

One of the things that all of us have to deal with at various points is change in our lives. From discerning a new job, getting married, or welcoming a child, we never know what tomorrow will bring. But this of course does not mean that we walk in the darkness. For God is always there to guide us along, and the challenge for us all is to be open to the changes that life brings, even if they may be painful, and also to trust in the Church.

One man who has dealt with a lot of change in his life is David Wheaton, who has written for the Star Tribune and is today is into radio. But for 30 years, he was a professional tennis player. And he had no idea what life would bring him. With it came change. But also with it came the stability that God gave him when a dog entered his life, using that dog to help open his heart to new plans God had for him.

In April of 1998, he sat on the bed in a tiny hotel room, getting ready to head off to practice for the Japan Open, with one thing on his mind. And it wasn't what you might think.

For the last 10 years he had competed all over the world on the professional tennis tour. He'd reached the semifinals at Wimbledon and been ranked as high as twelfth in the world. Tennis was his life.

David says he is a "praying guy," so you'd think he'd be asking God to help him get his serve right before his first match. But his mind was on something else. It was time to give up his dream. The dream he'd been holding on to for the past two years—one that had nothing to do with tennis.

His dream was to get a dog. A yellow Lab, to be exact.

David reflects that the life of a professional tennis player—nine months of the year on the road—was not a recipe for responsible dog ownership. But ever since his fitness coach took him pheasant hunting for the first time with his friends and their dogs, he'd been obsessed.

He couldn't stop thinking about how intelligent and well-trained the dogs were. How they were like teammates to their owners.

They reminded him of the dogs he'd grown up with on Lake Minnetonka. David was the youngest of four, nearly nine years behind his next oldest sibling. By the time he was in fourth grade, he was the only child at home.

His closest companions were two Siberian huskies. They were outside dogs and loved running around in the cold. His parents gave him a wooden dog sled one Christmas, and many a winter day he'd hitch the huskies to the sled, jump on and take off across the frozen lake like he was in the Iditarod.

Maybe that's why he was drawn to Labs. Not only were they excellent companions, they served a solid purpose. That was the odd part of his dream he says. Even though they

lived on a lake famous for great fishing, his family wasn't into fishing or hunting. They were sports-centered.

His mom's father taught her and his older siblings to play tennis. So when he came along, it was no surprise that David picked up a racket when he was four. By nine David was playing at Nationals. Later, he received a tennis scholarship to Stanford and left after one year to turn pro. He had been competing on the tour ever since.

After that outing with his fitness coach, David was set on finding a Lab to be a hunting companion.

There was a big stumbling block, though: Who would take care of his dog while he was away on tour? David was single and lived alone. His siblings had their own lives. His parents lived nearby, but they were nearing 70.

"David, we don't want that kind of responsibility at our age," Mom told him. "We have had enough dogs to know we have had enough of dogs!"

It was time to let go of his dream. He felt like a little kid who'd just found out the Christmas gift he'd prayed for all year wasn't under the tree.

Then a paper slipped under the door of his hotel room. A fax, from Mom.

This wasn't unusual. She often sent faxes with news and encouragement from home, with some tennis tips and Bible verses mixed in.

What was unusual was how she began: "I came across a beautiful yellow Lab on my morning walk through the neighborhood," she wrote. "His owner lives a few blocks from us. But I've never seen his dog before." That's odd, he thought.

She described the dog's beautiful coat, big brown eyes, cheerful personality. "If I ever got a dog," she closed with, "I would get one just like that."

"If she ever got a dog? Was this really my mom? Hadn't she told me that she was done with dogs? What had gotten into her?" David thought to himself.

The next day, there was another fax from his Mom, this one even more bewildering. "I called the dog's breeder to find out more about her dogs and breeding philosophy." The day after that, another fax arrived with this previously unimaginable statement: "I sent the breeder a down payment on a puppy today."

"What?! You could've knocked me over with a feather." After all, hadn't she just said she didn't want another dog in her life?

David wishes he could say the news inspired him to swashbuckle his way through the Japan Open, but he lost in the early rounds and flew home.

They went to visit the litter of puppies. One of them, a male, looked straight out of a dog show. He had an athletic build, a beautiful buff-colored coat and almond-shaped brown eyes. He walked over to David and fell asleep with his little head resting on his shoe.

He was the one. David knew it.

It didn't take long for David to see that Ben was no ordinary dog. His puppy misbehavior—chewed shoes, accidents, nipping—was minimal. He learned basic commands quickly. He was intelligent, gentle and thoughtful.

His dad built a dog run but Ben never spent a night in it. He just seemed to belong right with David and his parents, wherever they were. When he was on the road for tournaments, Mom and Dad were happy to dog-sit. He called home and got updates every day.

Soon he started Ben's training. That turned their walks into an adventure. "Fetch it, Ben!" He'd shout, throwing his rubber retrieving dummy into the marsh that bordered a street in his neighborhood. He'd disappear into the cattails...then burst out with the dummy in his mouth and tail wagging.

"Atta boy," David would say, patting his head. Sometimes he would hide. He'd always find him too.

If David knocked a tennis ball over the fence while practicing, Ben would run into the trees to find it, sifting through the dozens of balls that had landed there. Minutes later, he'd trot out proudly with the exact ball that David had hit—never anyone else's—in his mouth.

Everywhere David went, Ben went too. Now he knew why Jacob in the Bible named his son Benjamin, meaning "son of my right hand." That's what Ben was to him. David loved him dearly and deeply. Ben brought something to his life that he never knew a dog could.

The year Ben was three, 2001, was a time of change. David had been dating Brodie, a girl he had known for most of his life, but that year they broke up. He retired from the professional tennis tour.

David was in his early thirties, and injuries had taken their toll. He continued to play parttime in senior's tournaments as he set out to discover the answer to the question What's next after tennis?

One thing made the transition easier: Ben. God brought Ben to him at just the right time, he thought. So he said to himself, I've got to trust that he has new and good plans in store for me.

David was driving with his parents one day, listening to the radio, when out of the blue Mom posed a question that was more like an answer: "David, have you ever thought about getting into radio?"

He hadn't. But a few weeks later he got an unlikely phone call from a radio station, asking if he'd like to host one of their programs. Soon he was producing and hosting The Christian Worldview every week...with Ben at his feet in the studio.

After recording, it was time for The David and Ben Show. They loved heading up to Lake Superior for fun. "Careful, boy!" He'd say, before tossing his dummy into the rough, freezing surf. No matter how high the waves were, Ben dove in with his signature resolve.

Soon after he turned eight though, Ben got sick. At first David thought it might just be fatigue, but when he stopped eating he took him straight to the vet. The diagnosis was devastating: prostate cancer.

David was heartbroken. He cried out to God, "Why did you bring Ben into my life only to take him away so soon?"

Treatment failed. He couldn't bear to see him suffer anymore. Mom and Dad couldn't either. They called the vet, who came to the house. She assured us them they were making the right decision to put him down.

Ben was lying on the couch, nodding in and out of sleep. He'd lost a lot of weight, but his face still had that look of serenity and nobility. David put his arm around him and buried his head in his neck. "That's my boy," he whispered. "You'll always be my boy." The vet found a vein in Ben's rear leg and administered the injection. He turned his head to look, then rested it back on the couch and closed his eyes.

"His heart has stopped," the vet said quietly. "He's gone."

David remained slumped over him, gently stroking his side.

It wasn't until he watched the vet leave with his beloved Ben that a dam inside him broke. Mom and Dad wept for hours with him. "I'm so grateful to have had Ben," he said. "I just don't understand why he had to leave so soon."

David remembered how Ben had come into his life right when he was about to give up his dream of getting a dog. And yet God moved to make his dream come true. He even changed his parents' minds.

He knew Ben would teach him how to live more fully and love more deeply. In the midst of his grief, God expanded his understanding of his higher plans for us, and his grace.

And that happened in his vocation too. He got back together with Brodie, and they've been married for ten. They have a son, Tommy, and—not one but two Labs, Gracie and Billy.

All because his boy Ben opened his heart.

Sometimes it's a dog, sometimes it's a new friendship, or just something we least expect. But God is always going to come along when we least expect it and open our hearts. Because He is not a God who is distant and removed; but a God who is here and with us always.

Jesus in the Gospel gives us a hint that He won't be here forever. "You heard me tell you I am going away and I will come back to you." The Gospel comes from the Last Supper, and Jesus promises that the disciples will have peace, but the Holy Spirit will come to be with them too, the Advocate who will teach them everything and remind them of all that Jesus had told Him.

As the saying goes, God works in mysterious ways. Some things change; but other things always stay the same. And for you and me, we have to be open to being like the clay formed by the hands of the sculptor. Where is God leading you? How can you find the way? Do you listen to His plans?

For one, we trust in God's plan for guidance.

Part of that comes through our own personal prayer life and relationship with God. At our listening sessions last week, one of the things that came up was how to increase attendance at Masses. One suggestion was to look at programs offered such as speakers, or even liturgy. And those things matter a great deal, but I'd contend that what is needed is greater catechesis. So that people understand that God is there to guide them, from womb to tomb. So that they have a personal relationship with God. So that they understand that what makes our Catholic faith unique is that this is not one Church among many - Jesus did not do that - He created one, holy, Catholic and apostolic Church, and in our Church we have the Real Presence - Jesus Himself, His Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity. This is why when we receive Communion and when we pray, we need to trust that Jesus is going to journey with us through the day and week ahead. And why we need to listen to Him too what do you have planned for me next? David wasn't thinking of a dog but was giving up; his parents seemed closed to getting one too. But then they listened to the promptings of the spirit and into their lives entered Ben who changed them all for the better. Change can be painful or scary; but we need to trust that God will see us through it.

Closely related to that personal relationship though is the gift of the Church, who is there to guide and challenge. The Church has been through much, but the Holy Spirit is there to guide her. We see that in the First Reading, where the Church discerns the rules for people coming into the faith who were not Jewish and makes changes. We need to trust that the Holy Spirit will guide the Church. We need to trust that our pope

and bishop do not err in teaching of faith and morals. This is the Church created by Jesus. We do not come here for entertainment. And we can't be like the fair weather Catholic who doesn't like what the pope or bishops have to say so they leave the Catholic faith for the evangelical church because it has a coffee bar, a positive upbeat message each week and praise and worship music. One of the questions asked at our listening sessions was if the abuse scandals had impacted people's attendance or giving. Not too many people said it had. I'm certain it has impacted our Church as a whole. But one person also said he was convinced some left because they were looking for an excuse to leave. There could be truth to that. Indeed, there should be anger at how some bishops handled the abuse scandal. But I truly believe the Church has learned much from this and implemented so much change for the better. And we also can't forget that one of the first priests ever ordained was Judas, who betrayed Jesus for 30 pieces of silver, and another was a man who promptly denied Him three times right after the conclusion of the first Mass. The Church though has endured through so much, which is why we have to trust Her to shepherd us through life and to help us become saints. The Church will never fail. Jesus said so. Do we trust His words?

Lastly, we have to ask ourselves if we are truly open to change. It's so easy to get stuck in a rut in life. Or to be stubborn. Certain things are fine to be stubborn about, but we also have to ask ourselves if we are fighting against the Holy Spirit. So much in life changes though and change, as David's story illustrates, can bring about such good, but it also can entail growing pains. Changes happen in our families as kids age and we transition after a graduation or they leave the house; they happen in parishes when parishes merge or programs change; they happen in our universal Church when the pope or bishops under the guidance of the Holy Spirit teach us, and they happen in our personal lives all the time. God has big plans for you. So it's important to listen when He may be telling you through prayer or the voice of a loved one or some life event when it's time for a change. Peter was pretty set in his ways about the requirements for Gentiles prior to the first reading. God gives him a dream though and Peter listens, and because of the change he was open to the Church grew by leaps and bounds. So may we too be open to good change can bring.

Twelve years ago this weekend, a big change happened in my life. I knelt before Archbishop Flynn, and then laid on the floor as people prayed the Litany of the Saints, and I was ordained a priesthood. That priesthood has seen so many changes now in bishops, parishes, and has had it's ups and downs as I've navigated administration, personnel, successes and setbacks. But God always has a way of bursting in and surprising me in the most amazing of ways. Eight years ago when I became a pastor, like David I was able to have a dream come true in that I could finally get a dog. And so with a bit of searching, I was told to come visit a home in Eden Prairie where a lady who fosters golden retrievers had a dog in mind for me. A happy go lucky large fluffy dog prompted to jump on on me, and I knew then and there after I said "would you like to come home with me" that he was the one. A few days later Kirby came by, and then promptly introduced himself to my living room carpet in a less than ideal way. Not too long after while grocery shopping I came home to learn he decided to exit the home through a screen window because he wanted to go to his space outside. But through his

life, he changed me for the better and helped me through some of the most trying moments of my priesthood, but also brought so much joy. Just like Ben, Kirby succumbed to prostate cancer. And with that of course was pain at saying goodbye. But then two months ago, when I was looking but not looking as I have some summer travel come up, unsolicited a family calls me up and says they are looking at a new home for their dog, a golden retriever whom they love with all their heart but are so busy with work, school and sports, and might I like to visit with him. The family came over, and this dog too made a visit to the living room that resulted in something far less smelly than Kirby's first visit but nonetheless required a few sprays, and he walked around the house and felt at ease. Emmett's been in my life now for just over a month, and with him is change too - a large furry head shows up on my pillow just before 5 each morning, and rests in my lap each time I'm about to have a meal, and plastic bags are again in my pocket. But I also see him change others too. We visited a third grade class to talk about kindness towards one another, and he promptly went to each desk and greeted each child to teach them about unconditional love. I truly believe God speaks to us through our pets as dogs especially just love and teach us how to do the same to we understand what Jesus is talking about in the Gospel.

Jesus in preparing to leave the apostles knows that the road ahead for them won't be easy. He'll be with them in a different way, but so will the Spirit, and the same is true for us. Life is a blessing, but as we all know it has so many ups and downs, joys and pains. But like the apostles, we are not alone. So like them, and like David, may we listen to what God is telling us, and trust in His plan, for when we do we'll find that while change is sometimes hard, what great things will happen through us when God shows us how to use the gifts we've been given.