

Gathering Chant

Gathered here in the mystery of this hour.
Gathered here in one strong body.
Gathered here in the struggle and power.
Spirit, draw near.

How Firm a Foundation

How firm a foundation, ye saints of the Lord,
is laid for your faith in His excellent Word!
What more can He say than to you He hath said,
to who for refuge to Jesus have fled?

"Fear not, I am with thee; O be not dismayed,
for I am thy God and will still give thee aid.
I'll strengthen thee, help thee, and cause thee to stand,
upheld by My righteous, omnipotent hand."

"When through the deep waters I call thee to go,
the rivers of sorrow shall not overflow;
for I will be with thee, thy troubles to bless,
and sanctify to thee thy deepest distress."

"When through fiery trials thy pathway shall lie,
My grace, all-sufficient, shall be thy supply.
The flame shall not hurt thee; I only design
thy dross to consume, and thy gold to refine."

"The soul that on Jesus doth lean for repose
I will not, I will not desert to his foes;
that soul, though all hell should endeavor to shake,
I'll never, no never, no never forsake!"

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Psalm 138:3

On the day I called, you answered me,
you increased my strength of soul.

Nada te Turbe

Nada te turbe,
nada te espante

quien a Dios tiene
nada le falta.
Nada te turbe,
nada te espante.
Solo Dios basta.

(Let nothing trouble you. Let nothing frighten you. Whoever has God lacks nothing.
God alone suffices.)

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The Strength You Didn't Know You Had

As each of us navigate this pandemic and all the spiritual, physical and emotional places it takes us, I have found myself returning over and over again to an image of my mother I haven't thought about for years. It comes from a story she told me with tears in her eyes and a look of found determination on her face. I was present in her story, but I was less than two years old and have no memory of it.

I am the youngest of three children. I was born in Nigeria while my parents were serving as missionaries. When I was one and a half my father became very ill. The doctor tried to figure out how to help him recover but my father's health just kept declining. When my father got to the point in which he was basically bed-ridden, the physician pulled my mother aside and said to her, "You need to pack up your belongings and go back to the United States. Your husband needs the kind of medical care they can provide there." He handed her a sealed letter she should take with her to give to whatever doctor would be assigned to my father in the States. So, of course, she went home and steamed it open. It said that my dad most assuredly had liver cancer. My mother knew they were just sending my father back so he could die at home.

A little prop plane flew into the bush to pick us up. My father was put into the plane on a stretcher using the front seat beside the pilot and the passenger seat immediately behind it. He was given a sedative to keep him still. My mother, holding the hand of my brother and carrying me in her arms, boarded the plane. The three of us sat together in the remaining passenger seat. My mother was allowed no luggage on this flight, only a diaper bag. Our luggage would arrive separately. The pilot said an audible prayer and we took off. We flew through a rainstorm, buffeted about in this tiny plane. When the pilot finally landed, he turned to my mother and said, "Now that we have safely landed I can tell you I have never been more frightened in my whole life".

Arrangements had been made for my sister, who was just ten years old and in boarding school at the time, to take a flight to Lagos where we would reunite before heading the rest of the way home. We had arrived in Lagos before my sister. My mother got my dad settled in the hotel, the sat my brother and I in front of the TV to watch Lone Ranger reruns. I had never seen a TV

before so I was enthralled. Then she went back to the airport to meet my sister's plane and retrieve all of our luggage. Everything seemed to be manageable until my mother tried to get our luggage. She could see it behind the attendant, but he wouldn't let her have it. It didn't dawn on her at the time that a bribe was expected. So she marched through the terminal distraught, her daughter in tow with a dying husband waiting for her to return. She asked several people to help her, but they turned a deaf ear. So, she gathered up her courage and marched herself and her daughter through a door that read, "Absolutely no admittance" and demanded justice. She got the luggage. When she told me that part of her story you could see it was a pivotal moment in her life...the time she gathered her courage when it was needed.

She told me she hardly slept that night. She stayed awake willing her husband to keep on breathing. Nothing in her life seemed recognizable. She was moving back to the United States with an almost assured outcome that she would also be a young widow trying to figure out how to raise three small children and provide for them.

For some reason that image of my mother keeps flashing in my brain these days. I think it is because we are living in "unprecedented times" and it makes me think of that time when my mother's world seemed to change drastically without warning...a time that required her to adopt new skills and develop her courage muscles...a time of uncertainty and anxiety...an unprecedented time in her life.

I am sick of hearing that phrase "unprecedented times". But I admit that I have used that same phrase myself...many times. What else describes what we are experiencing. Every day when I awake and realize that we are still staying "safer at home" it feels like a surreal dream. This can't possibly be happening.

When I begin to feel sorry for myself I think of all the families I know who are trying to figure out how to navigate this experience. Bless you for all the added stress you are managing right now. I have been holding all of you families in my daily prayers. I have a hard time imagining the stress level you must be experiencing during these "unprecedented times" when everyone is home together every day. I wonder what kind of mother I would be if I had to work at home full time while sharing space with active children and also provide them an educational space or keep them motivated, all while wondering if I will be able to keep my job and provide for my family. How are you guys doing it? How many times a day does one of your children tell you they are bored? How do you explain a pandemic to children, let alone the need to wear a mask and stay away from their friends? How do you work and deal with their inevitable meltdowns? Inquiring minds want to know. I'm having a hard time figuring out my life right now and my children are grown, educated and on their own.

When my children were young my mother was my lifeline. I called her when my children asked me hard questions I didn't know how to answer. I called my mother when I had run out of ideas on how to get a child to go to sleep at bedtime. I called her when I just needed to cry. I called her when I wanted someone to understand the joy I felt when I looked at my children and

realized I loved them more than my own life. Sometimes I called her to apologize for every mean thing I ever said to her and to thank her from the bottom of my heart for having me, loving me and putting up with me. I called her because I knew she had walked through her own time of trouble and come out the other side with strength and wisdom. I think that is why that image of my mother in the Lagos airport keeps flashing in my mind. I want to tap into the strength she received when it was needed. I long for my mother right now as I am sure she longed for her mother while she laid awake in that hotel in Lagos.

When my mother retired I asked her to write the story of her life from when she met my father to when I have memory. I got out that book during this time of “safer at home” and read parts of it again. I was especially surprised by the name she gave the chapter about my father’s illness, that almost took his life. She called it, “New Challenges.” New Challenges? She didn’t name it “The Time that Rocked My World” or “Unprecedented Times.” She named it “New Challenges”. I’m guessing if you had asked her to name it while she was lying awake willing her husband to keep breathing it wouldn’t have been named “New Challenges.” That is what a backwards glance can do to your perspective. What you thought was the hardest thing you would ever go through simply becomes a new challenge.

Our scripture today is from Psalm 138. It is considered a Psalm of Thanksgiving and it begins with this phrase: “I give you thanks, O God, with my whole heart.” The psalmist is oozing gratitude because she came through her own unprecedented time. When she looks back she simply refers to it as “the time of trouble.” We don’t know what it was she experienced...illness, grief, financial loss, a pandemic? She doesn’t give us all the juicy details of her trauma because “the time of trouble” isn’t her focus when she looks back. What she remembers is that when she went through these times she called out to God and God answered her by increasing the strength of her soul.

We think of the soul as the spiritual part of who we are. The Hebrew word for soul used here is literally translated as “throat” and more figuratively means “true self.” In other words, “God showed up when I couldn’t keep going anymore and strengthened my true self. I was weak. I was in need...and God came alongside me and inspired me with courage. Got me onto my feet so I could stand on my own again. Emboldened me to be my true self.” The psalmist no longer referred to it as “the time of trouble”. She called it “the time I called out and God answered. The time when God strengthened my soul”. That is what a backwards glance can do for you.

I am curious what we will call this time when we look at it with a historical perspective. I have been asking anyone who will entertain the idea but no one has given me an answer. “Too soon,” someone said to me. We haven’t had the experience of coming through this and taking a long backwards glance. We are still calling for help. We are still at the part of the prayer when we call out “Thy Kingdom come”. We haven’t yet gotten to the part where we say with assuredness “For thine is the Kingdom...and the power....and the glory...forever.”

I remember when my sons were little and they would assert their independence and run out ahead of me. Then there would be that moment when suddenly they realized they were on their own and terrified. They would take that backwards glance, “Is she still chasing me? Am I still safe?” Then when they saw me they would rush on ahead, assured of my presence and knowing I would watch out for them as they ran headlong into life. It was the backwards glance that gave them the courage to keep moving forward.

I want to invite you who are parenting right now and all the rest of us, for that matter, to take that backwards glance today. Think about your biological or spiritual ancestors. What “troubles”... what “unprecedented times” did they walk through and come out the other side with the assuredness of God’s presence and the strengthen of their true selves? That courage like a rock that Edna St. Vincent Millay attributed to her mother. What have you walked through in your life that when you look back now you can say, “I called out and God strengthened my soul?”

It might be too soon to say this but trust me, you have strength you didn’t know you had. It has been handed on to us by those who went before us...it is given to us by our soul- strengthening God. Amen

I Am Weak and I Need Thy Strength

I am weak and I need thy strength and pow’r
To help me over my weakest hour.
Help me through the darkness thy face to see.
Lead me, O Lord, lead me.

Refrain

Lead me, guide me, along the way,
For if you lead me, I cannot stray.
Lord, let me walk each day with thee.
Lead me, O Lord, lead me.

Help me tread in the paths of righteousness
Be my aid when Satan and sin oppress.
I am putting all my trust in thee.
Lead me, O Lord, lead me.

I am lost if you take your hand from me.
I am blind without thy light to see.
Lord, just always let me thy servant be.
Lead me, O Lord, lead me.

