

"Survivor" is a reality tv game show that has proven to be one of the most successful franchises in television history. Starting in 1992 as the brainchild of a British tv producer, Survivor has spread throughout the world to play in over 50 countries as diverse as Chile and China.

If you've watched CBS' "Survivor" with its \$1,000,000 prize, you notice how quickly the sixteen to twenty strangers separate out into two groups, no matter how many "tribes" there are. In one group are those who, in the face of the unexpected, meltdown, freeze, or fold. In the other group are those who cope, manage, and overcome when the unforeseen rears its head.

This difference in ability and mobility is less dependent on the facts, and far more dependent upon faith. All "Survivor" stories combine components of grace and good luck, grit and gumption. But at the very base of those who "survive" in the face of surprising challenges, are those who have faith. When it is just too hard to hang on, we need another we can hang on to.

First century Palestine was not a particularly progressive society. Jews and Gentiles, iron-fisted Roman rulers and oppressed subjects lived in an uneasy, unequal social equilibrium. In the first century there were definite "haves" and "have-nots" — the "who's who" and "who's not" lists that circulated locally. Getting on one of these "who's not" lists had far more social, political, and even "Survivor" repercussions than any Christmas "naughty and nice" list.

In the 21st century it is hard for us to hear how the angel Gabriel's "good news" sounded to Mary because in the 21st century, it is not a death sentence to receive a birth notice.

It was then. That is exactly what Mary heard at that moment of angelic visitation because she was told that she would have a baby, but she was not married. Even though she was engaged, Mary was facing death since women who were pregnant without being married were stoned to death because of adultery.

Even with the possibility of being stoned to death, Mary did not question God's plan for her. Now if I was in her place, I don't know if I would have been all that excited for God's plan. After all, we are talking about a 13-15 year old young lady. And yet, as our gospel records the story, Mary embraced the news that Gabriel had to share with her.

As I think back over my own life, there are many times where I was not all that excited about the plans God had in store for me. While we were in serving our last parish, I can think of 4 times in a 3 ½ year span where I really wondered why God did this to us. There are times in all of our lives where we wonder what the heck God is doing and why we were not consulted. Instead of embracing the challenges that we face, we want to know why and we want things fixed now.

Mary could have responded that way as well and she had every right to. I know that with my stuff in Texas, it was not life or death situations and I responded by not being all that excited. But Mary was facing the possibility of death and she did not argue with God or say no. Instead she praised God even though she was afraid.

We can be afraid of life, but instead of living in that fear, we can embrace the journey that is before us. Mary was excited that God had something very special planned for her. God also has some special plans for each one of us. In my situations, the 4 events in Texas helped to shape me as a pastor so God took something that I did not consider very positive and turned it to good. At the same time, if we had not gone to Texas for 3 ½ years, then there is a pretty good chance we would not be here and would have missed out on a lot of good times and wonderful friendships.

Life is survival. There are some who buckle under the unforeseen challenges that we come across while others are able to cope with changes in life because of their faith in God. Mary was able to embrace God's plan for her even though her challenges were very terrifying. We too can do the same when we have faith that God will give us the strength that we need to overcome all things.