

My name is Linda Bridwell, and I have been a member at Blessed Sacrament since 1992. I have 3 sons, now all in their 20's who went to the school here. I want to share an experience with you that has been a life-changer for me, but to do that I need to take you back to the beginning of Holy Week, year 2001, a Holy Week I will never forget.

The beginning of the week crashed onto me with news that would forever change my life and that of my family. The details aren't necessary, but know that it shocked me out of my naïve view of happy family life. Reminds me of our first reading today from Isaiah:

“all our good deeds are like polluted rags;  
we have all withered like leaves,  
and our guilt carries us away like the wind.”

That is exactly how I felt at the time, crying a lot, as pain and betrayal was hitting me like a brick. The Holy Week Services weren't at the top of my list, hearing about Jesus suffering and dying only reminded me of my own plight, but decided to let God back in for Holy Thursday. The chant and prayer in basement grabbed hold of me, and I came back for Good Friday.

I arrived at the Good Friday service, alone and exhausted. I sat in the back, trying to hide from anyone I knew. Everything so important to me, my family, my home, my values were questioned. But what happened in following moments changed my life forever.

It began while waiting in line to venerate the cross. Fr Stan walked the cross down the church aisle and pounding it loudly in aisle, which felt like the nails pounding in my heart. At the 3<sup>rd</sup> time stomping the cross, something happened! The Ryan Family and Friends were singing “Precious Lord, Take My Hand,” the music was stirring something in my soul, I felt weak as I went towards the cross, like I was going to pass out; and felt so afraid. The music was all I was hearing, as I came closer to the cross, I noticed my body was trembling, wondering if I'd totally lost it. But then something remarkable happened! I was suddenly alone in this church with Jesus's cross. As my hand touched the fragmented wood, I felt this peace enter every fiber of my being, a warmth of love engulfed me from head to toe. I felt great love and compassion coming thru me, above me, around me. There was a glowing light that was not just around the cross, but around me as well. The light was the cross and the light was

me, there was no separation; I felt one with this cross. Then I heard a still small voice, not a loud one, not even soft, but one that pierced me at the heart region and spread throughout my body and mind. The voice was clear with great resonating. "Be Still and Know that I am God." I can't explain the love I felt with these words. They simply don't make words big enough or complete enough to do this. The only way I can begin to convey this love to you is to say that there was simply nothing else there. Nothing but love. No hint of judgment, no worries, no fear of the future. Nothing but love. I really don't know how long I was actually up there, but I found myself on my knees. Then the music resumed and I made my way back to collapse in my pew. There were some Dominican Sisters behind me that were tending to my racing heart, and sweaty body. I could not stop shaking!

So what happened to me? I wasn't sure what to do with this experience. I spoke with Fr. Stan the next day, Holy Saturday. He totally validated what happened to me, seemed excited by my story. He likened it to Saul, getting knocked off his horse. He told me that my life and the people in my life would never be the same from this experience. He encouraged me to tell someone else about it, and to pray! I turned to a good friend, Annette Cleary. Her response to me after listening intently, was to hug me and wish me "Happy Easter". She said I needed time away from my stress to think and pray about this, she set up a 3-day silent retreat for me at the St Benedict Center. She sent me with a candle, notebook, music and some books to help me.

It was an amazing three days. Was this a gift of grace from God? Did connect with my pain? After much prayer, it seemed that yes, I did have great pain, but what happened to me showed me that God is so much bigger than what I was experiencing. In fact as time went on, things got much worse for me, but I felt assured that I would be OK, no matter what got thrown at me. This was so much more than being about me. On the last night, as I searched the flame of my candle for some deeper answers, the love I felt on Good Friday once again permeated my body and a voice clearly said: "Linda, Love the child." I remember the clarity of hearing my name spoken.

Well that seemed easy enough, to love the child. Not knowing what this meant, I began to write about my 3 sons. I wrote pages on my love for them, what I treasured in them, what was beautiful and unique about them.

I prayed for their future wives, and thanked God for them. Then my pen went to their friends, and I found myself praying for them as well. And since then?

I have simply followed what God told me that night. To love the child. I felt this playful, joyous energy behind my motives, like it was where I was supposed to be. I learned that this Parish is chock full of amazing kids to love, and whether it has been coaching a junior high football team, being involved in Catholic Heart Mission Trips, the Confirmation program, the Teen Mass, or my favorite, the Salvation Army Homeless Shelter, I feel ablaze from that Good Friday encounter I had ten years ago. I felt like Jesus gave me a glimpse of Heaven on that day, and I will never forget it. But the real message for me was so simple and so easy, to love the child! And for this I have been truly blessed. I wish you all a beautiful Advent, as we all anticipate how to once again, love the Christ-child, who comes to change us all!