

Traveling Companion: If today you hear his voice...

Fr. Michael Tracey

I lay in bed on Thursday morning at 3:30 a.m., knowing that I had an hour with my own thoughts before I would engage the morning air for my 4:30 a.m. bike ride along the beach. Then the phone rang. As expected, the hospital called.

James, a seventy-two year old gentleman asked the nurse to call a priest. I donned my clothes, brushed away the remaining cobwebs of sleep and headed to the hospital.

As I entered the room, a robust man lay in bed in his pajamas. I introduced myself. He said, "I'm glad you have come. I want to talk to you." He told me he was divorced, that he had one daughter, married and living in New Orleans. He went on to tell me that he had been away from the church for years and wanted to make his peace with God. He wanted to go to confession.

I closed the room door and sat down in a chair close to his bed. I leaned in and said, "I know you want to be at peace with your God and I will help you." He made a general confession and I invited him to make an act of contrition. With some prompting, he got through it. I said the absolution prayer and we finished the confession part.

Then he went on to talk some more. He told me that he had had two open heart surgeries; that he had a life after life experience after one of the surgeries. He was awaiting kidney dialysis later that morning. I assured him that a load had been lifted off his shoulders and he nodded. Then he said, "I have a premonition that I will not be in it much longer." I didn't comment on his remark but told him that I would drop by again to see him.

I arrived back in time for my early morning bike ride. As I began the ride, the breeze in my face forced me to peddle even harder. I had one consolation. I knew that, on my return journey, the ride would be much easier, so I persisted. Thoughts of my encounter with James flooded my mind as I rode. I realized James got a special gift in his premonition.

I arrived back to celebrate the 7 a.m. morning Mass. I found it ironic that the first reading from Jeremiah challenged the people to return to the Lord. The response to the Responsorial Psalm was also fitting in that it suggested "if today you hear his voice, harden not your heart." I even mentioned the irony of the situation in my homily.

At 7:45 a.m., I received another call from the hospital, James had coded and the hospital asked that I come. I went, met his only daughter and sat in the Intensive Care waiting room area until the nurses could stabilize James and put him on a ventilator.

After an hour's wait, we were allowed in to see James. His daughter, Jennifer, went up to his bed, leaned down and kissed him on the lips and said, "Daddy! We love you." The array of machines and their constant rumbling did not disturb her focus as she leaned over and stroked his thinning gray hair.

Some time later, a technician ushered us out of the room while she did an echocardiogram.

All through the day, thoughts of "if today you hear his voice, harden not your heart," saturated my mind as I reflected on James and his premonition.

I realized that we are so busy, so preoccupied, so engaged, so involved, so committed, so stressed out that it becomes impossible for anyone or anything to breakthrough our control and manipulation. I also realized that so often the Lord wants to break through to us but most of the time we are not at home.

But I am grateful for one thing. James allowed the Lord to breakthrough in his life, taking his premonition as an admonition to experience the dawning of a new daybreak in his life.