

A St. Dysmas Blessing

My last service with my St Dysmas brothers was on Fri July 28, 2017. Afterwards, I said my goodbyes, and a few of them wrote down their information so I could keep in touch. Before the St Dysmas outside guest left, I was talking to Pastor Jason Burns about how my home plan fell through at the last minute, with 2 days left until my release date. My social worker at MCIJ told me the only places available were the first come – first serve homeless shelters in Balto City! He immediately called over to St Dysmas guest Terry Lockridge to discuss my situation. A minute or two later, a correctional officer came in and said it was time for the outside guest to leave. I was told by the Pastor and Terry, to make sure I go to Bible studies on Tuesday evening because the Chaplain would have some information for me. That's all I knew at this point and time.

On Tuesday evening, I waited in the lobby for the Chaplain to arrive. When she entered the lobby she greeted me with a big smile, and a thumbs up. She asked me did I have any family members that were willing to pick me up? I told her no, that I have no family what so ever here in Maryland. Her response was, you do have a family here in Maryland...my St Dysmas family. The Chaplain then told me that she would pick me up herself on Friday! Now I felt a sign of relief, knowing that I would get to the shelter on time.

After Bible study, the Chaplain pulled me aside and reassured me that she would be here and that everything would be okay. I informed the Chaplain that I was told beforehand, that they don't process you out until after 3:00, and I have to be at the shelter by 5:30, or no bed. She told me don't worry, I'll be here. Now that the table's been set, its 2 days and a wake up.

It was 12 noon when I heard my name called over the loud speaker to pack it up, your being released. My heart and mind started racing with fear and anticipation as I gathered my belongings. After 14 years of being locked up, the only think I could think of was getting to Baltimore by 5:30 so I could secure a bed, and meeting my parole officer Monday. I did have one good thing going for me, instead of taking the light rail into Baltimore...then getting a transfer or two on a bus, I had the Chaplain from St Dysmas taking me there, a true blessing in itself. I got to Process and Receiving at 12:15, I already knew this was going to be a long afternoon.

As time went by, I answered questions, signed paperwork, got photographed from my ID card, had my fingerprints taken, and received my new birth certificate and social security card. BY this time its 4:30PM. I asked the woman who was processing me out, if I could use the phone to call my ride. She tell's me that "the people were I'm going are picking me up"? That was my first inkling that something else was going on besides our previous plans.

A correctional officer walked me to the main entrance where they discharge you at, and that's when I seen my new driver for the first time – Chaplain Paula from St Dysmas! I walked out the front door a free man with Chaplain Paula and her husband Mick, which I've met multiple times at Friday night services. Its now almost 5:00.

We get into the car, and the Chapin hands me a cell phone and says this is for you, it's yours to keep, plus 1-month service! She tells me that they found me a place in Pasadena, but, I have to do a phone interview first with the guy who runs the place. About 10 minutes into our ride there we call. The guy

goes through a whole series of questions about my past, and because of my record, I wouldn't be able to stay there.

Mick found a place to pull over so we could figure out what to do next. Since we were in front of T.G.I.F., Chaplain Paula suggested we have dinner and come with plan B. They decided to get me a motel room in Annapolis for Friday and Saturday night, then on Sunday afternoon I would meet up with Pastor Rickel from St Dymas in Catonsville. Chaplain Paula and Mick picked me up Saturday morning and they took me out for brunch. Afterwards, they took me out shopping for clothes: pants, shirts, underwear, socks, shoes, wallet, and a backpack. They also treated me to lunch and dinner at two nice restaurants.

Sunday morning was checkout time. The Chaplain and Mick picked me up, we went to brunch, then went to Saint Martins Lutheran Church in Annapolis for service.

We had a few hours to waste before we meet up with Pastor Rickel, so they took me sight seeing around the Annapolis area, then we stopped for some lunch. Afterwards, we went to Arundel Mills Mall to meet Pastor Rickel, but not before buying a pair of shoes and a walk through the Bass Pro Shop.

We met up with Pastor Rickel outside the mall. I said my goodbyes to Chaplain Paula and Mick, and thanked them over and over again for all their hospitality and generosity they've shown me over the last 3 days. It was late Sunday afternoon when I left with Pastor Rickel. He told me of a mens shelter in Catonsville he wanted to check out on the grounds of the old Spring Grove Psychiatric Hospital. We went in and asked if they had any beds available. The man said yes, but you have to go to social services first and get a recommendation from them. We left the shelter and started making plans for Monday morning. Pastor Rickel then got me a motel room for the night at the Ramada Inn, not far from his Church in Catonsville.

Monday morning the Pastor picks me up, and we go to social services so I can apply for medical assistance, food card, and get the recommendation for the shelter. I get the recommendation, but theres a catch to it. You have to call this special social services hotline at exactly 8:30 in the morning. In other words, if the shelter has 3 beds available, the first 3 callers that get through get the beds.

After social services, I have to report to Parole and Probation in Glen Burnie. When we get there they tell me that they don't do intake at the Glen Burnie office...that I have to go to Annapolis Parole and Probation off Rowe Blvd for intake, then they assign me a parole agent back at the Glen Burnie office! After all that running around, the day was pretty much over with. With still no place to lay my head, Pastor Rickel put me up again at the Ramada Inn. My plans for Tuesday morning was to call the social services hot line at 8:30 to reserve a bed. Well that didn't work out to good.

Having never used a cell phone before, I ran into all kinds of problems trying to get through. It took me close to 20 minutes before I talked to someone, and by then it was to late, the beds they had available were already taken...try again in the morning.

The other plan for Tuesday was to get to the social security office in Columbia. It was already prearranged by Pastor Rickel, that I call Pastor Jason Burns from St Dymas for my ride there.

My appointment went well. Afterwards, the Pastor took me out to eat dinner, then dropped me back off at the Ramada Inn. Once in the lobby, I called Pastor Rickel to give him an update on todays events.

I told him about not getting through on time with the social services hot line, so he said that St Dysmas has enough funds left for one more night, thank you lord! I met Pastor Rickel in the lobby, he paid for my room, then we sat and talked for a while. I made sure I knew how to make a phone call properly without hanging up on myself before the call even goes through.

The next morning got up early and showered, got my things together for check out time, and waited patiently for 8:30 to roll around. The closer it got the more prayers I said, this has got to be the day lord. At 8:29 I called the number, and on the 2nd ring a womans voice said hello, how can I help you? I said I'm calling about a bed at the Westside Mens Shelter. She said I was the 1st caller and they do have a few beds open. I gave her my name then she told me to be at the shelter between 4 & 6 PM. I called Pastor Rickel with the good news, then we made arrangements on what time he would take me to the shelter.

I now finally have a place to lay my head for the next 3 months, thanks to the combined efforts of the Saint Dysmas Aftercare Program. It is a true blessing what these Pastors, Chaplain, Volunteers (Terry Lockridge) and Secretaries (Susie) have done for me. They truly are a blessing and a gift of inspiration and hope. I hate to even think about where my life would be at right now without the help that Saint Dysmas has provided. They took me under their wings when I had no direction where I would be going after serving 14 years in prison.

2 Corinthians 5:5 "I will walk by faith even when I can not see."

Thirty three days after my release, I landed a full time job at Jiffy Lube servicing vehicles. I am finally starting to feel like a productive member of society again. That you Saint Dysmas.

Special Thanks To:

Pastor Gerry Rickel, Salem Lutheran Church

Pastor David Asendorf, Salem Lutheran Church

Susie, Secretary at Salem Lutheran Church

Chaplain Paula Thistle & Mick Thistle

Terry Lockridge

Pastor Jason Burns

And anyone else I might have missed that helped my along the way.