

Stories of Faith

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Del Ippolitio, Angela and Dan Gladding

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[Music Intro]

[Male voice] The following is a presentation of Artisan Church in Rochester, New York.

[Voice of Del Ippolito]

Well I'm part of leadership team and it's my great pleasure to be here this morning. So growing up my mom always told me that I asked too many questions. And yes, I was that kid, and I haven't changed, but today I have a question I'll get to in a moment. But one of the things that is in Artisan's mission is to encounter God, engage culture, and embrace people in the way of Jesus. And the Bible is just full of stories of encounters with God in strange and ordinary ways like burning bushes, at wells through angels, on walks, on mountains and healing, like the story we just heard with Naaman. So you get the picture. And so this Sunday something that we wanted to do was to extend this thread. We wanted to add to the overall storyline, the biblical library, if you will, of God's movement in the world. To hear stories of how some Artisan members have and continue to enter, I'm sorry, encounter God in the way of Jesus. So it's my great pleasure to welcome Dan Gladding and Angela Gladding as they answer a question that's always fascinated me, which is: how have you, and how do you continue to encounter God in the way of Jesus? So here they are.

[Applause. Voice of Dan Gladding]

OK so we're just going for this!

[Voice of Del Ippolito]

You're gonna go for it.

[Voice of Dan Gladding, speaking to Angela Gladding]

Sure do you want to go first?

[Voice of Del Ippolito]

Ladies first?

[Voice of Angela Glading]

So I have no idea what Dan's going to say and I'm super nervous about it so... [laughter] I, I'm gonna go first. So I've been really inspired by our visiting clergy if I want say it that way. And you know I was thinking about what to say. And so I thought that I would share - inspired by Matthew (Nickoloff) - like, three little tiny vignettes. Three little stories of times in my life where I encountered, or where I think, I encountered God. Because you know the way my brain works I'm never quite sure. And Pastor Judy told us her story and a lot of it has to do with grief. And for me, I never want to complain because I don't feel like my life has been hard, and I know a lot of people have struggled way more than I ever have. But the time when I've really felt grief even more than when family members died is when the image of the person that I thought I was going to be died. And, or, the person I thought I was. And in those times of grief, you know, I went through all the psychological stages of grief: denial, anger. But I wanted to talk today about the times that I bargained with God and what came out of that. By the way, it's kind of a stupid thing to do, just sayin'.

So the first story. Well I mean, wrestling is one thing. I don't know, there was - no - there could have been side bets I don't know but. So the first story was when I was 11. We were traveling back from visiting my sister who had recently gotten married and moved to Portland, and we were going to drive from Portland back to where we lived. Just outside Sacramento California in a day. It's nine hour drive and, we're from California, so like, you know, nine hours is "OK, That's maybe a skosh long but ain't no thang, you know I mean?" So I know that people from New England are like "Oh my God, nine hours, you could be in Florida!

[audience laughs]

Sorry. And so my mom wasn't feeling very well, so my dad ended up driving the whole nine hours by himself which, you know, was interesting. But what we didn't know was that somewhere along the along the way my mother's appendix burst. Best I can tell it was like when we crossed from Oregon into California. And the next morning my mom was severely ill and she got taken - she was taken - to the hospital. Which was way down in Sacramento like, 45 minutes away and she was in the hospital. She had surgery, emergency surgery, she was in the hospital for a week and then she was home and she was really bed bound for another week. While she had this gigantic wound because she had abscess everywhere, right? It had to close up, and my Dad wouldn't let me look at it and you know it was all sorts of wrong. But the part of me that died that day during this experience was the part that thought my parents were invincible. And I realized that my parents are fragile and what happened was that I decided: Well, if if my mom could be gone for two weeks, you know, at the drop of a hat, than I'm the

only person that I can really count on. And, but I remember, you know, my grandma came and stayed and she kind of smelled funny and I didn't really like her and she took my bed and I had to sleep on the couch. And I remember staring up at this painting, this oil painting that my dad had done which was over a couch. I can, I could be very descriptive because I remember this so well. Just staring at it you know it was is a picture painting of a sand dune and there's like little faces and hedgehogs and stuff that I always like looked for. That's totally irrelevant. And just bargaining, because, you know, God to me was something that we did on Sunday when I drove down to church. And you know, I had asked Jesus into my heart over and over again because nobody explained to me that once was enough. But it was very distant. But I was like: OK, he did all these miracles, maybe he can, you know, miraculously cure my Mom. And so I bargained with God, and I said: you know, God, if you make sure my Mom is OK then I'll do whatever you want. I'll be nice my sister, I will become a missionary when I grow up, you know, all those things you know, that an 11 year old would promise. And I'm happy to say that my mom came home and I totally forgot about all those promises I made. But in retrospect, is.... you know, hindsight is 20:20. So I know God was there and he was laughing at me when I was making all these 11 year old promises. Like: yeah, sure, sure you're going to become a missionary. You *like* people, right?

[audience laughs]

And, but what I do know is that at the time the fact that my mom was sick and everything did work out meant that four months later, when my father's untreated bipolar disorder led to a nervous breakdown and he was involuntarily committed for a couple of weeks, it meant that I was not completely destroyed by that. I was terrified, but I could pay attention to what was happening and learn such things like: your thoughts, what you're thinking about the world, does not necessarily match up with reality, and that there are things that you can do about how you're feeling. Better living through chemistry, you know what I mean? Which meant that several years down the road when my own mental illness started manifesting I knew that there was something wrong and I didn't live in it for years and years before I sought treatment.

My next story happened about eight years later when I was 19 and my mental illness was manifesting big time. And I was grieving a part of myself... I was grieving a part of myself that was perfect. My father's a perfectionist and he expected nothing else out of his children and I had gone to college and things were distracting. I was in charge of myself. When I started getting depressed there wasn't, you know, a mom to get me out of bed at the same time every day and make, you know, make me my cereal and put me on the, you know, make sure I got dressed and got to school. And so when depression hit when I was 19 what happened was I stayed in bed and I failed calculus. And I almost failed physics because math, uh, sucks and...

And I was in the, probably one of the darkest places that I have ever encountered. And there was this is a gaping hole in me and was amplified by the fact that I have I was failing and I had been defining myself by the grades that I got. Cause I was a straight A student, valedictorian. Dan was salutatorian. He has a big chip on his shoulder about it, by the way. And all of the sudden I wasn't that anymore and I didn't know what to do and I didn't know who I was going to be and what what I was - who I was - without being a, you know, straight A student or at least even a student that could get B's, right? I mean I was failing. And so, you know, I started self harming and, I'm trying to keep this P.G. so, there were a lot of self destructive behaviors that started happening and I know God was there because I didn't actually experiences severe consequences that I could have. I did some really stupid things and I'm here. You know it didn't, I didn't ruin my life.

But I was grieving and I bargained with God. I said God: will you just take this hole out of my chest? Will you just take this mawing, open black pit that I cannot crawl out of on my own? And I'll do whatever you want. I will surrender my.... you know, surrender my will, become a missionary and help I'll get an M.D. So that - see there's a theme, right? I'll get it an M.D. so that I can go and help dying people in Africa and the like. I ended up with two things that changed that. One: I got together with this dude [points to Dan Glading], and his positivity like is a force of nature. And I also went, oh yeah, chemistry, right? And I went to the health clinic and I got myself on antidepressants. And I forgot about all the promises I made to God. And God said hey this is a thing that you've lived through and you've had to change your medications and you figured out how to get help, and in retrospect now that's equipped me to get to help other people.

So finally, I know I'm like way over my time, but the last story I want to help actually happened when... I have no idea how old I was because math. But it was 2013, so after we had moved to Rochester. And I wasn't a missionary. And we had started coming here to Artisan and I really felt different. But, you know I'm a scientist. I had gone through my four and a half years of my PhD and then my seven plus years of post-doc and I'm like, I am invested. I am going to be a scientist, damnit. But science is not a lucrative career. Well I mean it's not bad but, you have to self fund yourself to some extent by getting grant funding. And in the absence of that, you don't have a job. And I was at the point where if I didn't get grant funding, I was going to be out of a job pretty quickly. You know the university had given me some funds to start my lab but those were almost gone. I had a matter of months before I ran out of money. And I had all these grant applications I had written and put in and I knew that, you know, they were good. And I also knew, again, that it didn't matter that they were good. That there isn't enough money to go around and not every grant that's good is going to get funded. You just have to get lucky. You have to find somebody on the committee who's reviewing them that believes in you, or

believes in your science, or, you know, is in a good mood or something, you know, or knows somebody that you know.... who you know.... stupid stuff like that.

But I was failing again and I'm like: oh God, I'm a scientist. I have, I, my whole identity based on the fact that I'm a smart person, and why can't I be smart enough to get this money? And I had been trying for four, five years plus to get this money over and over again three times a year, grant deadlines, and nothing was working. And I read that - you know you get critiques - so you know every time I read a critique I'm pissed, angry, I'm in denial, I'm like: they're wrong! They're so wrong! And then I got to the point where I'm like, this is it. This is the last cycle I'm like: God, I know I didn't end up being a missionary but if you want me to be a scientist, something's got to give here bro! You know, and I was like, OK if I do this, I'll do whatever you want. And I will be the best scientist that you've made me to be and I will, you know, encounter God and embrace the way of Jesus in my career which is a challenge. And since I'm still here, employed, obviously he came through again, again. He isn't, I mean, I think this time I'm finally prepared to try to hold my end of the bargain. And so now I'm in the position where he came through, so now I'm in the position where I can help graduate students who suffer disproportionately high rates of mental health problems. Because I've been through that, and I've been through graduate school, and I can show scientists, who avoid the issue of religion and God at almost all costs, you know, what a Christian scientist - not a Christian Scientist - not those kind of Christian Scientists, thank you. [laughter] But hey, you know, what scientist who is a Christian looks like and acts like and find a third way to, you know, rise above the politics and, you know, and the crap and the backbiting and all that kind of stuff. So, again this is all where I've seen God work in my life but I want to make sure that you understand that I didn't see it when it was happening. When it's happening, it's just all crisis and survival. But I think my faith now is so much stronger because I know that I can see where God has been involved in my life.

[Voice of Dan Glading]

So I think it was probably three weeks ago Del asked if I would share a story and I said I'd be glad to help, I'm going to have to think about this because I'm terribly unobservant. Some people have been described as having a memory like a steel trap and mine is more like a colander. So I'm sure I see - I encounter God in the way of Jesus - every day of my life all around me and it just [mimes water running through a colander]. Well I said I have got great stories about the guidance of the Holy Spirit and how it got me here, and Del was gracious enough to say: hey, we're a trinitarian church, it counts, talk about the Holy Spirit, that's fine. So I was all ready to talk about the Holy Spirit. Those of you who have been here long enough and saw me baptized here heard the story of how a lot of seemingly innocuous decisions - the first one being stepping out in faith when I was, when we were both graduating college - decided to get

married. It was a decision for me, who had grown up on the West Coast, to marry this woman who I adored and move with her across the country to Birmingham. I thought I might need a passport to go to Birmingham! [laughter] A whole new culture. A whole new city. A whole new everything, totally away from everything we knew, because she needed to start grad school. And I was not then a Christian but knew that my wife was, and I started of reading the Bible just trying to find out what this is about and felt a prompting just go. Like Abraham, just go. So I went. And I was all ready to tell the rest of that story because I'm here now and it's important. In the middle of thinking that out, and planning that story, I got one of these: "McFly! Hello!" The Holy Spirit reminding me of an incident three days before - did I mention my memory? - when I did encounter God in the way of Jesus. And the Holy Spirit was just saying: "Hey dummy, the least of these. The least of these."

And of course reminding me of Matthew chapter 25, verse 34. Jesus has been talking about the goats and the sheep which is really about, you know, nations that treat people right and nations that don't and maybe we could learn something from that. Verse 34:

"Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing. I was sick and you took care of me. I was in prison and you visited me.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food? Or thirsty and give you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and we visited you? And the king will answer them, 'Truly, I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'"

So, not that I had that whole verse memorized, but the least of these, so you have done to the least of these you've done to me, it had stuck with me. A few nights before this conversation I had gathered with a group of guys from Artisan for coffee at Spot coffee. And the whole intent was just to get guys together and just kind of start to grow some bonds, start to grow some relationship, something that has been missing for a while. And we are literally just enjoying some coffee, light snacks, conversation, and a man came in who was apparently homeless. He was not very clean and he started asking if we could help. Did we have any money, could we help him out. And on instinct my voice said "I'm sorry, I don't have any cash." Which is typically true, I don't carry cash. And normally when that question comes I'm on the street and the fact that I don't have cash limits my ability to do anything. So that instinct came out and that's what it said. And similar mumblings and mutterings came from the rest of the table. And then in the

middle of that, one of the staff at Spot Coffee came out and said politely but firmly “Sir, you cannot bother the customers, you are going to have to leave if you’re going to bother the customers And this guy said “OK. OK I'm just going to sit down I won't bother anybody.” And that was that.

Right up until my friend Elliot stood up and worked through the discomfort of a strange person, a homeless person, someone not like him, asking for help, and the discomfort of again, this person, very polite, but a representative of Empire, saying you're not welcome, setting up a rule: you can't be here. Eliot worked through both of those things, walked over to the man and started talking to him, and walked up to the counter and bought him something to eat. Because of course it didn't matter whether or not had cash! I used a little piece of plastic in my wallet to buy *myself* something and of course I could've got something for this gentleman to eat, but I didn't. My instinct, my fear, shut me down right there. And Jesus went over and stood in the heart of my friend Elliot and acted that day and helped the least of these. And I turned around and looked and saw him at the counter and the lady at the register was uncomfortable and Eliot was just talking to the guy. I don't know what they talked about, it's not important, but he just met this person human to human and had a human moment of connection, gave the guy what he needed right then, which was something to eat. Gave him a moment of human connection and then the guy set down with his food and we went on with our evening. And since the Holy Spirit knocked on my head that story hasn't left me and I'm reminded that *that* is encountering God in the way of Jesus I saw it that day, and this gentleman who helped saw it that day. That's what we should be doing, that's what we should be seeing, that's how we will change our nation into a nation of sheep and out of goats, is one person at a time doing what we should be doing, helping the least of these. I was told I needed to keep it under five minutes, so...

[Voice of Del Ippolito]

Thanks Dan. So I have this rule. I never ask people to do something that I myself wouldn't do. So, my story starts with a break up. And there's a quote by C.S. Lewis, it says: “Pain insists upon being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasure, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pain. It is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.” And I was in college, it was the summer between my freshman and sophomore year and I got the news. And so, I remember just being in so much pain that I knew that nothing human could help me. And it was the most searing pain I had felt in my, like, 19 years as a human being. And I sat on my bed and I said, I remember this moment because it was the first time I really felt like I needed God, and I just said “I need God. I need God.” Mind you, I would say I grew up agnostic. I knew there possibly was a God. Recently my mom had started going back to church, but it was very rule based. It was like, you cannot actually... there is a little, you know, there's like bulletins, there's a little

line that says you cannot chew gum in the sanctuary. And it just turned me off. And I was like, if this is religion then I want nothing to do with it. But I have a mystical heart and so, I was always like, yeah there might possibly be a God but I don't know what God looked like.

But then a series of weird things started happening, and one of which was, I was walking to class and this guy who's like 6(ft) 2(in), probably like, 300 pounds, and he approaches me, which, please, if you're a guy just be mindful about how you approach a woman. But he approached me and he was like, hey, can I ask you a question? And I love talking, so I was like, OK let's have this conversation. And he said "If you were to die today do you know where you go?" And I was, kind of like, well, I you know, I am a good person, I guess I'd go to heaven, I'm not sure what you're asking. And he's like, "Well, you can know for sure if you want to pray right now. Pray the sinner's prayer with me and you'll know for sure." I'm like, OK, I'm game, so we prayed. We're like this... is where it is like out on this pathway and people are like walking by and I have my backpack and this guy's praying for me. But it's like, OK, so he's like: "Good, now you know that you're part of Jesus. You know, you're Christian, and the other things you need to do." And he hands me a tract with his name and phone number now is the last I ever saw him, at least temporarily. So I walk to class, you know, I forget about this encounter, but I still have the tract in my backpack. And then one of the girls in my class invites me, you know, I had, I was in a calc class and she invited me to lunch and hang out with her friends. And her friends keep talking about Jesus, you know like "Jesus said to do this, and I think Jesus wants me to do this" And so I stopped them. And I'm like, guys, you're talking about Jesus like he's real! And they reply, he is! And that was kind of shocking to see, like, 19 year olds like having this conversation about a person named Jesus as though he was like sitting right here and they could touch him. But that group of students ended up inviting me to Bible study, and as I got to know them one of the guys was talking about how he is spending his free time. And his free time was spent - this is like the early ninety's, actually 94 - he was visiting AIDS patients in the hospital. At 19 years old. And he was like: they were just so hungry for hope. And I remember just being like, I'm 19 and this is not how I spend my free time. Like, it's the last thing I'd do. But he was really trying to decide like, how do I live out this call of living a life for Jesus. And he would go and visit them weekly and he was like, he just pretended he was a pastor and would go in there and would sit with these patients whose families had completely abandoned them. And I found it really weird but I also found it fascinating.

And so, one day Carla was like hey, do you want to go to bible study? And I was like, what is Bible study? But we ended up going to this, I would call it a strip mall church. It was a Pentecostal church. If you've ever been to a Pentecostal church you know that like, people are falling, over speaking in tongues, I mean, it was just complete and total chaos to put it lightly. But I remember week after week hearing about Jesus through the Bible and just being like: I've

never heard of this guy before. I've never heard of Jesus the way he's being presented. As a person who loves so much and wants people and wants God to know that he cares. And so somehow, someway, I had like a transfiguration moment. There's a, there's a passage of scripture where, in Luke, where it talks about, like, Jesus' appearance changed. And I remember this moment where Jesus, up to that point, was just kind of a figure, but I saw something... I saw something that I'd never seen and it changed my perspective on life. And I literally, that moment, remember like: No, I really *am* a Christian. I really *do* believe in Jesus. And that was sort of like the encounters of seeing people live for him...want, wonder, like how to continue to show love. This pastor who, actually one thing that one sermon I remember where it was still legal to discriminate against gay people, and he said, you know, if a gay man, actually I think he used the word homosexual because I remember. But he said, if a homosexual were to come here I would totally welcome them. And this was really shocking for me because most Christians that I knew were extremely judgmental, but here this man and this whole congregation was totally about loving God. And so the takeaway for me was that, you know, was that God cared about people who had problems, God cared about people who were on the fringes. God cared about people who were desperate and in pain and I could get behind that. So that's kind of my story of encountering God in the way of Jesus.

[applause]

So this is the time for communion and I hope that this represents an opportunity for anyone to encounter Jesus and so if you would... This is an open table, we don't, it's not for members only. But if Jesus were to invite you to come have a meal and you'd say yes then you are welcome. Here we usually take the bread and dip it in the wine or the juice. There's a gluten free option. There's going to be a member of the prayer team in the back with us if you want to pray with someone. And the band will come up and play music. And I'm going open to communion by saying that this is the table not of the church, but of the Lord. Is the table, I'm sorry, it's to be made ready for those who love him and those who want to love him more. So come you who have much faith and you who have little. You who have been here often and you who have not been for a long time. You who have tried to follow and you who have failed. Come not because it is I who invite you, it is our Lord. It is his will that those who want him should find him here. Amen.

[End of sermon]

[Male voice] For more information visit us at ArtisanChurch.com