

In just a few weeks, my nephew Henry will be setting out on a new adventure, starting kindergarten for the first time. Most of us remember that part of our lives. And while I don't remember the first day specifically, I do remember it being a bit of a change from my morning routine of kids shows and the safety and comfort of home. And in the years that followed, school and growing up brought with it many ups and downs. There were some tough classes, some tough people to deal with, some smooth spots and rough spots. But there was also the need to trust that through the inevitable challenges, that as a person if I wanted to grow I had to trust in God's plan, but also be willing to trust that God might take me to places that required me to do new things if I wanted to change as a person.

If you were to look up the name Vin Baker, you would find one of the assistant coaches of the NBA. An astute basketball mind would remember him as a player for the Timberwolves for one season. But if you were to look at his life, what you'd find is a man who at one point had become stuck in a rut, a very dangerous one that seemed that it would never change. And to find the way out of that, he'd have to trust in God and reach out to Him, trust in other people, and realize that what he was clinging to wasn't fulfilling him, but destroying him.

In a story he wrote last December, he begins by asking “What’s the best job I ever had? The answer might seem obvious at first. From 1993 to 2006, he was a professional basketball player, a four-time NBA All-Star. He went to the playoffs multiple times with the Seattle SuperSonics and the New York Knicks and won a gold medal representing the United States in the 2000 Olympics. He earned millions doing what he loved.

A no less worthy answer might be the jobs he held after his NBA career was behind him. For three years, Baker was a youth minister at Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem, one of New York City’s most vibrant places of worship. Two years ago, he joined the staff of the Milwaukee Bucks, the NBA team that had drafted him right out of college. He’s now an assistant coach. Illustrious career, right?

Well, maybe. But you could make a case he says that the best job he ever had wasn’t related to basketball at all. That was the year he spent as a barista making lattes and macchiatos at a Starbucks.

Baker held that job from 2015 to 2016. At the time, He was a recovering alcoholic looking for a new direction in life. That NBA career? He was cut from the last team he played for in 2006, after it became clear to coaches that he couldn't get a handle on his drinking. His struggle with alcohol began during his earliest days as a pro player and lasted until he hit rock bottom in 2011. By that point, Baker was broke and living at his parents' house in Old Saybrook, Connecticut, drinking a gallon of cognac a day and waiting for the alcohol to kill him. How did he sink so low? How did serving gourmet coffee help him climb back? The answer to those questions is a God story he says, pure and simple.

Baker says he has no excuses for the addiction that wrecked his basketball career. He had a happy childhood in a stable home. His father worked as a mechanic and as a Baptist minister. His mom worked for a cosmetics company. His loving, faithful, no-nonsense parents didn't even push him into basketball.

Baker was a standout at a small college—the University of Hartford—and was the Bucks' first-round draft pick in 1993. He was 22 years old. Six feet, 11 inches. A center and power forward.

He was also plagued by anxiety. He had grown up straitlaced and attached to his parents. He often went home for the weekend in college. The swagger of some athletes didn't come naturally to him, especially under the glare of the NBA spotlight.

It didn't take Baker long to discover the cure for his on-court nerves and off-court shyness.

It probably will not surprise you, he says to learn there is a widespread party culture in the NBA. Many players are young, insecure and thrust into a world of sudden wealth, fame and public scrutiny. They deal with the pressure by drinking, smoking marijuana and throwing around money at clubs.

Baker was a faithful, churchgoing Christian through college. Those habits began to break down as his basketball career took off. Soon he was joining other guys on the team for postgame all-nighters, drinking and smoking weed at clubs.

The first time he drank hard with the guys, he made a wonderful discovery. His anxiety disappeared! He became the life of the party. He came to the conclusion that alcohol and marijuana were perfectly acceptable ways for a pro athlete to relieve the stress of a high-pressure job.

The path of his addiction was all too predictable. He went from partying occasionally after games to drinking almost every night. Somewhere along the way, Baker discovered he actually played better while buzzed (or so he thought). So he drank before games. Soon he was drinking every day, just to stave off the agony of hangovers and withdrawal. He was a hard-core alcoholic.

Baker bounced from team to team. He gained weight and got sent to rehab. He was suspended, then reinstated. He developed a gambling habit. He became addicted to anxiety pills. One Xanax-fueled night in Las Vegas, he blew \$100,000 at blackjack.

He had children but didn't get married. At best, he was an absentee father. When he was let go from his last team—the Minnesota Timberwolves in 2006—he had little savings. A disastrous restaurant venture left him

essentially broke. His house was repossessed. He moved back to his parents' house and waited to die.

So where does Starbucks come in? Baker entered rehab for the fifth time in 2011. His father drove him. There was no reason for him to hope. Except this time Baker had begged God for help.

And God answered. He found a commitment to sobriety he'd never experienced before. He returned to his childhood church where his dad was still a pastor—and threw himself into Bible studies and volunteer work.

There was just one problem. Baker needed income. And now that he was reaching out to his children and trying to repair the relationships he had destroyed, his financial obligations were growing.

Out of inspiration, he called Howard Schultz, the founder and CEO of Starbucks. Howard had owned the Seattle SuperSonics when Baker played for them. He was someone he admired who could give him advice about his future.

Howard gave him more than advice. First he set him up with Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem. He was friends with Dr. Calvin Butts, the pastor. Baker worked as a youth minister while attending Union Theological Seminary. He had thoughts of going into ministry, though he wasn't sure.

After returning to Old Saybrook as a licensed minister and marrying the mother of his children, he once again needed income. And once again Howard Schultz came through. He was mystified by his offer: train to become a Starbucks manager. His previous attempt at business—the restaurant he opened—was a spectacular bust. Baker never worked behind a counter in his life. And he knew nothing about coffee. But he needed a job, so he said yes.

“It was the best decision I ever made,” he says.

As he puts it: “Here’s the thing about the NBA: It’s not real life. It’s hard work on the court. But it’s a collective fantasy. A place for fans, for entire cities, to project their aspirations. The wealth is mind-blowing. The schedule is grueling. Players travel all the time. It’s hotel rooms and luxury lockers and pulsing arenas and media glare. For young players, it’s easy to

confuse the fantasy with reality. Working retail? That's reality. Especially when you work your way from barista through all the jobs you'll eventually manage—if you make it.”

Baker was given an easy shift at first—8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., avoiding the morning and evening rush. Still, the work exhausted him. He had no idea there were so many variations on coffee. He had to learn them all. How to make them and customize them. How to work the register and keep the store supplied and clean.

Soon he was waking up earlier than he ever had in his life to open the store. Getting behind the drive-through microphone was like strapping in for a road race. Orders came fast. Every one was different.

He made a lot of mistakes. Once, an impossibly complex order came in. He was reduced to punching random buttons on the register and hoping for the best. When the customer drove up—it was his training supervisor!

“Gotcha!” she shouted. He was relieved to see her smiling. Because he had messed up that order, start to finish.

Working at Starbucks was the hardest job he ever did. Baker says he loved it. All he had to do was win the day.

He loved waking up early—and sober—and heading to work like everyone else in the world. He loved being part of a team that was working to serve other people.

“Look, I know I’m supposed to be your boss,” he told employees when he took on more management duties. “But I realize you know more about this place than I do. Let’s just help each other out and work together.”

Help each other out. Work together.

On his best days in the NBA, life felt like that. But he didn’t have many best days in the NBA. Mostly he was so lost in his own insecurity, so weighed down by vanity and ambition, he sought release in all the wrong places.

Howard Schultz is a wise man, Baker says. Working at Starbucks showed him that a life of service—the life Jesus wants us to live—can happen

anywhere. In the NBA, he'd been the fantasy Vin Baker, the basketball star pouring alcohol into an inner void. At Starbucks he was just Vin Baker. And he loved it. "I needed it," he says.

Eventually basketball came calling again, and John Horst and Mike Budenholzer, the general manager and head coach of the Milwaukee Bucks, gave him an opportunity to be on the staff of his first NBA team. It was a God-given chance to take what he had learned at Starbucks and in recovery and offer it to young players in desperate need of a veteran's hard-won wisdom.

Baker has been sober for 8 years now. He thanks God for every sober day he lives. He thanks him for the many opportunities he has been given—especially the opportunity to live again after so much self-destruction. To live at last in the realness of God.

This week in the second reading, we are given a challenge, and that is to trust in God. To not live in fantasy land, or just be content with the status quo, but to realize that God is calling us to do new things with our lives. Sometimes that means a big change like Vin Baker went through

confronting big problems. But it can also mean starting school, a new job, or pursuing a vocation. Inevitably, it's a challenge. But inevitably, as Baker found out, it will bring about so many good things.

The author of the letter to the Hebrews says: "Brothers and sisters: Faith is the realization of what is hoped for and evidence of things not seen." He then talks about Abraham who has his own journey; called to go out and going out "not knowing where he was to go" and dealing with many ups and downs, but in the end ending up having descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as sands on the seashore. He does this with faith; to let go of himself, and to trust in God. And the challenge for us is to do the same.

It starts by regularly asking ourselves what needs to change in our lives.

First, sometimes there is a sin we need to look at. Some hit rock bottom like Baker or have a sin, struggle or addiction that just overwhelms them. And it can be easy to just think "I can never change this" but his first step was to reach out for help, to seek the help of others and most importantly God.

But often it's not even a sin, but just time to do something new. Think of Bilbo and Frodo from the Hobbit and Lord of the Rings; they leave the comfort of the shire because there is a bigger plan that needs to unfold that they are to be a part of. When asked where they are going, Bilbo responds "on an adventure." Life is the same way. I shared before how I almost didn't enter seminary right after college because I was panicked thinking how can I do this, I've just finished college, I need to slow down and work a year or two and think this all through, but I changed my mind when no one picked up the phone at the seminary who I was going to tell I'm not coming to. I was so blessed Fr. Ron Bowers, the vice rector, wasn't in that day - it gave me time to just think it all through and realize that God wanted me to go. But I had to take that step. Maybe God is tapping you on the shoulder too and saying be a catechist, be an usher, be a lector, coach your kid's team, apply for that new position, or step down from that committee you love to be on one you never thought of joining. I've heard Pope Francis use the term "God of surprises" so listen to Him.

When you do that, it's important to remember that He will be with you every step of the way to lead you through, but that change is inevitably tough. We

go to kindergarten but eventually we find learning new things is tough, and sometimes in school we deal with a difficult teacher or even a bully. A new job has it's ups and downs. We get married and find we love the person but they have some annoying habits or can sometimes drive us crazy.

Whatever the change is, setting off on that new adventure will bring it's valleys with the peaks. Baker did not envision serving coffee as a career, but he embraced it with humility and it led him to something he thought he'd never achieve. Hopefully we too realize that achieving our dreams and goals by following God's plan is a long haul effort, a marathon not a sprint, and keep persisting at it remembering that when we do, so many amazing things await.

Lastly, we always have to remember, God is in control, so let go, let God! Sometimes we want to do things "our way" and can get stubborn. That's fine if you are talking about say ketchup on a steak (in my case) or your choice of where to travel to, but not for a faith journey. For instance, change happens in the Church; the universal Church understands God's teaching more deeply, and may change the liturgy, or issue a new clarification on teaching. In parishes, things change too; pastors working with the people of God lead a community through changes such as

mergers, new programs, and building projects. And among people we know, they discern their vocations. Sometimes God is calling them to something, but a person can stand in the way - just read the story of say Thomas Aquinas, Francis of Assisi, Catherine of Siena or many saints where their parents wanted them to do something else other than a religious vocation. We always have to remember the Holy Spirit guides our Church and one another, and we are participants, but we have to “let go, let God” and trust that He’ll guide people and our Church and on our part, give input and counsel, but make sure we are never trying to be too controlling.

God has a plan for you and for me. Vin Baker I’m sure would love to be a part of a championship team, but he wants something even better than the Larry O’Brien trophy - he wants the crown of eternal life, which required changing and following God’s plan. So have faith in God, knowing that just as with Abraham, he is saying to you and me go forth, have faith, the assurance of all things hoped for. The journey might be difficult at times, but when we trust in God and listen to Him, what amazing things await us that eye can not see and ear cannot hear.