

Katie Langston 00:17

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Linda Booth 01:00

Welcome to Coffee Connect. My name is Linda Booth. And as you know if you've listened to this before, I love stories. I love to collect stories, especially stories that connect us with God and each other. And as we now enter into the Advent season as we prepare to celebrate Christmas, Christmas is a time of wonder. It's amazing, isn't it? That God loved the world so much that God and Christ came as a baby? What a wonder that a newborn placed in a manger by a homeless couple became a man who dared cultural and religious norms to love the discarded people in his world. Jesus, God with us. Today, I believe Jesus dares asked to be friend, love and be Jesus, even in the midst of all that we do to get ready for Christmas. Because we're to be Jesus like with people needing love, support and a place to belong, God with us and working through us. Recently I was filled with joy and wonder as I read an email from Jimmy Munson. And you some of you may have heard of him. He's the minister in Chattanooga, Tennessee for Community of Christ. And he shared the miraculous stories of four people who reached their educational goals, despite being homeless and briefly living in an old minivan. And as I read their story during this Christmas Advent season, I thought, "What if Jesus was born today to a couple searching for a place to live? Could Mary and Joseph have been have placed their baby in the backseat of an old minivan?"

Linda Booth 02:53

So let me tell you about a minivan. Many years ago, Jim and Pam Ash from Liberty Missouri, donated their used minivan to Chattanooga ministries, and today that band has more than 250,000 miles on it. The minivan is still picking up and taking hundreds of children, youth and adults to church, youth activities, the Peace Center, summer camps etc. The minivan is worn and street life battered, scarred in ways most of us can imagine. But young and old still watch expectantly for the minivan, knowing it will bring them to a place and a people who will love them as madly as God loves them. What a wonder! God with us and working through us. So these are four stories, miraculous stories of wonder, that I want you to remember as you celebrate Christmas this year.

Linda Booth 03:58

This first story is about Deborah, she's 56 years old, and she recently graduated from dental hygienist school and is now employed by two dentists. And when she first got involved with Community of Christ, she was a prostitute raising six children. Chattanooga Community of Christ helped her get off drugs and change her lifestyle. They helped her with her children when she worked three minimum wage jobs to ensure that all six of her children graduated from high school, the first ones and her family to do so. And then she put one through college, five through trade schools, and eventually got her GED and herself through dental school. At one time, Deborah and her kids lived in the church's minivan for over a

month. What a wonder, think about it. God with us and working through us. Jessica is 38 years old and she just graduated with her G III. In ninth grade, she dropped out of school to care for her mother who later died and her father had died in prison. And because Jessica couldn't afford the house payments on her childhood home, it was sold at auction, forcing her to be homeless. Now Jessica is a tough, resourceful person. She discovered she could make money as a semi-pro lady wrestler, earning enough to rent a 400 square foot house. She met chip, another local wrestler, and they were both baptized in Community of Christ, which is another story. Jessica learned how to drive using the minivan and she lived in the van for a few weeks until she and Chip were married. Today, Jessica and Chip lead Chattanooga is wrestling ministry, which reaches approximately 85 families. Their cell groups have multiplied eight times. Because of Jessica's success in earning her GED. Three other people from the wrestling ministry are starting their GED coursework. And you know what, Jessica and other members serve as tutors, what a wonder, God with us and working through us. Now Jeremy is 30 years old. This summer he received his Bachelor of Science degree in Human Resources. Jeremy grew up surrounded by violence, in what you have heard of a "blood gang" family. He was one of the first youth to get involved and baptized in Chattanooga ministries. After dropping out of high school his sophomore year he ended up in prison. He said he survived there because of his Community of Christ memories and praying for His church family. Jeremy got early conditional release if he would find a job, live in a halfway house and get a mentor. So Pastor Jared Munson became his mentor, and Kathy Munson and got him a job as a night janitor, and he briefly lived in the minivan. His employer, employers and church family supported him as he earned his college degree. Now he's a maintenance supervisor for two hospitals doing all the hiring and interviewing and management and budgeting. And Jeremy recently said, I never thought anyone from my family could ever get a college degree. God knew better and so did this church. What a wonder! God with us and working through us. The last story, Taytay is 26 years old and recently passed her advanced practice registered nurse certification. When she was 12. She began attending Chattanooga Community of Christ. Members supported her and helped her escape an abusive mother. They were present during her juvenile juvenile stays foster care and court appearance to be declared an adult at the age of 17. She used the minivan as her home and transportation when she began working at a nursing home. And with support from the church and through hard work. She earned several nursing degrees. What a wonder! God with us and working through us. It is wonderful, isn't it? That God's love and presence can open our eyes and our hearts to people yearning for a faith community. When we dare to respond, a minivan can become a manger for the homeless. When we love unconditionally, we can be a spiritual home for those who feel discarded. The wonder can continue if only we take that risk. Merry Christmas, Coffee Connect listeners. May your Christmas be full of joy and wonder as you celebrate God coming to earth in human form as a baby to teach us how to love one another. And may this Christmas not only be a celebration for you and your family, may it be a time when your eyes are open to risk loving and reaching out and being the friend to those who need someone to link them to the wonder of the Christmas story.

Josh Mangelson 09:49

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