

Faith: Child's death a walk in darkness, but God's light was nearby

I've never been one to be able to memorize and quote from the Bible, but I can share the experience of "walking in darkness" during and after the loss of our son, Sam, to cancer at the age of 16. While Sam was fighting his illness, my husband, Dave, and I would go into the chapel of the hospital and recite the 23rd Psalm — the Lord is my shepherd. We know what it was like to walk through the valley of the shadow of death with Sam. However, Sam crossed through it, made it to the light on the other side.

I feel that I need to share two gifts from God that were given to me to help my son into paradise. I had no experience with death, so how was I supposed to prepare my

son? One evening in September 2000, when Sam was in intensive care on a ventilator, my husband and I went into the chapel and let God know that if he was going to take Sam, we were ready to let him go. We completely gave him back to God. That evening I had a dream and woke up at midnight, remembering the dream vividly. I was enveloped in the color purple, and Jesus was standing behind me with



his hand on my right shoulder. He whispered to me, "Sam will be OK."

Miraculously, the next day Sam's lungs were called "pristine" by the doctor. He was removed from the ventilator and recovered from that ordeal.

Unfortunately, three months later we were given the news that the cancer had metastasized, and Sam wasn't going to be with us very long. We told Sam that his cancer was back, and he just cried and wanted to go

home. In the evening, in his hospital room, Sam said, "Mom, I love you. I don't want to die." I told him that I didn't want him to die either. I climbed in the hospital bed with him and sometime that night, in a twilight sleep, I saw darkness, but I saw light, too. I saw a white, swirly tunnel with angels floating on the sides.

I never told Sam about that until he was dying. I told him that he was going to paradise and when he saw the white, swirly tunnel to jump on the wings of the angels and they would take him there. I knew then that Jesus meant Sam would be OK in heaven.

Those gifts often help me get through my days without Sam. We have walked in darkness but the shadows mean that there is light nearby.

Debra Alimentato is a parishioner of St. Lawrence Church in Greece.

Faith: Warm welcome offered drug addict hope, new lease on life

She arrived in early November dragging a cart that held all of her worldly possessions. Having been homeless and living on the streets of Rochester since June, she had called several times looking for a place to stay, but we were always full.

Bethany House is a Catholic Worker house of hospitality. It is a local response to the Gospel call to feed the hungry, shelter the homeless and clothe the naked (Matt 25). The house offers emergency housing for women and children, and operates a food cupboard, a clothing room and a drop-in center for women and children in need of assistance.

Because of the rising numbers of homeless women and children, there is very rarely a bed available. The miracle of that early November day was that we had an open bed for the

next person who came or called.

That next person was "Betty." She appeared emaciated and disheveled. She'd been eating out of garbage cans and sleeping in Dumpsters. Her hair was matted and thin; her clothes were crusted with filth. Her worldly possessions consisted of a ragged quilt, an extra sweater, a large piece of plastic to keep off the rain and one pair of heavy socks. With vacant, sunken eyes she begged, "I need a place."

While one of us did the intake process, another went to prepare the room for our newest guest. As Betty began to settle in, she began to share her story. She has a serious drug problem that has taken her to the depths of darkness. She spoke of being sucked into a tunnel where there was no light. She told of the desperate things she did to get drugs. She shed tears of shame about engaging in prostitution to pay for drugs and then needing more drugs to soothe the shame of selling herself.

Because of her drug addiction, we

referred her to an outpatient treatment program. She had no medical insurance to cover the cost of treatment, so we sent her to get Medicaid coverage and public assistance. She worked diligently to meet all of the requirements asked of her. She commented frequently, "I've been in the land of darkness but I can see a light now." As her participation in the program increased so did her self-awareness. She was now ready to move on from Bethany House.

Every Wednesday night the community of Bethany House — present guests, former guests, volunteers and neighbors — join together in prayer and celebration. It is the time we honor birthdays, anniversaries and closings. When a woman moves on from the house, there is a special "closing" ceremony to send her forward with our blessing and love. On the night of Betty's closing, she asked to offer a few words. The following is what she said:

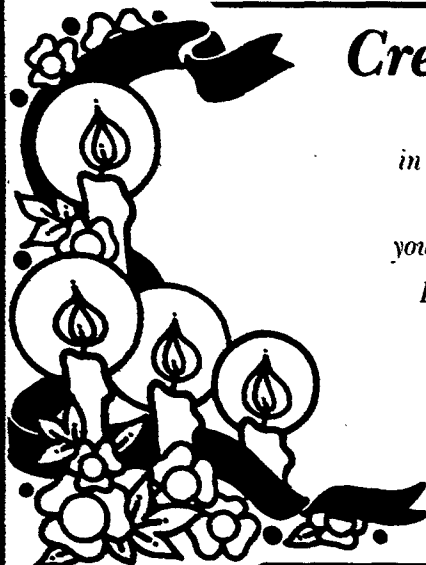
"I came here six weeks ago a broken woman in the pit of despair and darkness. There was no light in my

life and I saw no hope for my future. But here I found something I could hang onto. I was welcomed. You see, every place else I'd ever been, I wasn't there because somebody wanted me. Then in my addiction, I burned all my bridges and couldn't get help anywhere. When I went to my room here, there was a sign that said 'Welcome Betty.' Imagine — welcoming me. It must have been an angel that brought me to this door."

The first Monday of Advent, Betty moved to her own place in hopeful anticipation of a better life. The woman who dwelt in the land of gloom has seen a new light.

There is a sign that hangs by the front door of Bethany House. It reads: "Let all guests be received as Christ." My hope for you this Advent season is you will be able to find him in the goodness of others.

Donna Ecker, an associate of the Rochester Sisters of Mercy and recipient of the 2003 Mercy Action Cunningham Award, is house director for Bethany House.



Create a New Ritual

This holiday season light four candles in honor and celebration of your loved one.

The four candles represent your grief, your courage, your memories and your love.

During this season of new hope, may you find peace and joy in remembering.

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