

Bringing Light into the World

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Father's Day: June 19, 2022

The Reverend Bob Richards once said, "The Lord must have loved ordinary people because he made so many of us. Every SINGLE Day, and in every walk of life, Ordinary People Accomplish Extraordinary Things"

Good morning. For those of you who don't know me, my name is Gary LaSasso. And for those of you who do know me, I know EXACTLY what you're thinking: I don't why I'm up here either. I am truly honored and blessed to share my personal testimony with you today. And I am beyond humbled to be among so many ordinary people. This place, this family, this body of Christ has accomplished so many extraordinary things. Our daughter Ava's favorite verse is Jeremiah 29:11. She read it at my dad's funeral. "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."

Another important passage for me comes from the Sermon on the Mount. In Matthew 5:13-16, Jesus says,

"You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven."

God's Plan is to give us Hope in these troubled times. God's Plan is for us to sprinkle His Salt and add flavor and seasoning to people's lives. God's Plan is for us to bring His Light to help people find their way out of the darkness.

On this day I'd like to wish all of fathers, step-fathers, Grandfathers and Father in Laws a Happy Father's Day. I am the proud father of Ava LaSasso. Hearing Ava sing and give praise to God for so many years in this building is always special and emotional for me. There is nothing she loves more than God, her family and her friends. Being her dad is truly the most rewarding part of my life. And I have learned so much about compassion and empathy from Ava. I love you for that, and so many other reasons, Ava. I think we both learned compassion and empathy from her mother, my wife Dawn. She is the most beautiful woman in the world - inside and out. Dawn, my story and testimony is only worth telling because you are my wife and what I have become is because of you.

For me, this is a bitter sweet day; and is emotional for another reason. This is the first Father's Day I will not be able to celebrate with my Dad. Last October 6th, my father passed away due to complications from Parkinson's disease. My dad is my hero. I am proud of his life of service as a New Jersey State Trooper. I am also blessed that my dad was present and he cared. My dad never missed one of my baseball games. He always told me growing up: "Have Fun and Do the Best You Can." That's not just true in sports. It applies to life.

My Heavenly Father also gave me great advice for life. Jeremiah 29:11 says God's plan is to "Give you Hope." But when we use hope we usually define it as a wish: I hope I'm going to get a promotion or a good grade on that test, Hope that I get into the college that I want, I hope that I get good test results from the doctor, I hope this recent Phillies winning streak continues. It's Giving us Hope they will make the playoffs. God's Hope is different. It's not a wish, or in the case of our Phillies making the playoffs, a fantasy, God's hope is a guarantee. Hebrews 11:1 says, "Now faith is

being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.” Biblical Hope is a certainty. It’s having confidence that God’s plan is good.

God’s plan for me began to come together right here under this roof. How many of you have been a student, parent or teacher at Woodside Christian preschool? That’s exactly where our family’s faith journey picked back up in 2005. God started to sprinkle His Salt and shine His Light into our lives. I can see today that this didn’t happen by chance. It was part of God’s plan.

Here’s a picture of her Woodside Pre-K class from 2008 and a picture of the same group when they graduated high school last year in 2021. Back then, Dawn met Jennifer Uhlman, another Woodside mom. Jen the evangelist was probably Woodside’s first sprinkle of salt from God’s salt shaker. She simply invited Dawn and our family to attend a service at Woodside. With a little warning; that it’s not the same as the church we grew up attending. Our pastor, she said, is actually part of the band. Band?Band OK. Our first time was a Vacation Bible School Sunday with songs and skits. In one skit that guitar playing Pastor was sticking his arm in the toilet. Now, I’m not exactly sure what scripture passage mentions an arm in a toilet. But it worked. We were convinced this is the place for us. Not only did we join Woodside but for five years I became a part of those very same VBS skits. I had so much fun with those skits. I wasn’t sure if the kids were getting anything out of it, but I know I was.

The second truly life changing event at Woodside was participating in a growth group. I want to try something right now that Doug did back then. If you are part of a growth group, please stand up and stay standing. If you can’t stand, please raise your hand. If you ever were part of one, please stand. If you’re part of the youth group, you can stand too. For those of you still sitting, I know how you feel. My wife was standing next to me and I grabbed her arm and said sit down. She looked down on me and said, I’m part of a growth group, you’re not. You can all sit down now. Doug’s growth group recruitment tactic was going to lead me to be blessed with spiritual salt and inspiring light that continue to this day. And eventually we became salt and light for others.

At the end of that service, I got out of the sanctuary as quickly as possible. I told Dawn, I’ll go get Ava from Sunday School. I was a bit embarrassed. (plus I wanted to make sure Ava didn’t get too many of those giant candy bars that her Sunday School teacher, Cliff Hutchens, handed out.) As I quickly walked to the classrooms, I stopped at the sign up lists for growth groups. One stuck out, I saw the names Dan Regan and Ken Parker. I met Dan more than a decade earlier in 1991. We were both young sales reps for a company, and he was my boss. I actually didn’t realize Dan went here. Ken lived in our neighborhood. So I thought, okay, at least I know people. I’ll sign up for that group. Boy am I glad I did. These guys inspired me to find a better version of myself. They drew me out of my comfort zone. In addition to Ken and Dan there was John Hughes, Mike Gaul, Bud Schofield, Cliff Hutchens, Bill Pelosi, Jeff Hill, Geoff McKenzie and Wade Jacobsen. It was through these men, and this growth group that I was eventually introduced to Habitat for Humanity, The Woodside Dinner Ministry, Code Blue, Urban Promise, The Recovery Ministry, and building structures in the Tent City in Bristol for our homeless neighbors, to name a few. All of these extraordinary service opportunities, and a chance to shine God’s light, were all made possible by the ordinary men and women of Woodside. I also learned about Mission Trips. Each of these men went on multiple mission trips. In fact, Ken Parker came up with this bright idea to bring the Woodside Senior High Youth to the Bahamas. I drew the line there, Mission Trips sounded cool. But nope. Not for me. Way too far out of my comfort zone. Not part of my plan.

Oh, but of course, God had other plans for me. In time, Dan Schaal took over as the leader of the Bahama's Mission trip and in 2019 Ava and I were on a plane, heading to the Bahamas. Watching kids who I have known for years come out of their comfort zone, holding God's light high was inspirational and life changing.

Despite the hardships of COVID, our family life was going pretty well. Then things changed drastically in August 2021. Shortly after we dropped off Ava for her freshman year at Villanova, I was diagnosed with a very rare brain tumor called an acoustic neuroma; part of me laughed at God's irony; I've worked for more than 20 years for rare disease companies, helping to improve the lives of patients and caregivers. Now, I had one.

Frankly, it was quite a miracle that the tumor was even found. While it turned out to be a very large tumor, my only symptom was hearing loss in my right ear. I was pretty shocked when I read the diagnosis. So much so I didn't tell anyone, not even Dawn. Keeping it to myself for a week, and doing hours of research is not a good strategy for how to deal with a very scary situation.

That fall, Dawn started as an Assistant Teacher at Woodside Christian preschool the place where God's plan began to unfold 15 years ago. That was the same day I met with the neurosurgeon at Penn. He told me I needed surgery, I'd lose the hearing in my right ear, and there is a good chance I will have some facial paralysis for a few months; or years. It's hard to tell. Everyone is different. That news was a bit worse than I expected. At the end of that appointment. I sat on a bench by a fountain near Independence Hall. I cried, I talked to God; you know the typical why me stuff. As I was sitting there in my own world of darkness, a teacher brought a group of children who were about 4 years old into the park to play. At that very moment, I felt God's light. I thought about Ava at that age. I thought about Dawn being at Woodside at that very moment, with children the same age. The roller coaster was just beginning though.

A couple of weeks after I learned that I would need this pretty major brain surgery, my father passed away. I was trying to keep a positive attitude but it was hard. It was a lot to deal with. In some ways, I didn't really deal with it, I had a hard time focusing on anything, really. I was half grieving, half dealing with my own health. Eventually, after a really uplifting conversation with my cousin Frank, who had lost his dad, my Uncle less than a year ago, I started to do the things that I needed to do to prepare myself - a second opinion leading me to my surgeon Dr. Michael Sisti, at Columbia Presbyterian in New York, physical therapy to improve my balance before surgery, and more tests and MRIs.

From that point, until my surgery on December 28th, I remained mostly positive and upbeat, especially on the outside. There were some tough days however. Although I didn't admit it to anyone until after my surgery, I actually thought I was going to die. I prepared for it. I even wrote a letter to Dawn, with specific details including what readings and songs I wanted at my funeral. I was in a pretty dark place at points. The darkest was on the day of the surgery at 5:30AM, when we walked into the hospital. Because of COVID restrictions, there was a point where only I could go further. I hugged Ava and Dawn, truly believing that this was my final "I LOVE YOU". But, where there is darkness, there is light.

Everything changed a couple hours later, when I walked into that surgical suite that morning. I truly felt God's presence. It's hard to explain but I felt a peace and a strength that I had never felt before in my life. At that very moment, I was CERTAIN that I was going to be okay; of God's plan

to prosper me and not to harm me. God gave me HOPE. About 12 hours later, I opened my eyes...and it was Dawn. My wife Dawn, not the time of day.

With Dawn running the show at home, and with Ava as her side kick, my recovery went pretty smoothly. Just a few weeks of pain killers and steroids to reduce the swelling in my brain. How about that, they found a brain, by the way? A lot of physical therapy to improve my balance, and listening to my wife, was just the treatment to get me back to normal. While I did lose the hearing completely in my right ear, everything else came out pretty good. I truly feel blessed to be here today. I will need some follow up MRIs over the next few years to monitor the remaining tumor. But any other treatment will be minor compared to what I've already been through.

For so long, I always thought you had to do really big things to make a difference in this world. But God gives ordinary people opportunities to accomplish extraordinary things every single day, and these little things can make a profound difference in people's lives.

For me, one of those moments came during recovery on February 4th. That was the day Laura Cullen was diagnosed with the same rare disease as me. I did not know Laura but through a series of acquaintances which would make your head spin, including a connection right here to Woodside, God connected me with this lady from Long Island. Soon the salt and light which poured into our lives here at Woodside would touch Laura's life.

Two days after she received the news from the doctor, I was on the phone with Laura sharing my acoustic neuroma journey. I told her about my surgeon. I also opened up about my fears, including the irrational belief I was going to die. I shared what got me through the dark days: my wife and daughter, my faith in Jesus, the prayers from my friends and family, and my trust in God's plan. I read Jeremiah 29:11 to her: "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future." Dawn and I talked, texted and Face-Timed with Laura and her husband Michael a lot over the next month. Even the night before her surgery, we talked and prayed with them. Later, on Facebook, Laura said, "It is very difficult to find positive information on this. ...I am beyond fortunate that I was led to my new best friends. In our first text, Gary wrote 'I know that the time right after the diagnosis is scary, but know this, you are going to be okay.' That was it! The game changer for me. He changed everything for me with those few words. I went from fear to hope."

On March 2nd, Laura had a successful 8 hour surgery to remove most of her acoustic neuroma. During her surgery her husband Michael texted, "I'm not sure how you two made it through this without you two in your lives." It was truly humbling to know that we made that much of an impact on another person. It happened because God gave us that opportunity to be his salt and light. That was an emotional day for me. A couple hours later I was back at Woodside for the very first time since my surgery. It was the Ash Wednesday service. I had the chance to tell Doug about Laura. And that was when Pastor Doug invited me to give my testimony today.

God led an ordinary guy like me to do some extraordinary things with you, my Woodside family. God's plan brings Hope. I Hope you join God's plan.