

## **An Angel Among Us**

### A Mysterious Traveler and His Message of Hope

We had everything we ever wanted: a wonderful marriage, a healthy young son, another child on the way, and fulfilling, successful careers. We were blessed and we knew it.

But then something happened that changed everything. In 1987 our second son was born. He was a beautiful child with blond hair, a round little face, and bright blue eyes. But he struggled from his first day. He had difficulty breathing, so he was moved into a special care nursery. Over the next few hours, our exhilaration turned into concern, followed by fear, and finally devastation.

Our newborn Son was diagnosed several defects in his heart. And these “defects” indicated he likely also had Down Syndrome. We were devastated and overwhelmed. We prayed for the strength to endure whatever lay ahead.

#### **A Mysterious Passenger.**

On my first day back to work, I prayed the Rosary as I drove the 45 minutes to my office. On the way, I passed a clean-cut young man hitchhiking. He held a sign that said “Saulte Ste. Marie.” That seemed strange since he was on an east-west highway about 350 miles *south* of Saulte Ste. Marie, Michigan. There was no easy way he could get there from where he was standing. I had had never picked a hitchhiker before, but I felt drawn to give him a ride. So, I pulled over and picked him up.

As he put his backpack and sign in the back seat, he told me that he was on his way to meet his father to do some fishing in Sault Ste. Marie. What began as a vague sense grew into amazement. We had named our son after the patron saint of fishermen. I recognized that Sault Ste. Marie was named for the Virgin Mary, and I had been praying the Rosary (a Catholic prayer from Mary, the mother of God). I wondered if this man was somehow a sign from God.

My passenger asked me why I seemed upset. I told him about my son that had been born with a heart defect known as VSD (for Ventricular Septal Defect). I was amazed as the hitchhiker told me that he was born with the exact same condition. He shared he had been cured and was able to lead an active life. He assured me that my son would be fine.

I was so immersed in the conversation that I did not care that I had missed my exit. After about thirty minutes, I pulled over to let him out. He thanked me and assured me he and “his Father” would pray for me and my Son. As I drove away, I saw that he no longer carried either his destination sign or his backpack – and they were no longer in my car. When I told My wife about it later, she too wondered if my hitchhiker’s message was a sign from God about the fate of our Son.

### **A Dramatic Turnaround.**

Our Son was discharged from the hospital after a month. We adapted to the reality of feeding him through a tube, watching him sleep all the time, keeping our ears open for his heart monitor, and warning visitors not to touch him as even a simple virus could be fatal.

One day, a few months later, he developed a high fever. As we rushed him to the local hospital and he was transferred to a regional medical center forty-five minutes away. As I drove behind the ambulance and passed the location where I picked up that hitchhiker I wondered if his words of encouragement were just wishful thinking.

At the medical center, our son was diagnosed with severe pneumonia. The doctors confidently told us they were going to treat him so they could perform open heart surgery a few weeks later – something his initial doctor was reluctant to try.

When we brought him back for surgery, my wife held him for what we feared might be the last time. But as the anesthesia took effect, he opened his eyes, and he looked very different. His eyes were vibrant and alive; they glowed an electric blue. I had seen eyes like that only once before, on the only hitchhiker I have ever picked up. He smiled at me and looked so peaceful as he went to sleep. I instantly knew he would be ok and the Lord was with him.

The surgery was a complete success. In fact, it had gone better than anyone could have imagined. He progressed rapidly, and when he came home: he was considerably more alert. He grew and developed like any other child, albeit more slowly and with all the characteristic traits of a person with Down Syndrome. My wife and I were so grateful to God for caring for our son.

### **An Angel in Our Midst.**

Our son is now in his thirties. He inspires all who meet him. He brightens every day with his smile and unconditional love. He has an innocence that we know he will never lose. He lacks the ability or the will to hurt anyone. We are constantly challenged by the demands of his disability, but we receive much more from him than we give. Our experiences taught us that

we are never alone – God is with us at every step, especially in the most trying times of our lives.

We will never forget that messenger who gave us hope at a time of hopelessness. We only hope someday we can meet him again and express our gratitude.