

A story of God's love for one lost sheep
Dale Janson

During our discussions about my baptism, Matt asked me to answer a few questions. The first question was "Tell me how Christ became real to you"?

This is my answer to that question. It is the first time that I am telling this story in public. It is the story of God's love for me.

I met God on a motorcycle when I was twenty three years old.

It was a Honda and it was somewhere in the farm country north of Syracuse, NY and on that day in 1977, I found out how much He loved me, how long he had known me and that He had a plan for my life.

First, I need to give you some history from my childhood. My father left right after I was born. My mother was 16 years old when I was born in Syracuse, NY. My early years were spent with my mother and me living with my dear sweet loving grandmother and my alcoholic grandfather. Then, when I was eight years old, my mother married and I got an evil stepfather. He turned out to be an alcoholic who became violent and physically abusive to my mother. My home was not exactly a happy one but I had a friend named Patrick who lived in the house right next door to us. I spent a lot of time at his house playing and hanging out.

Patrick had a grandmother who lived out in the country. Every now and then Patrick's mom would invite me to come along for a weekend visit to Patrick's grandmother's house in the country. Patrick's grandmother lived in a small, cozy and charming cottage on the banks of a rather large river. She also had a creek running right along the side of her house and this creek flowed into the river at her side yard.

There was a large farm across the road from the house and on the farm there were cows and more or the aforementioned creek. Patrick and I liked to fish in the river but we needed bait so we would go across the road onto the farmland and catch crawfish in the creek. I don't know if crawfish were good bait but there were plenty of them and they were fun to catch.

I loved going out to that little house. It was like a fairy tale for me. Patrick's grandmother would bake really good things like apple pies and cookies and make great country breakfasts for us. The smell of the country and the smell of the house were wonderful. Patrick and I would take a rowboat out on the river and go exploring or fishing and, since I slept overnight for the weekend whenever I went there, I could get up really early and slip out onto the dock and fish until everyone got up. The memories of that little house were all perfect. Unfortunately, Patrick and his family eventually moved away and I never went back to that little cottage by the river. Later, I often wondered where that house was located but I had no idea where to even start looking. It was like it existed in another land, like Oz or something but without the flying monkeys.

Fast Forward to 1972:

I had become heavily involved with drugs during high school. With the exception of intravenous drugs, I used, and occasionally sold, whatever I could get my hands on. I somehow managed to graduate, despite my lack of work and my careless attitude. After graduation from HS, I entered Onondaga County Community College but dropped out after one semester in the Criminal Justice Program (ironic, right!) Somehow I knew that this Criminal Justice Program wasn't right for me when I found myself spending more time devising schemes to cheat on tests than time spent studying.

After dropping out of college, I took whatever jobs I could get to support myself. One of the jobs was in a small plant that produced imitation marble vanity tops. It was an extremely boring job. One day, I and one of my co-workers named Joe, were observed by the whole plant as we sat outside in his car, right in front of the place, which had huge windows, as we smoked a joint at lunch. We were like Dumb and Dumber! We were fired right after lunch. I then went down to the unemployment office and filed for unemployment benefits claiming I was laid off. The benefits officer called my old boss and that was the end of my claim. They pretty much kicked me out of the unemployment office.

I then got a job in an unheated, steel fabrication plant where I worked full-time cutting long sheets of heavy gauge steel on very large and very dangerous machines. After a year or two of that, I transferred to the shipping department where I loaded trucks. Loading unheated trucks on outside docks in the middle of winter in Syracuse, NY was a job which made me start to pray that someday I could go back to college and try again.

During this time I had an apartment with Joe, a.k.a. "Dumber", my lunch partner who got fired with me from the job making vanity tops. One day Joe borrowed my motorcycle and went for a ride. Unfortunately, Joe did not have a motorcycle license. Sure enough, he got stopped and arrested for driving without a license. When the police brought Joe and my bike back to our place, Joe invited them in (Duh!). They walked in to our apartment while my friends and I were partying and I also got arrested but mine was for possession of a controlled substance.

Since it was my first arrest, and because we had managed to dump most of the pot out the back door and into my landlord's garbage before the police came in the front door, I was let off easy with a conditional discharge. However, it was a very low point in my life. For one thing, the Police Officer who came into my apartment that day and who led me out in handcuffs, was a guy who was in my graduating class in High School. He felt bad about arresting me but he had no choice.

The worst part of the whole experience was facing my mom through the glass window when she came down to see me and to post bail. She was crying and looked broken and yet she never wavered in her love for me. She scraped money together from friends and neighbors to get me out of there.

While in that apartment, I met Joe's girlfriend's sister who's name was Sandy. Sandy and I immediately hit it off. She was three years older and was a bigger partier than I was.

She also had a 5 year old son and was going through a divorce . Sandy and I continued to date and I eventually moved into her apartment with her and her son John-John.

Shortly after I moved in with her in 1975, she developed swelling and pain in her arm and was diagnosed to have Ewing's Sarcoma, a very bad type of bone cancer. She started going for treatments at Roswell Park Cancer Center in Buffalo. I tried to support her as much as I could and to help take care of her son, John-John. Sandy started to look for spiritual answers and she met a woman who brought us to a healing service in Rochester. While in that meeting, held in a large auditorium, I had my first exposure to the Gospel and to the notion that God was a loving and forgiving and real God who cared about people as individuals. I found myself in tears and I was not sure why, but I knew that what I was hearing was true.

Sandy found a local church and started to attend weekly. She asked God to come into her life and heart and she became a very strong and faithful Christian who never lost faith in God's love for her. I was not so sure but I was trying to believe and I attended church with her.

After about two years of various difficult treatments, with the cancer returning each time, Sandy was not doing well. We were married in June of 1977. The following month I left the steel plant and went back to school as a full-time college student at Upstate Medical Center studying to be a Radiation Therapy Technologist. That is another long story of God's miraculous blessings.

In November, 1977, six months after we were married and three months after I started back to school, Sandy died of cancer at age 26. I sat next to her bed and held her hand as she died.

I kept John-John with me and tried to adopt him but could not because his real father would not allow it. About two months later his father took him for good and I was left living alone in the mobile home that Sandy and I had purchased when we got married that summer.

I could see no light. I was at a very low point in my relationship with God. After all, hadn't he let Sandy die and hadn't he let John-John be taken away from me. I was very angry with God and I yelled at Him a lot, and I cried...a lot. I was very lonely and in despair.

One day, while in the midst of that despair, something told me to go out for a ride on my motorcycle. I had no idea where I was going but I knew that I had to go. I just grabbed my helmet and jumped on my bike and took off, with no direction but with the idea that I would ride until I felt better.

After riding for quite some time, I was out in the country with pretty much no idea where I was but I started to feel like something was familiar about the place. I stopped my motorcycle and sat there looking around. There was a farm on the

right side of the road and a creek was going through it. I looked at the creek and I saw that it passed under the road and flowed a bit further to where it met a river. And there, at the point where the creek met the river, was that little cottage from my childhood. It looked the same (except that it had somehow become smaller with the years).

I sat there and started to cry. And then I felt an overwhelming sense of the presence of God. What came to me, not audibly, but from somewhere deep inside of me, were the following words..."I was with you then, and I am with you now. Trust me". I suddenly became aware that, even though I did not understand why Sandy had died or why John-John had to go away or the reasons for any of the things that had happened in my life, everything would be OK and that whatever direction my life was going to take, it would be with His guidance. Since that day I have known that He is my Lord.

God has brought me a long way and he has now blessed me with a wonderful and beautiful wife, Laurie, who has brought me more joy than I could have ever imagined back then. He has also blessed me with a son, Luke, and a daughter, Heather, both of whom I love beyond measure. And he has blessed me with the joy of being a part of his family of believers wherever I go in this life. He has been with me through it all and I know that my future is in his hands. It is my hope that someone that hears this may stop and listen for that voice of God who is knocking on the door of your heart and that you may open up your heart and let Him in. He has been there all along. God bless you all and thank you for letting me share this with you.

Dale Janson

Testimony to the congregation at the Three Village Church in Setauket, NY on the day of my Baptism on February 13, 2005.

Praise God from Whom all blessings flow.