

It goes without saying that life can at times be incredibly challenging and at times scary. And as we hear those words from Isaiah, “the people who have walked in darkness have seen a great light,” it calls to mind how each of us at points in our lives experience darkness.

For a mother by the name of Megan Hammon, one Christmas Eve, the darkness seemed rather intense. Christmas Eve morning her four-year-old daughter, Hailey, was in the hospital again. The doctor was with Hailey, waiting to talk Megan and her husband, but she paused for a moment in the hallway, bracing herself. Whatever news the doctor had, Megan knew it wasn’t going to be good.

An artificial tree, festooned with lights and ornaments, stood in the corner. Carols played over the PA. The staff had tried to give the place a festive air, but it felt grim and sterile to Megan.

Hailey had battled chronic lung disease and epilepsy since birth. She’d spent much of her short life in the hospital. Even when she was home, she was mostly bedridden. A surgically inserted feeding tube kept her alive. Her lungs were so weak, she couldn’t risk going out in public and being exposed to germs. Her big brother, Logan, and sister, Harmony, were wonderful to her, but when they went off to school or to play with friends, Hailey was left on her own. She wanted to be her mom’s helper, but she didn’t even have the strength for simple chores like unloading the dishwasher.

What kind of lonely life is this for a child, Megan found herself wondering lately. Why wasn’t God helping Hailey get better so she could play with a friend, go for a walk, eat ice cream? She wasn’t asking for anything extravagant. She just wanted her little girl to enjoy the simple pleasures of childhood.

They had all been looking forward to Christmas. Gary and Megan had scrimped for months and managed to save enough for the family to celebrate. Then Hailey caught some kind of respiratory virus. In the middle of the night on December 23, she had such trouble breathing that her lips turned blue. Megan called 911.

When the EMTs showed up at the apartment, Hailey whispered, “Mommy, why did you call them?” Her anguished expression told her mom that going back to the hospital was the last thing she wanted.

She’d been rushed to the hospital. The diagnosis was acute pneumonia. Logan and Harmony insisted they didn’t mind spending the holiday in the hospital. “We’ll celebrate Christmas after Hailey comes home,” they said.

If she comes home, her mom thought. She turned away from the carols echoing in the empty hospital hallway and walked into her daughter’s room. Hailey lay in bed, her face as pale as the sheets, the sparkle in her eyes dimmed. Megan had never seen her looking so frail and listless.

The doctor spoke in a low voice to Gary and Megan, telling them Hailey needed immediate surgery to move the feeding tube from her stomach to her small intestine because she was aspirating fluid into her lungs. "The standard procedure would be to put her to sleep," he said. "But she's so weak, we're not sure she would be able to wake up."

Megan clutched her husband's hand. "So what should we do?" he asked.

"The best bet would be to keep her awake during the surgery and give her a local anesthetic."

While the doctor explained the options to Hailey in language she could understand, Megan talked quietly with Gary. "Look at her," she said. "The fight's gone out of her. I think she's losing her desire to live."

"What do you think, Hailey?" the doctor asked her. "Can you stay awake for the surgery?"

Hailey looked at her mom. "Mommy, I don't know if I can do it."

Megan was afraid that what was really going through her mind was, I don't know if I want to do it. I don't know if I want to go on like this anymore.

"Why don't you take some time to think about it?" the doctor said.

Hailey had been incredibly brave through all of her treatments over the years. Yet Megan hadn't been able to keep her out of the hospital at Christmas. She felt as if she had failed her. "How could I encourage her to keep fighting?" She wondered. Suddenly it hit her. The perfect solution, the thing she wanted most.

She brought it up with Gary that evening when they went to the cafeteria to grab a bite. "What if we got her a dog?"

The one bright spot in Hailey's previous hospitalizations had been the therapy dogs that volunteers brought in for the pediatric patients to play with.

"Mommy, did you see him?" she asked eagerly one afternoon when Megan visited her after work. "You should feel how soft he is, just like a teddy bear!" Hailey couldn't stop talking about the golden retriever who'd gone from room to room. "He'll do whatever I say. When I throw the ball, he brings it back."

On her weakest days, the nurses let the dog onto her bed. Simply having him lie next to her comforted her.

She'd been asking for a dog for a while now. A golden retriever. Megan wanted so badly to give her the dog of her dreams, but properly bred goldens typically cost upwards of \$1,000. It was beyond their budget. They were living paycheck to paycheck. And they lived in an apartment with no yard—not the kind of place for a big, active dog. They had to tell Hailey no.

“We really can't afford it,” Gary reminded her. Besides the initial cost, there would be food and vet bills. He wanted Hailey to be healthy and happy as much as she did. But he was practical.

“I'll take on extra work,” she said. Megan already worked full-time taking care of a child with disabilities, an ideal job because she could watch Hailey at the same time. She didn't know how she'd find hours in the day for more work, but if it would get her through the surgery, she was willing to try. “She needs something that will make her want to live.”

“Then we'll find a way,” Gary said.

They went back to Hailey's room. “We have a surprise for you,” Megan said. “We're getting you a very special Christmas present—a puppy.”

Her eyes lit up. “My teddy bear dog?” she squealed.

“That's right,” Gary said. “But you've got to get through your surgery first before we can get the dog.”

On Christmas morning, Hailey made an announcement. “I'm doing this surgery without going to sleep,” she said. “I don't want to risk not waking up and getting my puppy!” She told the nurses, the doctors and anyone who would listen about her Christmas present.

Her mom sat with her in the operating room so she wouldn't be scared while the surgical team fixed her feeding tube. Hailey kept talking the whole time about her dog: what she would name it, how much she would love it. At one point, the anesthesiologist had to tell her to slow down and take a breath.

The surgery went smoothly, and three days later Hailey came home. But the journey to get her dog was only just beginning. Megan picked up odd jobs. She walked dogs, cleaned houses, worked for an on-call nanny agency at night while Gary watched the kids.

They set a jar on the kitchen table and put every spare dollar toward the “dog fund.” Logan and Harmony donated their Christmas and birthday money. Every Sunday night, they would empty the jar and count the money so they could see the progress.

It took eight months, but by the following August they finally had enough money saved. They found a golden retriever breeder and made plans to pick a puppy from his next litter. New worries sprang up in Megan's mind: What if the dog was too rough for Hailey? What if they couldn't train it or it had too much energy for her to keep up with? What if they didn't bond?

They met the breeder in the parking lot of a grocery store on a Saturday morning. It was a chaotic scene, with other families clamoring to play with the 15 adorable puppies waiting for homes.

"Do you see one that you like, Hailey?" Megan asked.

"That one!" she said, pointing to the only puppy sitting quietly on the side, not ramped up with excitement like the others around him.

"Are you sure?" Megan asked. Didn't she want a more playful pup?

"Yes, that's the one," she said with utter confidence. "I know. I think he's lonely, don't you?"

And that's how Hunter came into their lives. He became Hailey's motivation, her reason to get out of bed, to keep fighting. She'd never had the stamina to play outside. But soon she was taking him on walks. The first time was just to the mailbox. Gary went with her, and they would add a block or so with every walk until Hailey could walk for 20 minutes without losing her breath. They played fetch and tug, and Hailey's muscles grew stronger.

She took over the responsibility of feeding Hunter. She'd been dependent on the feeding tube, but seeing his delight in eating made her take an interest in food again.

By December, she was eating small portions.

Most important, Hunter was her best friend, her constant companion. Hailey still spent much of the day resting in bed. But she wasn't alone anymore. Hunter lay right next to her.

One day, Hailey overheard Megan sharing her biggest worry with Gary, that she would never be able to lead a normal life.

That night, as Megan was helping her daughter get ready for bed, Hailey said, "Mom, one thing you don't know is that I'd been praying for my teddy bear dog for a very long time. If God can get Hunter for me, surely God can take care of me!"

Hailey was right. They had Hunter trained to alert them to her seizures, and her health and confidence grew. At age 9, she was eating so well, the doctors removed her feeding tube. She's been going to school since second grade.

Their lives have grown as well. Hailey now has three younger siblings. They moved into a home of our own and breed and raise golden retrievers through their small business, Legacy Champion Goldens. Their next dream is launching a center to train service dogs for other families. Like Hailey, Megan has a faith that God will help us get there.

When I first became a pastor in the summer of 2011, the one of the first things I did was to meet up with a wonderful dog. I'd wanted a dog my whole life, and now having a rectory to live in with a yard, I found through a rescue agency for golden retrievers Kirby. His foster mom told me I should come and visit, and he jumped up on me and the first thing I said to him was "hey bud, would you like to live with me?" A few days later his foster mom dropped him off at the rectory. And then he did something in the living room that we need not go into detail about. But for 7 years, he was right there for me every day. And it was so important, because while priesthood is wonderful, it's not without it's challenges. Becoming a pastor isn't easy. There were issues with the prior pastor, and while you do things with support of others and consultation, at the end of the day when you go through layoffs, terminations, consolodations, mergers and building projects, some people are going to be unhappy, and downright mean. I had days where I was exhausted, and frustrated, and just felt the pain of the gossip and negativity. But through every up and down, there right next to me was a large fluffy golden pyrenees named Kirby, who was quick with a paw on my lap when I'd make a meal, quick to jump on the couch and rest his head in my lap, or just would look at me and tell me all would be alright. Losing him to cancer was devastating and painful. But then when I least expected it, into my life came another golden retriever named Emmett, who much like Kirby, is always there for me, loves to chase a tennis ball, to share a meal, but just to be with his human friends.

We're not here tonight to share dog stories, though as a dog lover I could certainly do that for hours on end. But I share the story because in Kirby and Emmett, what I see is the power of God's love, the power of the God who created them. I see unconditional love and kindness. And I'm reminded that no matter what I may go through, it truly will be okay. And that's because Hailey is right - God takes care of us, and Megan is right, God will help us get there, the there being heaven.

No matter what vocation you have in life, there is darkness. There's financial insecurity, loss of work. There's having a child loving you one minute and hating you the next. There's gossip in the workplace. There's being in the public eye, or people criticizing you behind your back or on social media. There's broken relationships and promises, and abuse of trust. It can be so easy to become a cynic; to just look at the world and see no hope. But through all of this, a light has come - a light that the darkness could not overpower.

Hunter brought joy and hope to Hailey, and helped her through her surgery. But God does something even more remarkable, he restores us to that fully human life that He reveals, he fills us with hope and joy, he saves us from our sins. Kirby, Emmett and Hunter and so many dogs just love unconditionally. And that is what I mean when I say I see the divine in their eyes. And that is the starting point for us. No matter what your fear, your anxiety, God comes to you. He loves you. And He redeems you. So the key is to just let Him into your lives. No matter what the fear or the challenges, never doubt how much God loves you. And if the darkness is something you got yourself into, such as chronic sins or things that cause you shame, or something like Hailey you had no control over such as illness or whatever it might be, know that God's love will always see you through any storm.

The way that happens is through the blueprint of our second reading, where Paul says to Titus God's grace trials us to "reject godless ways and worldly desires, and to live temperately, justly and devoutly in this age." The point is that God's love also requires a response. With Hunter, the family sacrificed so they could welcome him into their lives. Then they would make sure he was fed, played with him, got him exercise, etc. God gave them the tools, and they used them. Once we realize how much God loves us, hopefully we respond to that love by coming to know Him. If you've been away from the Church for a while, know you are welcome here always. If you've struggled with something like a particular sin, pray about it, go to confession, and ask for God's help because He forgives and helps us overcome those struggles. If you've been too busy to pray, try to work in a little bit of time each day. And if your family is perpetually on the go and doing a million things, try to pray as a family and make it to Mass. Then keep living your faith through your vocation. Strive to serve your family, to go the extra mile for them, to forgive wrongs, to be patient with others, to keep calm when arguing, and to remember in so many ways God's love helps us to become better people who bring His light into the world.

Not too long ago on social media I saw a photo of a man sitting by the lake with his dog. The bubbles above his head were of a car, a jet, a home and money, the things he was dreaming of. And above the head of the dog was just one bubble, that of the moment he was in at the moment, being next to his best friend. The caption was "this is why the dog is happier." If you were to ask most people what they really wanted, I suspect the answer would be happiness. But it can sometimes be so elusive, because life comes at us, or we just chase the things we think will make us happy but don't ultimately bring us peace. If you're thinking of adding a golden retriever to your life, I'd highly recommend it. But you don't need a dog to be truly happy, you just need to come to know the God who if you were the only person in the world would still come to be born, to live and to die all for you, because He loves you more than you can ever imagine. So don't be afraid of the darkness when it comes. Let the light of His love shine in your soul, remembering you are loved more than you can ever imagine, so let that light of his love fill your souls with love and peace by welcoming the King into your lives, and coming to know Him each and every day.