Sometimes in life, it can be easy to lose our way a bit, as poor choices and actions just kind of creep in. For as Isaiah asks in our first reading, “Why do you let us wander, O Lord, from your ways, and harden our hearts so that we fear you not?” Now this is not to say that God is somehow hardening our hearts to cause us to make the poor choices (though we sometimes blame God for things) but rather God allows us to wander through free will. Ideally though, when that happens, our eyes and hearts are open to the love God has for us. For as we are reminded every Christmas, the people who have walked in darkness have seen a great light; for our God does indeed meet us where we are at with His love and mercy. On our part, hopefully we are open to that mercy and then changing for the better.

Godwin Barton, who became an educator, author and poet, at one point had gradually become blind to a problem in his life, namely his battle with alcohol.

In his short reflection, “Touched by a Higher Power,” he writes how one evening he was out with his wife at a local Greek restaurant and then was going out with his wife to one of the more popular nightclubs. It was a time filled with great food, laughter, teasing and recollections of the school

week. Fully satisfied, some would leave for home while the rest made their way to the club. Bright, colorful lights lashed and strobes pierced the semi-dark room filled with people having a good time listening to the music. The music was loud, and the party was just beginning. His hands helplessly reached for the concoction capable of turning man to animal.

Looking to his wife, he asked her, half jokingly, “do you mind if I get drunk tonight?” Knowing that they lied just a couple of blocks from the club, she replied, laughing, “Sure. Why not! I don’t have too far to carry you home!” Over the music he smiled and began to celebrate.

The night of drinking, laughter and dancing would take its toll. As if he didn’t have enough to drink, or wasn’t drunk enough already, he reflected that he always had to finish with a very potent drink of various types of alcohol and a bit of mix. His laughter was now diminishing and the apparent heaviness of his heart was showing on his face.

He remembers Phyllis asking him if he was okay.

Looking anything but okay and resembling the zombie, the name of the drink he just consumed, he replied that he was fine and asked Phyllis if she was fine too. Phillis held him and said “It’s okay. Everything will be all right.” Her eyes looked right into his as if she could see right through him, reading his mind, seeing his soul. Feeling her love and knowing that he could not hide anything from her, tears began to fill Godwin’s eyes.

“Had enough to drink? Want to go home?” she asked. Hesitantly Godwin answered, motivated by the thoughts of the damage he’d now begun to do in his drunkenness, not feeling too safe inside himself. “Sure, let’s go home” he said.

He awoke in the morning sad, sick, sorry and extremely hungover, awaking again to the words that he dreaded hearing after drinking the night before.

“You’re not going to like yourself very much when you see what you’ve done” Phyllis said to him. Silence filled the air. He was too ashamed to even look at Phyllis for those words only meant one thing. Defeated, he slowly made his way toward the living room, hoping in these few minutes

the damage he'd done would somehow miraculously repair itself. He looked and was in shock at what he'd done.

Phyllis seemed scared and concerned and asked him "You don't remember?"

Fear gripped Godwin as he envisioned the fury it must have taken to reap such destruction as he looked at the living room. He was in shock and asked why did he do this.

She told him they had just left the club, and he was quite drunk and she wanted to get him home. He stopped in the parking lot, and she looked at him, and said last night as she looked into his eyes and face it was as if he had become a different person. She asked if he was okay, and he said yes; she told him to keep on walking, and they were almost home.

Not moving, she told him he had started to ask why and what and started hollering and his fists were clenched as he ran angrily toward the house, and he kicked in the door and started to curse.

Fearfully he asked where the kids were when all this was happening, and she explained they spent the night at a friend’s place, and there was no one home but just the two of them.

Not really wanting to know, he asked what happened next.

She explained that he began smashing everything, punching and kicking the walls, which is why there were holes in them. He walked over to the fireplace and knocked everything onto the floor. He flipped the couches and the armchair as if they were paper weights, smashing the coffee table and throwing the other table around. He walked over to his weights and picked up his barbell and began repeatedly slamming it into the floor hollering and cursing.

He asked where she was when he did this, and she said she was right there next to him.

He was in shock at the devastation and asked her if she was afraid.

She said she was not, and she was praying. She said he made his way into the dining room, crying, still asking “Why?” and she just watched him but was not afraid.

The tone of her voice changed as she said, “I really need to talk to you about something.”

Godwin’s spirit, already crushed, braced itself for the worst.

“After doing all the damage, do you remember anything at all?” she asked him.

Puzzled, he answered, “nothing, why?”

Silently, she stared at him, then continued, “From where I was sitting you were in full view - you didn’t enter the kitchen, you stood in front of the doorway.” Pausing again, she looked at him questionable. “You began to talk to someone…”

Quickly he interrupted her. “You said we were alone.”

“Yes, that’s true, but as I watched you were motioning with your hands, very clearly talking to someone. I couldn’t understand what you were saying but I could hear you as clear as I hear you now. You sp;oke with this person, or whatever it was, for about 10 minutes. Do you remember who, or what it was, and what it is that you talked about?”

Even more perplexed he replied. “No, are you sure this is what really happened?”

Assertively, she retorted. “Come on now. You know me. Would I make something up like this or lie to you?”

Phyllis, Godwin reflected, was a woman of many years of sobriety, a woman of integrity. She’d never play such a cruel trick on him. She continued, “Whatever you two talked about, it must have been something good. Afterward you changed completely. You turned to me with an incredible look of peace back in your eyes and on your face. You walked toward me, and of all the damage you had done, the only thing you picked

up was the calendar with the picture of Jesus on it. You pinned it back onto the wall, then said, “Let’s go to bed sweetheart, I’m tired.”

Powerful emotions stir as Godwin recalls that night many years now in the past, and he thinks about the places from which he has come, worlds of seemingly unrecoverable loss and immense pain. Wondering how a hand of beauty, love and grace could reach into darkness so vile to rescue one like hi. Tears, no longer of rage and anger, roll down his face in thankfulness for the life he has now found. Sobriety; a life no longer dominated by drugs, alcohol, rage, pain. Five years, each new day bringing with it the promise of something better, this can only be so as the words Jesus spoke still echo somewhere deeply in his soul.

While not everyone has a serious addiction like Godwin had, all of us in one way or another are sinners and have our struggles. Just think about how hard it is for many of us to be addicted to working too much, to our smart phones, to being overly involved in activities we miss dinner with our family or time to pray. Catholic Deacon Gregory Doyle, who founded a program, Talbot Ministries, to help people with addictive behaviors, states that in recent years his programs have helped people deal with a ride array

of addictions including the Internet, shopping, sugar, gambling, caffeine, nicotine, laziness, caretaking, lying, perfectionism, exercise, control and work to name just a few. He sees that we are all prone to addiction simply because of our humanness. The addiction starts out slowly, beginning with a sporadic activity before becoming a habit and then a compulsion. In order to change, Talbot Ministries digs in on the four “Ds” which are denial, defense, delusion and dysfunction, which all stand in the way of honestly viewing the extent of an addiction. "You have to be willing to acknowledge and accept your own stuff," Lauren Doyle said. Yet she said that with many addictions, "people think they're normal. They don't see the unmanageability." Rather, she said, they may focus on the addictions of others, such as celebrities: "They think, 'I'm not one of those.' They have an image of other people being worse.” How true that is for all of us too. We can compare ourselves to people like Godwin and say “well at least I’m not like that.” But we all need to change, and this includes looking at our lives and realizing we need to change; acknowledging that we need God to help us; and to take the concrete steps needed for long term change so our hearts are truly changed. For as Jesus reminds us, we need to be watchful and alert because we do not know when we will stand before God. This means we want to grow in grace and holiness.

The first step is remembering that God loves us. Godwin in his battle had a moment where he encountered the Lord, and as his wife said of that moment, he had a look of peace about him. This is what God does for us. God does not come to condemn, but to save. Saint Maximilian Kolbe said: “Whenever you feel guilty, even if it is because you have consciously committed a sin, a serious sin, something you have kept doing many, many times, never let the devil deceive you by allowing him to discourage you. Whenever you feel guilty, offer all your guilt to the Immaculate, without analyzing it or examining it, as something that belongs to her…My beloved, may every fall, even if it is serious and habitual sin, always become for us a small step toward a higher degree of perfection…In fact, the only reason why the Immaculate permits us to fall is to cure us from our self-conceit, from our pride, to make us humble and thus make us docile to the divine graces.” It’s the devil who wants us to give into discouragement, to think that whatever our sin or addiction is, will always win. God will help us, but we have to turn to Him.

Coming to God requires humility. Godwin’s morning after was a moment of humility for him; but for us, it takes being introspective and listening to our

conscience. What needs to change? Maybe it is an addiction, a sin we've battled for years; maybe it's being more generous with our time, more patient as a spouse or parent, or being less of a gossip or more forgiving. We then meet God at Mass, and in confession. In fact we have our Advent penance service tomorrow night at 6:30 p.m. What better way to prepare for Christmas than by thinking about how we can make room for Jesus in our hearts by removing the sin that is there with His assistance?

Once we do that, it takes commitment. Godwin may have encountered God in a moment of clarity, but then he knew what needed to be done. So often when we are trying to better ourselves or overcoming something there are setbacks. But with God's help, we don't give up. If we take a step back, we go to confession and ask for God's help to pick us up off the mat. But we also listen to our consciences daily; looking each day at how we are doing, and pushing ourselves to go further. Godwin had to keep going to meetings and getting treatment to get to where he wanted to go. For us, the sacraments are there to sustain us, but on our part we have to stay committed to things knowing it takes time and being patient with ourselves, but also challenging ourselves; maybe we make a conscientious effort to make time for others, to forgive, to do works of charity, to get healthier. We

need to visualize who we want to be and realize we can get there with the help of our Lord.

And lastly, we do it together. We work with God, but the journey to sainthood is made with others to help us. Godwin had his wife to encourage him. It can be vulnerable to ask for help, but as Jesus called 12 to help Him, we need to seek out others who will help us by giving us counsel, by challenging us, and who we can open our hearts to. Sometimes we get to be the helper for others, other times we need to be the one helped - we have to be comfortable with both.

Advent comes at the darkest period of the year. One candle on a wreath doesn't give off a whole lot of light, but as the next few weeks go by the wreath gets brighter, symbolizing the light of Christ that dispels the darkness. So too can darkness gradually creep into our souls. Jesus is the light; so rather than fear the darkness, may we open the door to His love and mercy so He can shine on us and through us. How often in life we make excuses, think we are fine, or say "I'll do it tomorrow." Jesus reminds us though the time is now. So with Him, let us daily and step by step become who we want to become. Advent is a time of "coming to." It is a

time of active waiting and preparing. As we prepare to share Communion, let us make a new commitment to stay close to Jesus and act on His teachings, becoming the saints God knows we can become when we open our hearts to His grace and cooperate with it.