

A reading from romans....and we know that all things work for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose.

The word of the lord

For those of you that do not know me I am Natalie Kasberger, a senior social work and sociology double major. I was born into a catholic church in sheboygan wisconsin into a family with very passionate and devout catholic grandparents, and younger generations that just followed along because that's what you did. Throughout this portion of my life I had a lot of questions, but never really seemed to find answers. I went to church every sunday, followed the rules, and tried to be the best sunday school student in the world, by studying every week and making sure I always had an answer or something to say.

I was curious and always wanted to discover more and more about this Jesus guy. As I got older, I started to realize that this church was not for me and my mom and I decided to start going to a lutheran church that lots of kids from my school went to. I really enjoyed my time here as it introduced me to some really great people, some really awesome mentors, and not to mention some really cute boys that made middle school youth group more exciting.

This is also the church that introduced me to an organization that had my heart from the moment I rolled into the parking lot of my first mission trip... Appalachia service project. Now, those of you who have ever been within an earshot of me know that ASP is something that means the world to me and has been the cornerstone of not only my faith, but human development.

I first was introduced to this organization as a freshman in high school who was literally just trying to make some friends and before I knew it I was in the middle of appalachia working in the home of a very sweet old lady, cramped in a bathroom with about 6 other people.

Throughout this week I faced a challenge where I had fallen in love with a home and a lady but sadly needed to leave the home due to a discovery of very toxic black mold. At this point in the trip I looked to my youth group leader and the staff and questioned why God would let a woman, living alone in a home, to be also inhabiting a place that was slowly taking away years off her life.

The staff explained that they would find care for her, my youth group leader explained that God has a plan, and we moved onto our new project. This family was amazing and we ended up finishing the project in less than two days.

I saw God in the mountains and in these people as we spent hours installing posts, splashing in the rain and mud, and talking about life. As we rolled out of the mountains and back to the flat lands of the midwest, I felt like a piece of me was missing and I couldn't wait to go to go back to the mountains and serve one more.

This second year tested me like no other. We worked for a family that worked in the mines and was not home to ever meet us, it was humid, and my group was full of older students that I didn't know. I really struggled and really questioned why God would put ASP in my heart, just to make me hate my experience a year later.

I discussed this with my youth group leader and he reminded me of ASP's motto, accept people where they are as they are, that's it. Just take your situation and the people in it, where they are as they are.

I carried this with me through the rest of the week and was inspired to go on another trip.

The following year, my junior year of high school, was a turning point to say the least and challenged me in ways that I never thought I would be challenged at the age of fifteen.

I had a friend die of cancer, another in a tragic car accident, and saw my friend groups fall apart. I clung to God like no other, but also saw my faith falling fast away as the year went on. I questioned why God would take so many people out of my life and leave me with what felt like nothing.

My faith was messy, I was uninspired, and I felt like a victim. I was sad. I was torn. I was broken. I felt like there was no direction. I explored the LDS faith, found a new friend group, began struggling with an eating disorder. I isolated myself (before covid made it cool). and I shut down and lost my curiosity about God and faith completely.

You could say that by the time summer rolled around and it was time for ASP again, I was ready for a change and ready to find God in the mountains again. When they say the third time is a charm, they aren't kidding.

This year at ASP was MON-U-MEN-TAL. We had the perfect balance of challenging project, perfect location, and wonderful loving family.

The staff was phenomenal and I was finally old enough to understand the project and not get discouraged. The family we were working for was made up of two older individuals and the wife's cognitively disabled brother who loved to hang out with our team.

I spent all day sweating my butt off, falling off a ladder 1-2 times, and got to know some of the most amazing people this world has to offer. I went into this week feeling discouraged, feeling like there was no way God was going to change my heart after feeling like I didn't see him in my life for so long.

AND THEN IT HIT ME.

God doesn't show up only in the perfect moments and the perfect conversations and the perfect people. He shows up where we least expect it in the moments we think would be the last place we would find him.

Truly something wild. At the end of this week, I decided I was interested in staff. The following summer I went on a trip, and tried to suck up as much magic from the mountains as possible and also participated in a staffer in training week where I had the chance to lead worship and manage my own project.

I found God in the stories the staff told, sitting on the front porch of homes, and speaking with volunteers. I knew that ASP and Appalachia were places that I felt at home and that I felt God was calling me to.

Soon after this I headed to Valpo. I imagined Valpo as a new start, with new friends (including Sarah Buckman who has encouraged me from day one), a new found faith, and a new beginning. I committed myself to going to every single church service and soaking up as much God as I possibly could. This brought me some of the best friends I could ask for and introduced me to a truly beautiful campus. I got more involved and was able to begin finding who I am. The summer after my freshman year I worked on ASP staff and had the time of my life.

Within my first week there I had visited approximately 100 homes, met a ton of new staff members, cried for about 6 hours, and called my mom at least 20 times. I was once again lost and unsure... but it was awesome.

It forced me into this super uncomfortable position where I didn't know my staff, turned down about 90 homeowners, and met about 900 volunteers.

Each of the people I met showed me more and more that individuality is perfect because it is from God. God makes each person the way they are for a reason, God puts people in positions for a reason, God brings people together for a reason.

I found that God is found in imperfections. God is found in the beautiful sky. God is found when you are hanging off the side of a mountain behind the steering wheel of a truck with your screaming center director and a 911 operator who cant understand your accent, God is found in the homeowner who shares their life story, God is found in the volunteer who barely knows the difference between saws and screwdrivers. He is everywhere.

I was high on the love of God and ready to come and rock my sophomore year. Once again, it was a challenging but rewarding year. I was the chaplain of my sorority and a peer minister. I was involved in the chapel again and found myself involved in lots of other activities. This was also the year that I got to introduce many Valpo people to ASP through a spring break service trip.

I was on fire for God and headed off to ASP once more.

This year I was the spiritual coordinator and designed the spiritual programming at my center and inspired programming at other centers. I had amazing conversations with volunteers, fell in love with the homes we worked on, and met some of the best homeowners Appalachia has to offer.

I fully embraced everything the summer had to offer and was completely on fire for God and was so hyped to serve. I stayed at ASP until the day before I had to come back to Valpo.

When I came back to Valpo my schedule quickly filled up and I became lost. I felt like the magic of ASP went unmatched and I felt distant. I continued to go to Celebrate, but was still struggling to find something that matched the magic of ASP. Soon, COVID hit and I was even more lost.

With the cancellation of many programs, I was alone, and with the cancellation of an entire summer, I didn't know what to do. My home church closed, and many online programs were discontinued because they couldnt gather.

I kept my faith through the help and support of my family and friends. I learned that God has a plan and that everything happens for a reason. Ive seen that There is no answer and there is no right way to do it.

There will be laughter, tears, confusion, frustration, hatred, love, joy, passion, mountain tops, and valleys.

I learned that the confirmation verse that I picked just because it sounded good and easy to memorize would be a statement that shaped my life. Romans 8:28 (and we know that all things work for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose).

I learned that as I chase after my purpose whether that be memorizing a children's bible, diving into ASP, coming to Valpo, or chasing my dream to be a social worker. All things work out.

No matter how messy in the moment- there is a purpose and there is God. There will be individuals who come into your life for a second and change it forever, what is important is that you learn something from every person you come into contact with and love them where they are as they are.