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Celebration of Hope
St. John the Evangelist Parish
New Hartford, NY
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The idea for this Prayer Service grew out of our awareness that in both the Albany and Syracuse Dioceses a number of parishes were closing, merging or experiencing other significant restructuring. While these changes came about from an effort on the part of bishops and pastoral planning committees to meet changing circumstances and needs, they nevertheless brought about various responses in the parishioners affected—among them feelings of deep sadness, hurt and anger as beloved parishes closed or merged. We, the Sisters of St Joseph, empathizing with these feelings and wanting to reach out to those affected, designed this prayer as a possible means through which hope and healing might be fostered.

As I prepared and reflected on this, I also thought of many other changes and situations in the world around us that might be affecting people and causing concern—among them, the economy. Stocks have plummeted, some have lost their 401K's, some have lost their jobs, and because of this their familiar way of life seems threatened. In addition the media keeps us informed about the possibility of a Global pandemic. The cover of the most recent issue of Newsweek for example, reads "FEAR & the FLU, the new age of pandemics." Besides this, all of us are faced with personal challenges that have a way of cropping up in life—accidents, illnesses, the aging process, the death of a loved one, and difficulties in relationships.

Yes, we all, everyone of us, face circumstances that threaten to change life as we have come to know it. And such circumstances can lead to feelings of sadness, hurt, anger, fear, anxiety and worry, and at the least a sense of unease. We all need a strong measure of hope in our lives. As Catholic Christians, our hope is based on our understanding of who God is. Namely, the One Who Loves us. The one who knew each one of us before we ever were, and who loved us, you and me, into existence—the One who sent His own Son, Jesus, into the world to help us to understand the depths of his love, lest the cares and difficulties of life should cause us to forget. The words of Scripture assure us over and over again of God's love and of God's involvement in our everyday lives. In the Letter to the Romans which we just listened to, Paul assures us that NOTHING, absolutely nothing can ever separate us from the love of God, poured out for us in Christ Jesus, our Lord. In assuring his readers of the Love that God showed us in delivering up His Son for us, Paul wants us to rest secure in the knowledge that God will see us through every difficulty, every tragedy that may come our way.

This assurance, of course, does not mean that we will not experience pain and hardship, trials and difficulties, or that God will simply take these things out of our lives. The assurance is that we will not have to face these things alone, and that the adversities we face will not overcome us. Thus when we find ourselves faced with changes that fill us with grief, fear or anger, we have something solid to hang on to. In the Gospel of John, Jesus says, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God and trust in me." I think that Jesus is reminding us, that He is the One who will see us through, but I don't think he meant don't feel what you may be feeling now, but rather don't let it overwhelm you. God alone has the power to change things beyond our control. Fear and anxiety focus on our "inability." Hope focuses on God's ABILITY. But our feelings are not wrong; they are a part of being human, and need to be acknowledged. Even Paul says in one passage, "There is great grief, and constant pain in my heart.", and Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane experienced sorrow and distress, and cried out to his disciples, "My heart is nearly broken with sorrow." At times like this perhaps all we can do is, with Jesus, cry out to God in our pain. Elizabeth Johnson has said that such "lamenting unto God" actually keeps hope alive. If hope is underlying, even our strongest feelings will not control us or eat us up. They will be like waves on the surface of a lake whipped by the wind, but deep down, the lake is still and silent. Grounded in God, our hearts can experience peace even in the midst of tumult.

When I had to leave a job that I loved due to circumstances beyond my control, I was filled with sadness, anger and anxiety. And even when I began a new job, I kept asking myself, “What am I doing here?” I was in the “nowhere between two somewhere’s” that is a part of all change. Author, Luisa Saffioti calls this the “in between time” that we need to acknowledge and endure with patience, rather than thinking that we are at the end of something. In Isaiah, God reminds us, “See I am doing something new. Now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?”

I recently heard about a photograph that was on display of a burned out mountain shack. All that remained was the chimney . . . the charred debris of what had been that family’s sole possession. In front of this destroyed home stood an elderly grandfather dressed only in his underclothes with a small boy clutching a pair of patched overalls. It was evident that the boy was crying. Beneath the picture were the words that the man was speaking to the boy. They were simple words, but absolutely profound, “Hush, child, God ain’t dead.” The picture speaks to us not of despair, but of Hope. Hope means that with God, we will never be defeated by life’s calamities, and that as we stand before the ashes of what we have cherished, we trust that God can and will do something new. That when we stand in the nowhere following a loss we believe that there *is* a somewhere ahead of us—a somewhere that is even now being forged by God from the ashes.

The mystic, Julian of Norwich, lived in England in the 14th century when political and religious unrest was creating a turbulent world. The hundred years war was in progress, a schism had occurred in the Church, and the plague was also devastating England. In the midst of this difficult time, Julian’s revelations are hope-filled words that are just as relevant for us today as they were for her time. She says, “and this word: you shall not be overcome, was said full sharply, and full mightily for sureness and comfort against all tribulations that may come. . . . God wills that we take heed at his word, and that we be ever strong in faithful trust in well and in woe, for he loves us and delights in us, and all shall be well. And all manner of things shall be well.”