journey back home, sure that his son would recover. Such is the trust in God we need to develop during this Lent, while battling COVID-19. We can be assured that whatever happens, we are safe in God's hands.

Let us today repeat the officer's prayer of faith: "Yes, Lord, we believe."

It is not easy to keep battling the worms of temptation that wear us down. The Lord understands our struggles to follow his ways, to love our enemies, to care for those around us — because he became one of us to make us know the depth of his love. He sympathizes with our pain.

The story of Job strengthens us in our unexpected trials. Stripped of his possessions and reputation, he lost his family and suffered a terrible bodily affliction. Yet Job demonstrated that he was indeed a righteous man — that he trusted in God who had blessed him with a beautiful life and family. In spite of his misfortune, he held fast to God with faith and devotion. Generally, our first response to suffering is anger and resentment. Job's response shows us a way, "We accept good things from God; should we not accept evil?" (Job 2:10).

The trails of pain and discomfort we endure are like the discipline that any good parent would use to reform his child. The discipline might feel painful at first, but there is great reward in store for us (Job 42:10) when we persevere and cling to Christ; we experience the peace that comes from living for him (Hebrews 12:11).

God wants us to strive for holiness. He does not expect us to do it on our own. He freely showers his grace on us, each time we ask.

And then we begin to proclaim who has revived us, who never gave us up when we were slaves to sin, who has given us new life. "We proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to gentiles" (1 Corinthians 1:23). Yes, I become the messenger and the message of the one crucified; the crucified and risen Messiah.

Thus, Lent is a journey in faith, growing in Christ as we proceed to good Friday and Easter, the celebration of new life.

This story appears in the **Lent** feature series. View the full series.