



Faith Amidst Uncertainty

Adapting to Challenges
in 2020



Vytas Babusis was abruptly woken in the middle of the night this past September by knocking on his door. It was the Oregon State Police, informing him that a wildfire was bearing down on his home. Babusis, his wife, and two sons, needed to evacuate immediately.

The Babusises, who live near Hillsboro, Ore., jumped into their vehicle and fled to the city. There they stayed for three days, waiting and wondering if their 120-acre filbert orchard, originally planted by Babusis' father in 1972, would still be standing when they returned.

"The fire got within a mile of us, but fortunately God thought our trees still had work to do," said Babusis, 50, adding that some of his neighbors weren't as lucky.

What a year

Whether it be wildfires, drought, supply chain disruption due to the COVID-19 pandemic or uncertainty about the U.S.-China Trade Deal, 2020 has been a very challenging year for farmers like Babusis.

In fact, Babusis is currently waiting to see if there will even be a market for his nuts. The United State's tense relationship with China, to which most of America's filberts are exported, is something he watches closely. He added that the financial fallout of the pandemic has also made Americans hesitant to spend their money on high-cost, high-quality goods like his.

"It's kind of funny to see the supermarket empty out of frozen pizza and toilet paper, but if you go to the fresh fruit section, it's all right," he said. "But no one goes to get what's actually good for them."

Up until September, Babusis also worked as a Portland police officer, giving him an up close look at the riots affecting the city throughout the summer. However, once the wildfire impacted his community, he quit the police force to focus more on his farm and helping neighbors who were negatively impacted by the blaze.

Although 2020 has definitely brought hardship, there have been beautiful moments of grace, too. For Babusis, a bright spot has been the renewed focus on family life.

"I think spending so much time with each other helped to wear off our 'squareness' and make us more round," he said. "Now we can bump off each other and roll along whenever we argue about things or things get tense."

Babusis' Catholic faith has also sustained him through this year. In any year, a farmer already has to place tremendous trust in God that the things will turn out okay, he said.

"We don't control the rain, we don't control the microbes in the soil," Babusis said. My farm focuses on nearly no chemical use whatsoever, so I really have to trust that things will work out."

Prayer, time in God's creation, and meditating on unfortunate Biblical figures, such as Job, keeps the family grounded.

"God has never let us down," Babusis said. "We constantly have trials, but it seems never more than we can handle. We try to be like water - bending and flowing even as we crash into things in life, hard and soft as situations dictate."



Creativity and flexibility

Angie Rogan, along with her husband and two brothers, owns and operates Van Ruiten Family Winery in Lodi, Calif. Her nephews and her two children are also involved in the business. Rogan and her family have had to adapt to various coronavirus lockdown measures in their state to keep their family business running. When things initially shut down in March, the winery pivoted to online sales, curbside pickup, and local delivery via Rogan's son.

In June, the winery was able to get back to serving customers outdoors on its patio. They've been able to reinstitute "Sunday Music on the Patio," but now require reservations. They also divide the afternoon in two shifts, sanitizing during the break in between.

"We're doing the social distancing, the mask wearing, all the precautions to keep everyone safe," said Rogan, 63. "It's worked out very well."

One of the bigger disappointments of the pandemic has been the unusually low number of tourists to their area, she said, adding that meeting people from all over is a favorite part of her job.

Van Ruiten Family Winery also saw a decline in distribution due to restaurant closures, as well as a decrease in their own on-premise wine sales. Events, such as bridal showers, often held in their barrel room, were also cancelled. Rogan has been most bothered by the cancellations of the many fundraisers that Van Ruiten Family Winery hosts throughout the year. The fundraisers not only give back to their community, but are a way to honor Rogan's parents, who moved from Holland to California in 1948 following World War II. Initially, her parents were dairy farmers, eventually diversifying with almonds, walnuts, cherries and grapes. Her father planted the vineyard in 1955,

though the winery's first vintage didn't occur until the 1999-2000 season.

"My parents really taught us about a lot of great values, such as hard work and faith," Rogan said. "It's all about our love for others and helping others. They taught us that what's truly important is to love God first and all things will come after that."

Still, Rogan and her family were able to think outside the box when it came to supporting a local crisis pregnancy center. They sold tickets for a drive-through fundraiser, where benefactors picked up dinner and a bottle of wine as they drove through the winery's parking lot.

Although Rogan estimates the winery is down 35 percent overall, she is grateful they could pay all full-time employees. They also qualified for the Paycheck Protection Program, which allowed them to pay their part-time workers.

In September, the vineyard underwent a scare when smoke from nearby wildfires threatened to taint the taste of the grapes. To everyone's relief, the grapes were spared.

Uncertainty is faced by everyone who relies on creation for their livelihood, but Rogan said she experienced the fear of the unknown in new ways this year.

"We've wondered: 'How is this going to affect our business? How is it going to affect our employees? How are we going to keep everybody working?'" she said. "We didn't want to lay anybody off. We wanted to keep everybody working. We knew that it was important for our employees and their families and their livelihoods. So myself, my husband and my brothers, we had to pray about it all and think about it and decide 'how are we going to get through this without being fearful and just trust?'"

Pandemic's Effects

For Lochiel Edwards, a third generation wheat farmer near Big Sandy, Mont., one of the saddest consequences of the pandemic is the drastic loss of community in his rural area. High school sporting events, community fundraisers, school reunions and holiday fairs have all been cancelled, undermining what he calls the “social fabric” of his community.

“This interaction between people is what makes these small towns and rural communities cohesive and builds reliance on one another, instead of being just isolated farms and isolated towns,” said Edwards, 67. “That’s been harmful to rural America in psychological, social and spiritual ways.”

All this time alone has one bright spot, however, in that he has done more and better farming than ever before thanks to being home every day. The farm, which produces 4,000 acres of wheat each year, was homesteaded by Edwards’ grandfather in 1911. Today it is run by Edwards and two siblings.

Time alone has also allowed him to spend time deepening his relationship with God.

“Farmers have always had the advantage of being connected to creation and having quite a long time to think,” he said. “I think the isolation that the pandemic has caused has given us a little bit of breathing room to ponder faith more often, more frequently.”

However, one must guard against turning too inward and falling into a sort of “dark night of the soul,” he said. Too much intro-

spection paired with psychological stress has had negative impacts for farmers in the past, he said. So far, farmers in his area are weathering the storm of 2020 well, but depression is something he watches out for.

Although his area of Montana also saw a drought this year, he said he’s grateful for a good harvest that was minimally disrupted by the pandemic. Edwards, who also works in farm policy, said that malting barley farmers were drastically impacted because beer consumption went down with the closure of public events. The itinerant labor force has been disproportionately affected by positive COVID-19 test results. With fuel consumption down, the ethanol industry has suffered, which has caused the corn industry to suffer.

“As far as direct impact on me, it has probably increased the cost of some machine parts and some parts I have not been able to get,” Edwards said. “For instance, I needed a part for a tractor and the company in Mexico that was making this particular part was shut down for coronavirus for months. I still can’t get it.”

Through it all, Edwards is keeping his eyes on the big picture and looks forward to things returning to normal.

“You just do what you have to do short term, and in this case, short term seems long,” he said. “When they figure out how to care for people a little bit better the restrictions will ease gradually and we will re-establish those bonds with each other.”

