

My Own Eyes Have Seen Salvation

Let me tell you a story about my wife's cousin Dan...

I first met Dan when I was fourteen years old. He was my counselor for a week at church camp, and at the time, I thought he was the coolest person in the world. He was goofy and awkward, but also calm and confident, and he spoke candidly about some of the health issues and struggles he had dealt with in his life. For your average 14-year-old, he was the kind of awesome young adult that you wanted to be able to look up to.

Two years later, I got a job working at camp, and there he was. Except that year, he was a unit leader, which is sort of the top of the ladder for summer staff, a job that other camps might refer to as head counselor, or maybe program director. Now 16, I still thought Dan was pretty cool, he was still someone I looked up to, and now, I got to work alongside of him.

My connection with Dan was on-again, off-again over the next few years until Bekah and I started dating. But whenever I'd get to talk to him at family events, I was reminded why I was so enamored with him in my younger years. And when Bekah and I got married, I was honored for him to be one of my groomsmen.

Dan is a paramedic. He works for Citizen's Ambulance Service in Indiana County. They're quite a bit bigger than any of the ambulance services around here, as they cover almost all of Indiana County and spill over into parts of Westmoreland and Armstrong counties as well. And Dan works as a manager, helping to keep the whole operation running smoothly.

When I was taking class to become an Emergency Medical Technician a few years back, I started getting closer to Dan again. He was an excellent mentor, always able to answer questions and make suggestions, whether it be things I was learning about, or about how things were run in our small ambulance service locally compared to their large one. When I got to ride-along with him for a shift, it was amazing to see him work, doing something that he was so passionate about, and did so well.

Truly Dan found his calling in emergency medicine.

The coronavirus has not been kind to Indiana County. They had some pretty big surges of cases early in the spring, including a pretty significant outbreak at a personal care home right next to one of Dan's ambulance stations.

Dan and I have kept in touch throughout, and he's shared with me all of the steps his service has taken from early on to ensure the safety of their employees, and he's shared with me some of the stories of what he's seen over the past nine months.

For a lot of reasons, ambulance crews are at a higher risk than a lot of healthcare workers when it comes to coronavirus. They go into the homes of people who may not even realize they're sick yet, they travel with them in the small enclosed space of an ambulance, they rarely have the same sort of protective equipment available to nurses and doctors in a hospital.

And because of all of that, because of my longtime friendship with Dan, and because of him being at high risk due to his work, it made me so immensely happy when I found out that he was among the first people at Citizen's Ambulance to receive a COVID vaccine.

Among our siblings and cousins and their spouses, Bekah and I are related to one doctor, five nurses, and Dan the paramedic. We worry about all of them every day, but it was pretty much a given that the nurses and doctor would have the vaccine available to them quickly; we didn't know how long Dan might have to wait.

And Dan was so immensely grateful for the opportunity. When he wrote about it on his Facebook, he described it like a kid waiting for a Christmas present. He encouraged others to take advantage of this new tool in the fight, he said there was light at the end of the tunnel. He said, "if I had to walk away from ems at the end of this I would feel complete and have no regrets knowing I had accomplished so much in my years helping others. This moment was the punctuation for me. I know we have a long way to go but this was such a profound moment."

And when I read this, when I saw the raw emotion, I couldn't help but think of our Gospel reading for today... Mary and Joseph bring Jesus to the temple and when Simeon sees Jesus, he knows this is the endgame, he knows that this is the light at the end of the tunnel, this is the new tool in the fight.

And he's moved to song...

"Lord, now you let your servant go in peace, your word has been fulfilled. My own eyes have seen the salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of every people. A light to reveal you to the nations and the glory of your people Israel."

Imagine waiting for something so long, and then finally seeing it. Finally knowing that the world is on a better path. That is the joy that Simeon gets to experience in this moment. Just days after the birth of the Christ Child. He sees the baby Jesus, less than two months old, and he knows that this is the Messiah. This is the savior.

Frankly, this is among my favorite pieces of scripture. It's so easily overlooked in the days after Christmas, but it is so incredibly moving. And the tune I just sang it to, one that I remember so vividly from my childhood in the Lutheran church is one that immediately comes to mind as soon as I read those words, so much so that I can hardly read them *without* singing.

We so rarely sing it in worship anymore, but I do pull it out when at the bedside of someone who's nearing death. And I often sing it once more at the conclusion of graveside services as a reminder of the gift of salvation, as a reminder that because our eyes have seen what Simeon saw, because our ears have heard what Jesus said, we too can go in peace.

The fight is not over. The struggle is not over. We've still got months until we can say that we have come out on the other side of this pandemic, but we've seen the light at the end of the tunnel. We've seen the salvation. Both that which is offered my modern medicine, and that which can only be offered through God.

And so, as we continue our celebration of Christmas, our celebration of God born among us, let us imagine the joy that a mere glimpse of the Christ child gave to an old man who saw the baby in the temple, and hold onto that joy for ourselves. Let it carry us through whatever else we might encounter in the days ahead.

Amen.