

The Congressional Medal of Honor has been awarded to more than 3,400 of our nation's bravest since the decoration's creation in 1861.

Each recipient has a written citation that accompanies the award, detailing their specific acts of heroism.

Without spending time on the details nearly all include these or similar words:

"Distinguished himself conspicuously by gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty".

Specialist Salvatore A. Giunta , In Afganistan, in 2007

John Mack, Civil War, 1865

HENRY A. COMMISKEY, SR. Korea, 20 September 1950

LARRY E. SMEDLEY, Quang Nam Province, Republic of Vietnam.

First Lieutenant Vernon J. Baker Italy, April 1945

These American heroes had little in common with one another. They fought in different wars, or on different continents, were of different, races, creeds and backgrounds.

What they did share was the belief that they did nothing special. They certainly were never thinking during their actions that they might someday be honored for them.

They did not see themselves as heroes, they were doing what they believed any other soldier or sailor would do. They stayed faithful in the small things as well as the big.

The stuff of heroes is humility, a strong sense of right and a determination to do the right. A hero is not fearless, but rather faces their fear and remains alert, vigilant to the dangers and situations around them. They are disciplined. They know the enemy and are enabled to engage them and win.

What enables this heroic virtue to kick in when all the fires of war are breaking around them is, in almost every case..... training.

Heroes stand on the shoulders of heroes before them.

Heroes see a situation and react because they have been prepared. Someone before them foresaw the possibility of the situation and made them ready to react heroically.

Advent is a season of training and preparation in the Christian life and of being ready. We await the celebration of the first coming of the Child Jesus at Bethlehem, and we, at the same time await His final coming.

That final coming may be today, tomorrow or a million years from now. What we know for certain is that it will happen.

The time and manner of our individual coming to the Lord is also an unknown.

The words of Jesus in the Gospel are far more direct than we have been used to lately. We have been hearing parables for the last several weeks. Thought provoking stories meant to strengthen our faith and to help us understand the Father, the Son and the Kingdom of Heaven.

"Be watchful! Be alert! You do not know when the time will come", He says. "Watch, therefore;" and "What I say to you, I say to all: 'Watch'!"

He gives these orders as the Head of His Mystical Body, this Church precisely because he does not wish to lose any one of us to the enemy.

Heroic virtue: It is the stuff of Medal of Honor Awardees and the stuff of Saints.

The lives of all the Saints are lives of ordinary and extraordinary trials, and the practice of virtue in getting through them all. They show us the situations they faced in their lives and offer to train us to react rightly to the same situations we face.

They did not rely on themselves. They've tried that and failed. They came, over time, to trust in God and in their training in the battles of the spirit and of the flesh. They were faithful in the small things.

St. Paul tells us today, speaking of the Father “He will keep you firm to the end, irreproachable on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful”
Isaiah tells us “we are the clay and God our Father is the potter, molding us, forming us, making us Saints.

Every bit of wisdom, every bit of preparedness, every tool for holiness that was available to the saints is available to us.

Their training is our training.

- Prayer,
- fasting,
- giving to the poor,
- reading scripture,
- attending Mass and participating in the Sacraments.

I think we have lost, or at least minimized the penitential nature of the season. Again, the season of Advent is a time of getting prepared, training ourselves in the exercises of holiness. Today’s Gospel calls us back to it.

All of that said, Advent is NOT some sort of spiritual boot camp, but an opportunity to slow down in this particularly hectic season.

Develop a new spiritual habit. Choose one discipline like prayer or reading scripture and focus on training your spirit in it, making measurable improvement in that area over the next four weeks.

Perhaps once a week, you could pray the rosary as a family or as a couple. Celebrate the season with an Advent wreath. Consider inviting someone you know who hasn’t been in Mass for awhile. Make an effort to make peace within your family.

To help us in that this year, Father Jose has ordered a number of booklets featuring Advent prayers and meditations. They are in the back of the church. Consider taking advantage of them. Also the parish website will have a number of resources and ideas and activities for families and individuals.

No one will give any of us a medal for doing these things, and we shouldn't expect one. Most people won't even take notice of our efforts, but we will be more ready, more prepared, more watchful and perhaps even more heroic when the day of the Lord does come.