

One of the realities of life is that it can be very easy for people to get off track. A bad decision can snowball, or a person can justify behavior as not a big deal, or something they have under control. But until they firmly trust in God and have a plan that they stay committed to, inevitably things will get worse and worse.

Tom Montgomery, a journalist, learned this when alcohol began to take over his life.

Now sober, he looks back and says he can vividly recall standing just outside the Chronicle building countless times early in the morning, trying to clear his head enough to focus on his duties as the editor of the small weekly newspaper. And he remembers praying, begging really, that God would deliver him.

As morning went on, his co-workers would begin to arrive so it would be time to plaster a fake smile on his face and crack a few jokes. But in his mind's eye, he was in a deep cylindrical pit, the walls hard and smooth as granite. It was pitch black and empty, like his life had become. And there was no way out.

He prayed, but he knew God wasn't listening. And, Tom thought, he couldn't blame him; He knew as well as Tom did that Tom was thinking about his next drink even as he promised to stop if he would come to his rescue.

Tom had no idea then, but God was in fact listening and waiting.

Tom was 50, married, a father and a grandfather. A successful journalist. And also a hopeless close drunk, albeit a high-functioning closet drunk who spent nearly every waking hour drinking, planning to drink or disposing of the evidence of his addiction. It was an exhausting and pitiful existence. He lied constantly and worked tirelessly in an effort to live a normal life and at the same time secretly fed this insatiable, abnormal habit that never really satisfied him.

It's the sort of insanity that prompted him to get out of bed every morning and take that first drink. Usually a bout of being sick to his stomach followed, then he'd attempt to take another and another until he could keep down enough of the poison to ease the shakes.

In spite of his efforts to rotate from one store to another, nearly all of the clerks knew what he wanted as soon as he walked in the door. He isn't fooling anyone. He hated himself, because while he was never an abusive drunk, he knew deep down he'd rather spend an hour with a six-pack than with any member of his family.

The only thing more important at the time was his job. He was proud of his writing. He knew that as long as he could write, he could hang on to one last shred of self-worth.

But fear of losing everything, of getting called out for his drinking, of his liver exploding, was choking out any hope for peace of mind. A few more drinks and he couldn't care, at least not for a few hours.

"Dear God, don't you see me? Can't you hear me?" He'd pray. "I'm going to die! Don't you care?"

There was no answer. But in his isolation, Tom continued to pray. He wasn't sure why. After all, he knew alcohol would always answer his prayer to escape. It gave him what he wanted when he wanted it.

Until another weekend binge left him feeling sick. He literally couldn't get drunk and as he forced himself to walk into the office early that Monday morning in December, just before the paper's biggest issue of the year. He found himself unable to concentrate on anything. He was sick deep inside.

Tom finally gave up and walked out the door, confused, hurting, without hope. Completely broken, because he had just walked away from the one thing he thought made him worth something.

He wanted to die. He prayed, waiting for an answer he knew wouldn't come.

He finally made the decision to get some help, no matter how frightening the prospect. He and his wife made a couple of calls and everything fell into place for him to admit himself into a residential treatment program.

He walked through the doors, alone and sacred to death. What he didn't know was that he was in fact not alone.

Tom went through detox and several rigorous days of rehab meetings, therapy and group sessions before finding himself wanting to pray again as he sat on his bed.

"Dear God," was all he could get out before an overwhelming feeling came over him. His face was flushed and the tears began to flow uncontrollably. For a few moments, he knew what it was like to feel God's presence inside every fiber of his being. It was incredibly intense, like electricity shooting through his veins.

Tom went to sleep that night without fear for the first time in years. And with the personal realization that God works His will according to what we need, not what we want.

Looking back. Tom says it was so clear how perfect God's plan was. God was listening all along. It just never occurred to Tom that God might expect him to start cleaning up his own mess before taking the reins. Had God simply "delivered" Tom, he says he probably would have gone on his merry way without trying to lean on Him, and without realizing how much he needed His presence in his life every day. Truth be told, Tom says, he'd probably be drinking again today if God had answered his prayer the way He wanted Him to answer it.

Still sober, Tom still prays outside the Chronicle building alone, but today he offers sober words of gratitude, knowing that God is listening, just as He was when Tom was at his low point drowning in a cesspool of his own self-loathing, fear and selfishness.

He will never look at prayer the same way again. Just when he was ready to die rather than continue living in his personal hell, God gave him another shot at life. It was just God's way, not his own.

All of us know the story of the Magi; the three kings who follow the stars to see the Baby Jesus. In reality they probably weren't kings; they may have been advisors to the king. Matthew cites 3 gifts, but we don't know how many magi there actually were. There certainly could have been more than 3.

But I wonder what Mary and Joseph must have gone through when they showed up. Just think for a minute the radical faith and trust they had. More than once these past couple of weeks we have heard how Mary "ponders these things in her heart." So much has happened, and so many strange events. The annunciation of the conception of Jesus; the dream Joseph has to take Mary as his wife; the holy birth taking place in a crude shelter where animals were fed, a manger serving as a crib. On the surface, it was a scenario of everything gone wrong. And ahead of them was another: a midnight flight from Herod's death squad. Indeed the visit of the Magi, and many other events in the life of Mary and Joseph, required strong, blind trust in God's providence. Doing it, as Tom would say, God's way and not just his own. So what about us?

All of us like Tom, can make a bad decision. Or we can just kind of shut God out, and not listen. Like Tom, we might even have a successful life for many years. But without God, sin will always get us. We'll never become who we can really become without God.

The feast of Epiphany reminds us that God is for all people, symbolized by the Magi who come from far-off lands. But the feast also gives us a chance to look at the Magi and the Holy Family too as reminders that faith is a journey and requires a commitment.

Tom at first thought God not acting right away meant that God wasn't involved or listening. But he eventually figured out that he was in fact there all along. God's involvement in our lives does not mean that God causes bad things, from a cold to a tragic event. But when the bad things do happen, like Tom experienced, God is able to draw new births out of the ashes of misfortune and tragedy. Sometimes we don't even see these in our lifetime. A loved one dies too soon. A divorce results from a once happy marriage. A financial collapse happens. An addiction spins out of control. In these moments, what we need to first do is to trust that God is still holding us, still guiding us and still loving us. This means that on our end, we need to let go and let God. To talk to Him daily. To receive Him in Holy Communion. To name our sins in confession. And to remember that just because we do not see the results at first or understand all that might be going on does not mean that God does not have a plan. God journeys with us as we go on our journey through this life home to Him - we need to just rely as Tom did on God's plans not just our own.

But as we follow God, we also have to persevere on the journey. The magi took time to get to Bethlehem; and now they go home on a different path. Our encounter with God puts us on a new path too. But we have to persevere. So many hear the Good News of salvation, but get caught up in the same struggles as non-Christians. That's normal - it's called the effects of original sin as Tom learned. But because we've heard the Good News, and because of our relationship with Christ, that means our life is headed in a new direction. How we make sure we continue on the

journey is that we grow in grace, learn from our sins and strive to overcome them through acknowledging them, celebrating confession and holy Communion, and seeking God's love. We learn how did we fall into the sin as Tom did, and then do what needs to be done to correct it like he did. Beyond sin though, it's the daily parts of our vocation we live out, and living out virtues like being patient with our families and showing them love, going to work and school with a positive attitude, not fearing talking about our faith to help them find God in their lives, and sacrificing for others. Being a Christian isn't easy - remember the words of our Lord, "whoever wants to be my disciple must pick up his cross daily and follow me." And it can be easy to just give up on trying to become a better person; or to do things half-hearted and think that's enough. Our final destination of heaven isn't for the half-hearted though - it's for those who are perfected in love, faith and charity, something God does for us but something that we need to respond to.

There is no getting around the fact that life is hard. Sometimes through our own fault, we lose our way. Other times we just want to give up because things get too tough. But if we listen carefully, we'll hear the Lord giving us an opportunity to go down roads that we might otherwise chose to avoid, and also hear how He challenges us to find new ways to travel to Bethlehem. Like Tom, may we have the courage to acknowledge we need God in our lives and without Him we can't do it alone, and also remember that as the magi read the stars, God gives us the Bible, the Church and the catechism to help us chart the course of our lives too. So let's keep on the journey so that one day we will stand before Him and not give him gold, frankincense and myrrh, but the gift of our lives that were transformed daily by His love that we learned how to put into action and to share with one another.