

When Saint Ignatius sent his followers out on mission, he would send them letters of encouragement, to help them maintain their hope in the face of great struggles. I imagine he must have taken great pains to write words that would do just that. Maintaining one's faith in God, finding God in things that are frightening, painful or unfamiliar, can be very difficult. Ignatius told his followers to go and set the world on fire. And they did.

I imagine few of us here feel we are able to set the world on fire. In fact, sometimes I feel like the world is already on fire, and I am powerless to put the flames out. But setting the world on fire is about more than making a big scene. It is about more than being famous, or prosperous or having the type of impact that wins Nobel prizes. Setting the world on fire is about doing what those wise travelers did, 2000 years ago in Bethlehem. They changed the world by their simple generosity, openness and trust.

Try to remember back to a time when you trusted far more than you do now. Remember being a child, letting trusted adults lead you wherever you needed to go, knowing all would be taken care of along the way. Remember how you would long for special things, an ice cream on a summer evening, or a special gift at Christmas time. Remember how much you would look forward to curling up in bed and sleeping without worry or fear.

God wants you to remember that because God wants you to believe that you can feel that same way now. Fears are there to help you avoid what is unsafe or unwise. But in reality, very few things in life are worthy of such fears. For most of us, life is relatively safe, and we can quite freely dream and imagine and long for wondrous things. Whether we get them or not is immaterial. What matters is that we share these longings with God, with ourselves and with those special people we trust with our hearts.

Long ago, when the stories of Christmas and Epiphany were written, life was far less safe than it is today. And when Ignatius lived, his followers went off into a truly unknown world, where there was little certainty of ever returning home and a high likelihood of encountering real disease, danger and hardship. And yet, despite the dangers of the world, the wise men set out to follow a star in the sky, because they believed the stories that said great joy, wonder, wisdom and love would be found beneath it. And the Jesuits, especially the earliest ones, went where they were told, supported by an encouraging leader, one who found God in each of them, and who helped them to know they would find God in all they encountered.

So it is with each of you. You may not be heading out into the jungle, or across a desert, or halfway around the world. But each day you set out upon uncharted waters. Each day you know not what the world will bring you, yet each day you get up, you set out, and you too find God in all you meet.

It is not always easy to step out the door each day. It is sometimes almost impossible, when the worries of the world weigh you down. And when the worries are right there beside you, when all you can do is put one foot in front of the other, still you do. Still you go out, and still you set the world on fire. Just be stepping out that door.

The greatest gift Ignatius gave us was this ability to see God in all things. I remember how hard that was, when I first was told of the concept. I remember trying so hard to see God in things I could not seem to love. I remember even how hard it was sometimes to see God in myself, to feel worthy of that great love. A friend did an exercise with several of us one day. We lined up in rows, facing each other like in a speed dating event. For 2 or 3 minutes, we stood and gazed at the person in front of us, with the intention of seeing God in that person. It was an intense and uncomfortable exercise at first, but after a while, it became clear that God was in fact there.

I have used that exercise in my prayer sometimes. Specifically when I have struggled to see God in myself, I imagine myself as the person looking at me. I look back at myself, and just as I can find God in the other person, I am able to find God in me. And when I can do that, I can begin to feel worthy of the love God has for me—for each of us.

Sometimes I struggle to feel hopeful about the world, especially when hatred and violence flare up, or when we cannot seem to communicate with one another. When I feel that anger and fear are going to swallow us all, that hatred and bigotry will make it impossible to continue on, I hear the words: “Love always wins.” Love always wins. And yet I wonder, “Does it?”

Love doesn’t always immediately win, and hatred certainly seems to have the upper hand for long periods of time. But the world has not yet dissolved in flames. Tyrants and despots eventually are overthrown. The peaceful loving people of this world continue on. Wildfires and hurricanes seem to wipe away all living things, and yet somehow life returns. Sometimes it takes a painfully long time for the trees to grow again, and sometimes the landscape is changed beyond recognition. Yet life continues on, and what *was* changes to what *is*. And what *is* becomes loved just as the other once was.

Every time there is another mass shooting, or terrorist attack, I see first, as I am sure most of you do, only the fear, only the disbelief, only the sadness. I see someone who has done this to others, someone I am told I should not only fear, but hate as well. I am told that justice must be done, that without it terror and destruction will win. And yet, *and yet*, the terror and destruction don’t win, whether the attacker is killed or captured and tried, or able to escape. The justice doesn’t seem to matter. What matters is that love wins. Communities rise up in support of each other. Conversations happen, dreams are shared, and love grows. Another place, one we may not have heard of, becomes a special place in our hearts. And love grows. A community we felt was different from our own, foreign or distant or unfamiliar, becomes known and seen and understood. And love grows. We come to see that each person lost had a family, a friend, someone who grieves for them deeply. We find compassion for people we never gave a thought to before. And love grows.

It is that love which sustains me. It is that love which guides me. It is that love which tells me I can hope. I continue to long for a time when we won’t need or use labels for each other. I continue to long for a time when we won’t have people to use as an example of the least among us, because there will no longer be anyone who suffers. And I continue to long for a way to show the world that we can love each other, really love each other, and we will be MORE safe, not less.

But what gives me hope is that I can see the love in each one of you. I can see the love in the victims of tragedy and I can see it in those who are trying to do good in this world. And when I sit with Ignatius, and with Jesus, I can even see love in those who do us harm. I see it not in what they do, but in who they are inside, where only God really sees. But if I truly believe what Ignatius taught us, that God is in all things, then God is in everyone, and my faith and trust in that gives me the most hope. The hope that all in this world will in fact, be well.

What is it you long for? When was the last time you told someone about it? When was the last time you told God about it?

If God longs for what we ourselves long for, then why not tell God? Holding a longing deep inside of yourself can make it feel wonderful, and precious, and sometimes unattainable. Don’t fear that God will laugh at your desires, nor that God will find them selfish or wrong. Tell God what it is that fills your heart with joy. Because when you talk about it, it becomes real. And if you talk to God about these things, God will find a way to talk back. God will give you what you

need, and most importantly, God will give you hope. Believe that this hope is what will lead you forward tomorrow, and that what you long for is what will be.

Dream, love, hope. The future is bright indeed, as bright as that star that led strangers to a small child, in a distant land, trusting only in the hope that allowed them to see what God was providing for them. Allow yourselves to see what God has for you. What you long for, what you hope for, what is good, will be. For love always wins.