

Sometimes in life we can be quite stubborn and set in our ways, thinking we have all the answers and know where we are going.

But hopefully what we eventually find is that God has a plan for all of us, and He has a funny way of showing up when we least expect it, helping us to realize how much we are loved by Him, but then sending us on a mission.

Recently I got an email from a parishioner about an upcoming movie that will be released this Good Friday called simply “Father Stu,” with Mark Wahlberg playing the title character, a real life priest who took quite the windy road to finding his vocation.

Before he became a priest, Stuart long grew up in Helena, Montana. Stu began his elementary education at Central School in Helena and graduated from Capital High School in 1981.

Stu grew into a big young man, proud of the powerful physique he developed while wrestling and playing football for the Bruins. He moved on to Carroll College, playing Saints football for two years and developing a

passion for boxing, in which he excelled. He won the 1985 Golden Gloves heavyweight title for Montana and was runner-up in 1986, the year he graduated from Carroll having earned a degree in English Literature and Writing. A planned career as a prizefighter was nipped in the bud by reconstructive jaw surgery after a fight so at his mom's suggestion he moved to Los Angeles intent on breaking into the movies.

Though he made some commercials and had a few bit parts, Stu eventually became disillusioned by the film industry which he later described as "seedy". He became a bouncer, and then, looking beyond the comedy club and bar jobs that had paid the bills, he took a position with the Norton Simon Museum in Pasadena where he rose to become manager, a position he held for seven years. He was an avid motorcyclist too.

But what Stu was not was a man of faith. At that point in his life, he considered himself a "disinterested agnostic" who would needle priests or Christians if anything. In his own words, "I wasn't Catholic," and he'd question his teacher at college to stir up trouble, but one priest saw something behind the tough agnostic exterior. Fr. Jeremiah Sullivan found a way to direct his yearning for conflict. He'd bring him to the school's gym

and introduced him to boxing, which was a way to direct Long's yearning for conflict.

Now, after college with a degree in English literature and writing, the roads to boxing and acting seemingly closed, Long was trying to figure out what to do with his life. He'd spend a lot of time on his motorcycle in part to think, and one evening coming home from the museum, he was struck by a car, then run over by another. He was not expected to live. This close brush with death was a turning point in Stu's life, prompting an exploration of religious faith that ultimately led to his baptism as a Roman Catholic so that he could marry the beautiful young lady he loved. God however had had other plans.

"God was working behind the scenes," said Fr. Stu later said of this time.

"He was within me, but I was outside." While Stu lay unconscious on a gurney, he had an out-of-body experience, during which he hovered above his body and heard God speak directly to him. Stu did an about-face: He recovered and began from that time to study religion, completed RCIA training in the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, and was received into the Catholic Church at the Easter Vigil in 1994. During his conversion Father

Stu was influenced and deeply moved by the lives of the saints especially St. Francis, St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas and St. Padre Pio. He developed a deep love for the tradition of the Church and appreciated the spirit of the martyrs. He joined his parish Legion of Mary, acquiring a Marian spirituality while participating in door to door, pro-life, hospital and homeless ministries. He also spearheaded a community effort and effectively stopped the construction of a proposed Planned Parenthood clinic in the city of Monrovia CA.

Discerning a possible call to the priesthood, Stu left his job and began teaching at Bishop Alemany High School in Mission Hills, California, where he also coached the wrestling team. He went on to serve with the Capuchin Friars in New York City, working in some of the city's poorest neighborhoods. The Friars sent him to Franciscan University in Steubenville, Ohio to study philosophy. After earning his Masters there he was steered towards pastoral service, receiving his priestly formation for the Diocese of Helena at Mount Angel Seminary in Oregon. He was ordained a priest by Bishop Thomas on December 14, 2007 at St. Helena Cathedral, along with his good friend Father Bart Tolleson.

While a seminarian at Mount Angel, Stu underwent surgery to remove a tumor discovered on his hip, after which the strength began ebbing from his once powerful body. He was diagnosed with inclusion body myositis, an extremely rare autoimmune disease which mimics the symptoms of ALS, Lou Gehrig's Disease, and for which there is no cure. By the time of his ordination, Father Stu was walking with the aid of crutches. His first assignment was to Little Flower Parish in Browning. After two falls, as his illness weakened him the diocese of Helena brought him home in 2010, where Father Stu took up a new life and ministry at Big Sky Care Center. Now using a power chair, and with the assistance of his dad, Bill Long, Father Stu spread the faith throughout Helena's parishes. He celebrated Mass regularly at St. Mary's and Big Sky Care Center, as well as traveling wherever asked to perform the duties of his calling. His Masses were known to be devout and his homilies faithful to Christ and His Church.

Father Stu found his great love serving as a priest, administering the Sacraments and counseling his flock. Though only there for a short time, he left an indelible mark in the hearts of the Catholic community there. In the words of his friend, Fr. Bart Tolleson, he said Fr. Stu's perseverance

and story was a source of strength for many. In his words, “that cross of his disease was the most powerful way to serve people. he was tireless in his service and the Lord gave him many beautiful gifts, of counsel, of providing the sacraments. He was fearless even though he was limited.”

Father Stu flourished, absorbed with the love of Christ and graced with a desire to share it; he brought the faith to others. He accredited effective evangelization to sound Church teaching often quipping, “People are ultimately drawn to the Truth”.

And so this man, who at one point didn’t even have much a belief in God, by allowing God to come into his life, he went on to become a beloved priest, confessor and friend to countless people. He taught by example, accepting the pain and weakness each day brought; Stu said it was the best thing that ever happened to him, because it allowed him to shed the pride he had felt for most of his life.

Father Stu’s physical suffering sanctified him. He endured his pain without complaint, giving thanks to God always. Father Stu’s witness brought dozens (if not hundreds) of Montanans into the Church as was evident by

the overflow crowd and personal testimony of those who attended his funeral, where his bishop noted that his illness and testament of life brought so many who, like Fr. Stu at one point, had no understanding of God, back to the faith.

Like Father Stu, like Isaiah, Peter and Paul, all of us are called. And God has big plans for us, namely calling us each day to share in the divine work of love. And the call tends to follow the same pattern - God first making the move, at a moment when we often least expect it, and then us realizing like Peter gee, does God have the right person because how could I of all people do this, and lastly God's grace flowing through us so that like Father Stu, we are a fisher of men.

The starting point is the call. On his own, Stu wasn't really finding much success in life; he may have gone to college, he may have become a good boxer, and had a steady job. But he wasn't truly happy. Peter too, is seemingly doing pretty well; he has a business, a boat, but this day he's been out all night and hasn't caught a single thing. But note what happened with Peter, with Isaiah, with Peter: they let God in. Jesus is no fisherman. And yet He comes into Peter's boat, and starts telling Peter what to do.

Seems a bit odd. But Peter doesn't resist; he says OK, we've been out all night, but if you say so we'll go out again. Stu when he encountered God in that near death experience also allowed himself to be transformed by listening. So how about us? People over the years sometimes ask how did you come to be a priest, and it was a series of moments I'd say of listening. My confessor and spiritual advisor in college saying hey I think you have a call. A man who played on a senior golf league who'd come in for breakfast or coffee at the bar I worked at at the Bunker Hills Golf course who got to know me and when I said "I'm not so sure I should really go to seminary" looked at me and said "I think God is calling you to this, you really need to go," and the calm and peace I found in spending time quietly reflecting before the shrine of the Sacred Heart at the cathedral before I went to the informational dinner on the seminary hosted by Archbishop Flynn. In these moments and others, what I allowed to happen was to force myself if you will to stop doing the talking and do the listening, and let God into my life at that moment. For us, it's why listening matters so much, because sometimes when we get stubborn, or are having trouble to figure out what to do, God is going to just come arriving in our lives through a feeling of peace, through a phone call from a friend or family member, or something unexpected happening, God shows up when we least expect it at times. It

includes the big moments like should I go to seminary or propose marriage or have children; but it also includes so many other things too like how do I handle this thing going on in my family; volunteering for something new; or maybe God saying I want you to take a stand for this or talk go this person or be a little more patient in this area of your life. Or in my case, welcome this dog into your life. On our own, we run on empty. On our own inevitably things fall apart. But God always is reaching out.

As he reaches out though, sometimes we might think “I’m not worthy to do this.” Isaiah had this issue. “Woe is me, I am doomed! For I am a man of unclean lips, living among a people of unclean lips.” And Peter, uttering that famous line, “depart from me Lord, for I am a sinful man.” All of us have moments where we see our parents or our kids doing something incredibly good and beautiful or we look at them, or look at what we’ve been called to do, and can feel unworthy. I know I do. If you’ve ever wondered why the priest washes his hands, we say a prayer - “Lord, wash away my iniquity, cleanse me of my sins,” because God is making us clean. God makes the move first, it’s not us making the first move; rather when God comes to us, our eyes are opened and we realize gee, maybe I’m not perfect, maybe my ego was a little too big, and grace brings to light the imperfections. We see

things as they are; its why when you read of the stories of the saints, they are aware of their own sinfulness as they encounter God. But this is not because of a shame thing. Rather when God shines His light on us, while it illuminates what is in the shadows, the light transforms us with love. The conversation with Peter is not “well you are right you are a sinner, I’ll move on.” It’s “follow me and I will make you a fisher of men.” To Isaiah, his lips are touched with holy fire and his sins removed. It’s a privilege to be a priest. I know a parent, a husband a wife would say the same thing. But we all at times fail in our vocations. Nonetheless God has called us, and gives us the grace necessary to do them and carry them out.

And that’s the last part. Realizing that yes, we are sinners, but God wants us to go out. Peter does this and there’s so many fish the nets are breaking. Fr. Stu said yes and so many were going to Mass and being inspired to come to the faith because of the witness of his life. I know at many times I as a priest have wondered too is this homily working or am I making a difference; maybe you as a parent have wondered “is what I’m saying to him or her making a difference too” or “am I letting my kids down.” We all have those moments. But then I have moments like last week, when someone writes me and says I helped them return to the Church, or you

hear a confession and it seems like you helped the person find peace. I am quite unworthy to do what I do, but like Fr. Stu, what I do have is peace, because I know it's what God has called me to do. Fear can sometimes get in the way - what if they don't like my message, what if I fail, what if they knew the real me, just like it does for all of us. But what I remind myself it's not about me, it's about God getting into the boat with me and telling me to push away from the shore and go off into the deep.

Momentarily, we'll receive Communion together. And the reason we do this at every Mass is because God is our food for the journey of life. But also, think of that moment as another way God is getting into the boat, the boat of your soul. He's sending you on a mission. Today, because of a fisherman named Peter allowing that to happen, we have a growing Church. Today, because of a boxer turned actor turned bouncer who didn't know where to go in life, scores of people in Montana and likely many more who now read his story and watch the movie of his life will be brought to the faith. So what about you? What is God calling you to do? And if you've discerned it, remember He is in the boat with you, and while there may be times when the fishnet doesn't bring in a catch, keep going out further and deeper because the fish will eventually be there, for God is with you. You are making a big difference in this world for your families, your friends, your

spouses, your kids, the people you meet. Yes, we are unworthy. But grace is truly amazing, and let us never forget that it will empower us to do our mission. Like Peter, may we let Jesus in and follow Him, knowing through our words, actions and vocations we too become fishers of men, bringing souls into God's kingdom, using the grace that transforms us to in turn transform the world.