

As we hear in the first reading from Isaiah, we have this image of all the tribes and people climbing the holy mountain of the Lord. It's a beautiful image that invites us to think about how we use life as a sort of "Advent" people; we are waiting for God to appear at the end of time, or when we die and meet him we are slowly journeying that mountain every day. But something to think about is what kind of mountain are we exactly going up? Because it is so often easy to say we are on the right track, when in fact we get lost as life goes on.

In the late 80s, the comedian Dave Coulier rose to fame by appearing on the show "Full House" along with Bob Saget and John Stamos, centering around a single dad and the two uncles of four girls in San Francisco. I can't say I've ever seen a full episode as it was more of my sister's show (I was more of a 'Dukes of Hazzard' and 'A-Team' kid) but he was known as kind of this fun-loving uncle who was known to many.

In real life, Coulier at that point had finally made it. But recently, he was in the news again for getting his life in order and seeing more clearly a bigger, more important mountain he wanted to climb than that to stardom.

In his own words he speaks of how there is a common belief that comedians use humor to deal with or even cover up pain they can't otherwise process. That may be true in some cases, he says. Coulier has known a few comics like that. But not him. He says he became a comedian because he loved to make people laugh. It made him feel good, and it made the audience feel good. That's a pretty great gig to have in life, a blessing he says he's grateful for every day.

But he also fell in love with something else: drinking. As of 2022 he's been sober now for two years and counting, two years in which he's suffered three of the most devastating losses of his life in quick succession. How did he survive those blows to the heart without alcohol?

The answer is a rediscovery of God helping him to climb the mountain

He notes that back in the sixties, in St. Clair Shores, Michigan—a town north of Detroit along Lake St. Clair, right across from Canada, drinking was just a part of life. Growing up in “Hockeytown,” kids would play in a hockey game, then go out for pizza afterward, the parents knocking back

pitchers of beer. No one objected when they poured the kids a little glass.

Wow, cool, we thought. We're just like the grown-ups.

Eight or nine years old and we'd pour ourselves a gin and Squirt at a wedding reception, so much Squirt in there you could hardly taste the gin.

No one said, "Hey, what are you kids doing here at the bar?" No one even objected. As far as I could tell, drunks were funny. A source of laughter.

He used to love watching actor Foster Brooks do his drunken act on The Tonight Show or with Dean Martin, inviting Martin to join his own version of A.A. called Alcoholics Unanimous. Coulier didn't know they performed completely sober, and thought nobody can act that perfectly drunk if they're actually intoxicated, except for maybe W. C. Fields.

He went to Catholic schools all the way through high school and played on the hockey team. Win or lose, they'd celebrate with some drinking while the adults looked the other way. In a big Catholic family like his, when all the aunts and uncles and cousins got together, they told jokes—and drank, his uncle Dick doing a killer Rodney Dangerfield, complete with the tie tugging and other tics. He had it down cold, even the material.

Coulter's family was tight-knit and supportive, in part he thinks because of his younger brother, Dan, who struggled with mental illness. Dan was the funniest person Dave had ever known. They started doing impressions when they were kids, trading funny voices back and forth from their bunk beds each night. His brother had this laugh that was so pure and infectious. He sometimes thinks it was his laugh that ignited in Dave the desire to make people laugh. He loved to make Dan laugh.

Dave had two buddies who were really funny. From fifth grade on, the three of them would get up at hockey banquets and do impressions and jokes. Dave sharpened his comedic skills in high school. He started working in comedy clubs at age 19 and moved to Los Angeles. Drugs were rampant back then. He was never a druggie though. He just liked to drink. It never seemed to get in the way of things. He worked hard.

Comedians, he says, are basically writers. Storytellers. Every joke is a story. A lot happens before you actually get in front of the mic. You write and refine your material, try it out, refine it some more until you get that magic you want: laughter.

Dave moved up in the business. He was a writer, actor, director and eventually a star on a hit television series, your classic highly functional “friendly” alcoholic. He’d gotten his pilot’s license as a teenager, and he even got his instrument rating in L.A.—careful to take a three-day hiatus from the sauce before he ever flew. Didn’t that mean he could control it? What was so alcoholic about that he thought.

Bob Saget was a close pal even before they worked together in Full House. Dave slept on the couch at his apartment in L.A. during the struggling years. When he was cast as the dad in Full House with Dave as his helpful buddy, Dave says it was such a gift, running for almost 200 episodes.

Dave liked to say it was a show about “a G-rated dysfunctional family,” but offstage, off camera, there was nothing dysfunctional about them. There was support, love, affection, respect. If he saw any pictures of himself at an afterparty, Dave looked happy. The last guy standing. He was the “final, final” guy. Drunk but happy. Making everybody laugh.

When did he cross that line from life-of-the-party drunk to out-of-control alcoholic, he asks. When did he see that he was paying a price for this?

About five years ago, he started to see the red flags. He wasn't remembering things. Blacking out, falling. "I'm really worried about you," his wife, Melissa, would say. By then, they'd been together for more than a decade, and she knew him better than anyone.

"Come on," he'd say, "I've been doing this my whole life."

"Yeah," she'd say, "that's what I'm worried about."

Dave loved booze. But it had stopped loving him back.

One day, staying at a friend's house in Arizona—Melissa wasn't there—he fell during a drunken stupor. He took a picture of himself, his face a bloody mess. "You're going to have to show Melissa this," his friend said, "before she sees you." He texted it to her, then got her on the phone. He heard her crying. That's when he knew: I have a problem. A real problem.

Christmas and New Year's were coming up. All those parties. He'd wait till the end of the year and start 2020 sober. The drinking would be over on

January 1. Never again. Not a drop. “Yeah, sure,” He could hear people say. “We’ll believe it when we see it.”

In Dave’s mind, he heard that old W. C. Fields line: “Now don’t say you can’t swear off drinking. It’s easy. I’ve done it a thousand times.” Yet he was determined, as determined as he had ever been about anything. No. More. Alcohol. He’d promised Melissa. How hard could it actually be when he was that committed?

The answer: Hard. One of the hardest things he’d ever done, his body in torment, completely cold turkey. Dave trembled. He sweat. He knew the only thing that would make him feel better was a drink. But only for the short term. This was long-term. Not till March did he share the news on Instagram. Letting the world know. No secrets. Dave Coulier was sober now.

As painful proof of his past, Dave shared that photo of him looking like all hell. If he fell again, it wasn’t going to be because he was drunk. Clumsy maybe or from an accidental stick or puck during pickup hockey, but not stumbling drunk.

He couldn't have done it without the support of Melissa and friends like Bob. But he also called on something deeper, a part of him that had almost gone dormant, a faith from within, his spiritual DNA. It was always there, that inner fire—ready to keep him warm, give him light—but he'd almost forgotten. He began throwing logs on that fire, keeping those spiritual flames burning, a blaze that cast far more light than alcohol ever did, a healing, life-renewing light.

Melissa and Dave had moved back to Michigan, to be closer to family. His mom had passed, but his brother, Dan, was living with and helping take care of Dad, who wasn't doing so well. Dan was incredibly funny, funnier and more talented than me. And suffering for all those years from mental illness. Each day was a battle for him. Dave knew the darkness that was always at the edge of that wonderful laugh. And tragically, he found one night that his brother had succumbed to his mental illness. He shared this on social media, and says he could only hope that others, people whose families had such tragic stories, would know they weren't alone.

But he says he would not have had the courage to say all that if he hadn't been sober. The pain, at times, was unbearable. Drinking would have buried the pain. But it also would have buried the love. That grief, that pain, he notes, is the price we pay for love. It drove Dave to call on that fire of faith more than ever.

It was shortly after his father went into assisted living that a second blow came, one he could not have imagined. Bob Saget's death. Dave's mind recoiled. It simply wasn't possible. He was out on the road, doing comedy. They'd just been texting each other that day, sharing jokes and making each other laugh. Dave told him to have a great show.

Later that night, he died in his hotel room of head trauma. He'd hit his head before going to bed. He died in his sleep, which can happen if a concussion causes bleeding in the brain. Bob probably thought it was nothing. He was just looking forward to his next show.

John Stamos was the one who called Dave told him that Bob was gone. The shock, the horror of it, was immense. For too many years, decades of drinking, Dave had sheltered himself from addressing sorrow like this. Not

now. He felt pain as he never had before, and he had to deal with it on many levels: psychologically, emotionally, spiritually. But he felt human too, more human than he had ever realized.

Was Dave angry at God? You bet, he says. “Why am I getting punched in the face like this?” he asked.

He thinks the answer was that he was finally ready for it, finally in a place no matter how painful that he could deal with it honestly, feel not just the hurt but the love without the haze of alcohol. The pain was a gift. But, boy, did he ever pick a time to get sober.

He says he was talking to God. Not ignoring him. Not running away from faith any more than running away from the pain. He would look at the sky and go, “Hey, is it my turn? Are you kidding me?”

He would hear, “Of course, I’m kidding you. You’re a comedian.” Dave says he needed this. He would laugh, cry, get angry and feel the loss, truly feel it. This is what being human is. This is what sober is.

God wasn't done with him though. His father was dying. A person who had been there every day that he'd been alive. Dave held his dad's hand at the assisted living facility, Melissa by his side. He was in hospice care—the final part of his journey here on Earth.

He looked into his eyes and told him how proud he was that he was his father. He was a blue-collar guy who put all four of his kids through private school. He sacrificed. He loved his. And now Dave told him how much he loved him.

Afterward, he felt this huge opening up, a new perspective, a whole new appreciation for the smallest things in life. He could lie on the grass and look at the sky, the way he did as a kid, and gaze at the clouds with wonder.

He closes by saying you realize how short life is and how precious it is. How beautiful. And, yes, how funny. That's one big way we deal with it all. Humor as salvation.

He still loves to make people laugh, to connect with audiences he usually does not know and make them feel something. It's the most genuine thing he knows. He helps them feel human, and whether they realize it or not, they make him feel human too.

All of this is possible because he figured out where he needed to go, with the help of God, and what he needed to do. So, how about us?

Advent is a season of joyful waiting where we prepare for two things. The first is for our own encounter with God, when we will stand before Him at the end of our lives or when He comes again. The second is for Christmas, when we reflect on the first coming of our Lord. Both of these things come down to answering the question "does God matter to me." Most everyone would say He surely does, but as our lives get so filled with so many other things, it can be easy to lose sight of just how much we matter to God, and of how God needs to matter to us.

First, we need to ask ourselves what mountain are we climbing? Isaiah says "In days to come, the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest mountain and raised above the hills." The key

word there is “highest.” Ideally in Advent, we can find a moment to hit the “pause” button and look at our lives and ask ourselves what we are going after. Is it a career? Certainly school and work are important, but if we are so focused on that to the point where we never have time to pray or time for family it’s a problem. Is it being appreciated by people? Sometimes we can have a need for praise, or a desire to keep an uneasy peace, so we never speak out for what is right and what matters most, which is God’s law.

Second, we have to ask ourselves what is getting in the way of us climbing that mountain? For Dave, it was the reliance on alcohol that made him a functioning alcoholic and it gradually caused him to hit bottom before he cleared the path with the help of God by rediscovering his faith. Advent is a great time to do just that in our lives. We are hopefully seeking God as life goes on - no longer the infant in the manger, but the God who wants to burst into our lives just as He came into this world all those years ago.

Sometimes there’s stumbling blocks like sins of habit or things we minimize like Dave did with the alcohol and say hey no problem, no big deal, I’ve got this thing under control when little by little it’s taking over.

Third, are we reaching out to God and to others to help us climb that mountain? Dave knew he could not overcome his problem alone, nor could he deal with the pain of loss alone. He needed his wife, he needed God. Mountain climbers are often roped together when one falls, their fall can be stopped. So it is in life, but how often we want to be untethered from one another. When we are hurting, when we are falling on our climb up the mountain, may we not fear asking for help knowing we can turn to others to help us through those dark moments.

Lastly, we need to have God incorporate our entire life, not just part of our life. Isaiah says “All nations shall stream toward” His mountain. The key word here is “all.” If God is front and center for us, it spills over into other parts of our lives. When our minds and souls are filled with God, we make time for prayer throughout the week. We talk about the faith together as a family. We look for ways to become a better steward and give back the love God has given us through service to our parish or family. We look at Mass not as fulfillment of an obligation but as an invitation to know God at a deeper level. We always need to be on guard to make sure that God is not someone we devote part-time to, but someone whom we invite into our hearts and who we get to know deeper with every passing day of our lives.

Our second reading puts it so beautifully: “You know the time; it is the hour now for you to awake from sleep.” We all need sleep, but spiritual sleep is not a good thing; it means we become indifferent to God. Saint Paul is not talking to a group of people who had to get up for the first Black Friday sale. He’s talking to his community in Rome, urging them to prepare for their encounter with Christ. Now is the time to wake up. Dave Coulier realized that when he knew his battle was getting out of control, and he woke up, and got his life ordered and realized what his highest mountain was. So, let us use Advent do re-acquaint ourselves with how to do that, by truly putting on the Lord Jesus, and throwing off the works of darkness and giving glory to God, knowing together, we will climb the mountain to the heavenly kingdom.