

In (Christ) we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, in order that we, who were the first to put our hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory. And you also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation. When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession—to the praise of his glory. – Eph. 1:11-14

As a youth pastor at my first church, I decided that our youth would get the chance to experience both the City and inner-city ministry. So I brought a group from our small town of Cheboygan, MI (pop. 4800) to Chicago for a long weekend. We toured North Park College (now University) and stayed on campus. We spent an afternoon and evening downtown at museums, Giordano's pizza, and the top of the Sears Tower. But we also spent a full day working cleanup in the Cabrini Green housing projects, known for their gang violence, including regular shootings.

We drove in to downtown Chicago and parked behind the Lutheran church, the only church in Cabrini Green. Pastor Chuck would meet us and explain the history and struggle of the people in the projects and then introduce us to "Gangster Bob". Bob was a large, bearded, overall-wearing white guy who had been working in Cabrini Green "forever". Everyone knew him, so if you were with Ganster Bob, you were safe. Each year we would go to abandoned apartments and either clean them out (usually with a grain shovel) or fix them up or paint them. Once we were finished, another homeless family could move in off the Chicago streets.

This particular year, our 4th year going to Cabrini Green, Bob told me to follow the two leaders of the other group who were driving another van, park the vans and then Bob would come to get us and take us to the apartment we'd be working in. The other leaders and youth would go with him in the meantime to get started. Nervously I drove our van around the block, parked, and got out along with the other 2 leaders, both college age women. We stood in the street looking lost and afraid... no Bob. There were plenty of groups of 8 -10 young shirtless men eyeing us suspiciously, but no Bob. We went to get back in the vans, but instead decided to go into the McDonalds we were parked in front of. It was closed. So we got back in our vans to wait. As the groups of people approached the vans, I have seldom been so afraid in my life. And as they tapped on the window and my pulse rate rocketed, Bob strode up, said a few words to the young men, and they walked away laughing. We got out, followed Bob to the apartment, and did a good, hard day's work.

Today, many people are looking at COVIDland with that same sense of panic that I felt that day in the van. A virus has looked our way and approaches. Our pulses skyrocket with every cough. But what we so often forget is that we have our own Ganster Bob who is with us. When He's around, the virus walks away, along with the fear. Maybe we don't see our Ganster Bob standing beside us every time we get afraid, but He's there nonetheless. We just have to remember and believe.

As we approach Pentecost, we celebrate together the gift of the Holy Spirit of God given to every one of His disciples. We celebrate that God is with us everywhere we go, our own Ganster Bob keeping us safe in every circumstance. With the Holy Spirit directing us, we don't need to fear viruses, or people, or finances, or circumstances. The Holy Spirit is a seal, marking us as God's heirs and promising us eternal life. So remember, celebrate, and don't be afraid. The Holy Spirit is with you, within you, and marks you as belonging to God. And that means you are safe, no matter what comes your way.