

Over the years while I've taken a lot of fun nature photos, one of my favorites was at Devil's Tower, Wyoming. It was kind of the photo that got me into photography. I was all alone on an early fall evening; the sun was going down, and the sky turned beautiful colors. A deer even posed for me as I gazed up at the tower being lit up by the light of the sun.

But what also arrived was dark. It just kind of got there gradually, and out there it is super dark. In hindsight I would have gotten a place near Devil's Tower, but I had to make my way back to Rapid City. I made my way back to the freeway with my printed directions, (this was before GPS), but it sure was pitch black.

So is it with life, too. Darkness creeps in little by little; a secular world tries to shut out God; or a person just gets caught up in busyness or life situations and they can be overwhelmed. Thankfully God, in Jesus, who is the light we hear of in Isaiah and in the Gospel today, can do so much to dispel that darkness by giving us directions that lead one not to Rapid City, but to peace and happiness if only we let go, and let God.

One of the biggest names currently in Golf is Bubba Watson who has two Master's wins under his belt. As he reflects on his career, he says he still has a Titleist Balata ball, sitting in a glass case on a shelf in his house. It's from a win back when Bubba (actually Gerry) was 13 years old, at the 1992 Divot Derby, the biggest junior golf tournament in the Pensacola area, where he grew up.

That win sparked his determination to become a pro golfer, to become, as his dad said, a leader, not a follower. It also sparked something else—a bit of anxiety that at times brought darkness to his life; a foreboding that things might not ever get any better than his last win, that he'd never really be good enough. It was a feeling that would, as the years passed and his career flourished, consume his life. Until He let Jesus in more fully.

Bubba's first love was baseball. His dad thought he was destined to pitch for the New York Yankees. Then, when he was six, he says, lightning struck: he got a left-handed nine-iron golf club, cut down to his size. He became obsessed with golf, spending countless hours hitting plastic balls around—and over—their house.

Their family didn't have much money. His dad was a construction engineer at a chemical plant. But his parents could see his talent, and, at age eight, for Christmas, he got a brand-new PING junior set from them.

Winning his age division at the Divot Derby became standard fare. But that day, when he was 13, playing with that Titleist ball, he finished at 10-under par 62. Maybe, Bubba thought, he could live up to his dad's expectations...and his own.

His world, he reflects, shrank to the size of that Titleist. His father came to all of his tournaments, leaning against a tree, puffing on a cigarette, sipping beer out of a Styrofoam cup, seemingly judging his every shot. He rarely mixed with the other parents, who were generally more upscale than the Watsons.

Bubba said his dad was a good man—a good husband and a good father to his sister and him. He was as tough on himself as he was on the kids. A Vietnam veteran, he had been wounded in combat and entitled to be awarded a Purple Heart, but he refused to accept it because he saw his wounds as a sort of failure, as if he didn't do his job. Bubba knew that deep

down he was proud of him, and loved him, and that he supported his dreams of going pro.

He enrolled at the University of Georgia. That's where he met his wife, Angie—the best thing that ever happened to him on or off a golf course. Till then he'd never really been in love with anything other than a golf club. Angie taught him what it was like to love another human being with all your heart. She also taught him what it meant to love the Lord.

Bubba's family was not a big churchgoing family back in Pensacola. Faith was the shining center though of his wife Angie's life. And so Bubba asks, how could he love Angie fully if he didn't share her love of God and his commandments? She and Bubba decided to dedicate themselves to a Christ-centered relationship.

Only a loving God, Bubba says, could have taken his head out of golf and led him to such a kind, generous woman with a vibrant faith that filled her spirit—and his. At their wedding, he was so overcome with emotion, tears rolling down his cheeks, he could barely say, "I do."

Bubba turned pro in 2001, not long after meeting Angie. He pushed himself relentlessly to get his PGA tour card so he could qualify for the big-money tournaments.

Professional golf was a level of competition he could not have imagined even in college. It was a struggle to make cuts and play in the final rounds. But he moved up the ranks, always striving to be at the top of the game, always feeling as if his father were leaning against a tree, judging his shots.

Bubba got a reputation—deservedly, he says—for being overly aggressive and cocky. Looking back, he says he realizes that his behavior was meant to cover up his fear of losing, of never being better than the last win. Back then, it seemed like it was what he had to do to survive on the tour. Never show weakness.

Then came a devastating call from his father when he was out on the road.

“I have throat cancer,” he said in his typically blunt way.

“How bad is it?” Bubba said.

“Bad.” The doctors gave his dad months to live. Bubba just couldn’t accept that. His longtime caddy, Teddy, whose faith is as deep as Angie’s, urged Bubba to send his dad a letter. Bubba and his dad had never had any of those serious father-son talks, let alone letters. “I’ll write everything down,” Teddy said. “Just tell me what you want to say.”

Everything came out. How much Bubba loved him, how he wanted so bad to make him proud, to feel good about his success, how he wanted him to be happy when he went to the Lord, how it was never too late to give yourself to God.

His dad never made any reference to that letter—except once. They were on the phone, and he declared that when he got to heaven, he was going to become a great golfer so he cancer was one thing he couldn’t beat.

One of the last conversations they had was after he’d just gotten his first big win on the tour, the 2010 Travelers Championship. Dad called. “What are you doing?” he asked.

“Just sitting here,” Bubba said. “Soaking it in, at least trying to.”

“Why aren’t you out practicing?” he asked. “Everybody else is. They’re trying to beat you now.” Why wasn’t I practicing? Why wasn’t I worrying about the next cut I had to make?

You don’t keep those feelings inside Bubba says. You overcompensate for your lack of confidence. As Bubba said, he could be aggressive, even mean-spirited, despite his profession of Christianity. A jerk. Not long before winning that first tournament, Teddy called him on it. “You know,” Teddy said, quoting as he could straight from the Bible, “it’s our job to ‘encourage one another and build each other up.’” Bubba thought my caddy was calling me out?

“You’re not being who you should want to be,” he said. “You’re not even trying. You’re hiding.”

All his life, Bubba realized he’d been running away from this worry that he wasn’t good enough, and he’d sometimes taken it out on other people. Hadn’t he pledged to live a Christ-centric life when he met Angie? That meant on the golf course too. Teddy was right. Maybe because golf came

into his life first, before he met Jesus, he'd never quite figured that out.

After he met Angie, nothing in his life could come before God. His life was on one path, not two, even if he still needed to be reminded from time to time.

He won his first major, the Masters in 2012—finishing with a minus 10—and he still couldn't relax. He thought of all the great names in their sport who'd won that event, and didn't see where he fit in. Maybe he was just an impostor, a flash in the pan, he thought. He ended up taking the storied green jacket awarded in Augusta, Georgia, and shoving it in the back of his closet. He could see the concern in Angie's eyes as she watched.

His nerves were shot. He couldn't get on an airplane without taking a pill. One night, he felt this suffocating weight on his chest, thinking it a heart attack.

The hospital admitted him and did all sorts of tests. "There's nothing wrong with you," the doctors said. "You're in great shape." He won a second Masters. He moved up the ladder, his winnings putting him close to the top. Is this as good as it's going to get? He thought.

He had another one of those “heart attacks” and rushed off to the ER. Someone said something about it being a panic attack, but he wasn’t listening. By 2017, he was losing weight. Losing the muscle mass he needed to hit winning shots.

One morning, Bubba got on the bathroom scale. It said 162. He’s six foot three, bigger even than his dad. He’d never been so thin in my life, almost 30 pounds below his normal weight. In the mirror, he looked emaciated. What was happening to him, he thought?

Bubba felt panicky, as if having another “heart attack.” He collapsed to his knees. “God, I’m so lost! Something is wrong with me, and I don’t know what it is. Help me, please help me.”

He was losing. But not on the golf course, nowhere but inside his head. He’d lost the battle of denial. In the depths of his suffering, when he cried out to the Lord, he also began to feel a release, as if at last he’d truly handed his burden of self-doubt and worry to God, a burden he’d always thought was his alone to bear.

Anxiety had come to rule his life, not a loving God; the insidious anxiety that went all the way back to that tournament he won at 13 and the winning ball he still had. Bubba thought about that ball, sitting in its case on his shelf, and instead of the foreboding that had crept over him the day he shot 62 with it, what he felt now was something completely different. He felt so blessed.

He thought back to his parents. Their quiet affection for each other, the way they'd never leave the house or return without a kiss. Were they perfect? Of course not. Neither was he. But that underlying love was there, the way it was in his own marriage and life with Angie and their kids. And without a doubt, he knew God loved him—love that could be equaled by no other force in the universe.

If only he thought, he could let that all-encompassing love banish his fears, his lifelong battle with anxiety.

One of the last times he'd seen his dad, he'd flown back to Florida. He and his dad sat on the porch and had a friendly enough chat, talking about golf mostly. Bubba got in the car to drive to the airport but stopped.

He parked the car and walked back up to the porch. He said what he had never said out loud to him. "I love you." Tears flooded his eyes. Amazingly, tears came to his dad's eyes as well. "I love you too," he said.

That was the legacy Bubba says he needed to hold on to. Not one of continual self-criticism, of constant dread of missing the mark. "Love your neighbor as yourself," Jesus said. It was that last part that was missing in him. He needed to start giving himself a break. He was so worried about what others believed about him that he wasn't acting like the person he wanted to be.

Angie, Teddy and the people who really knew him all believed in him not just as a golfer but as a person. He just had to figure out how to be his true self. He's not completely free of anxiety. But turning to God, turning to others, making sure that golf ball is not his whole life, is where he started. Bubba says he surrendered to the fact that he had a problem, an anxiety

disorder, and took his first crucial step toward finding help and getting better.

He's even taken up fishing. Something he used to think was boring. He says it doesn't matter if he catches anything. It's an escape from the tour and the things that can trigger anxiety. He recharges his batteries, as they say, especially his spiritual batteries. He relaxes. And he thanks the Lord for the blessings He's learning to embrace.

What Bubba came to realize is that Christ is the light that has come to liberate him; it just took a letting go and letting God. The darkness of anxiety filled his life gradually; now there is the peace of Christ's light.

As we hear in Isaiah, the reading we also had on back on Christmas Eve, the people who have walked in darkness have seen a great light. Into our world which has so many problems, and into our lives which like Bubba's can be so full of stress and other problems, this God comes to be our light.

We see this in the Gospel, when Jesus meets people and they are overjoyed that He has come to be with them. His teaching reveals God to them in a more profound way than ever before, and Jesus' works free them from bondage and show God's compassion for those who are suffering.

What Bubba came to understand is that Jesus had also come to him to enlighten and liberate him from his darkness which was anxiety. So how are we doing with respect to being liberated, and in turn being the light of the world to one another?

With respect to being enlightened, a good starting point is to ask yourself what is the darkness in my life? Maybe you have anxiety like Bubba Watson did. Maybe you are battling a chronic sin. Maybe you are having a hard time having hope when you look at the state of affairs in the world. Maybe you are over-stressed with work or school. Maybe you have family issues that seem overwhelming. What Bubba had to realize is that he needed liberation and true peace, and this liberation that God gave him came to him as he became a better husband and son; as the other areas of his life began to fall into place. This is why it's so important to do what he did; to listen to God, and to listen to others God sends us like he did to his caddy who was a Christian as well. For when we hit the "pause" button every once in a while, we can hear God speaking to us and see the areas that need fixing in our lives. We can invite Jesus in. We can reach out to others to help us sort things out. But it all starts by admitting that there are parts of our souls where the light isn't getting in.

We then take the steps. Bubba got serious about his faith. He got serious about doing what needed to be done to tackle anxiety by making sure he had outlets for peace. It's one thing to recognize the problem, but then tackling it with the Lord is the next step. Jesus is here to enlighten and liberate us at Mass, in particular through Holy Communion. He enlightens us through spiritual direction and the people around us to help us make changes. And we journey with Him by being committed to bettering ourselves; recognizing that steps need to be taken to confront our problems to find the peace that we long for.

And lastly, we are the light of the world. We bear witness to God through our words and actions. So we ask ourselves who is it in our families and society that need to see the light? Bubba's caddy and friend Teddy realized his friend needed some good advice so he gave it to him. Bubba realized his dad loved him, but had a hard time putting that into words - as he did too - so finally was able to write him and then say he loved him and also hear it from his dad. All around us are people in darkness; people who maybe are stressed, who have anxiety, who are battling things in secret; or people making poor moral choices. There is the greater world which is so

often at odds with what we believe. So often we can be tempted to think we can't do anything, or maybe we are fearful for people being angry at us for speaking up for moral truths. But we have to take a stand as people of the light. Remember as Christians we can't cling to our safe spaces but we have to be not afraid to take the risk with others both in our families and circles of friends to the greater world that so often says keep your religion to yourself. Our goal should be to help others find true happiness which isn't easy but takes work.

As much as I love sunsets, I love sunrise even more. And an even more memorable photo I took was up in Banff at Lake Moraine; I got there in complete darkness, and gradually the sun rose creating an alpine glow on the snow capped mountain, and illuminating clouds pink and purple, reflecting in the clear aqua water. It was incredible and I hope to make it back in June of 2024. It took time, but the light eventually dispelled the darkness creating something beautiful that I could finally see. So too is it with us. You and this world God made you to be a part of are beautiful created in God's image; it's just at times that beauty gets obscured by sin, by stress, by life. May the love of Jesus open our eyes, and may we strive to do the same for one another by bringing His light into the world.