

“Meeting God in the Wild Unknown”

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Deuteronomy 26:1-11

Luke 4:1-13

As some of you know, I took a few days before Lent began to go with my family to Disney World and Universal Studios. We joined my sister and her family; my daughter Kai was thrilled to pal around with her cousin, who is just a couple year older and is an only child too. We braved the crowds and the lines for the rewards of several exciting rides. You should know, I have a history as a thrill-seeker. In my past I have been skydiving, bungee jumping, and I have never met a roller-coaster I did not like. However, amusement parks are different these days. The more thrilling rides are not towering roller coasters. Instead, they are contained structures, usually indoors. They fasten you into a chair, and then instead of rolling on a journey up and down a track, the structure stays mainly stationary and dips, tips, lifts, and shakes you around while a 3-D video flashes in front of you. With the magic of the screen, you might be in a racecar, or exploring Hogwarts Castle from *Harry Potter*, or an apocalyptic alien battle in the streets of New York City.

One ride that made all 4 of us adults on our trip ill was called, simply, “Mission: Space.” In the line, we had the option of waiting 10 minutes to go on the Green Mission, which was recommended for all audiences. But because the wait for the Orange Mission was 25 minutes, we figured it *must* be the better ride. Throughout the line, we were warned: Do not ride this ride if you are prone to motion sickness, if you react to strobing lights, if you have high blood pressure, if you panic in enclosed spaces, or if you ever get anxious in any situation. Ever. They warned us about 12 times as we waited in the line, and I realized after the ride that each of us adults had considered wimping out but not one of us wanted to be the only one. One last bit of advice we were given before we boarded was this: “If you find yourself getting disoriented, keep your eyes open. Whatever you do, do not close your eyes.”

The ride was a rocket simulator that would send us on a launch to Mars. After being warned one last time, we climbed into our rocket ship and fastened ourselves to the screen. 3-2-1...Blast off! While smoke seemed to fill our chamber, I felt a pressing down on my chest. Not only was our cabin shaking with motion and overwhelming us with 3-D visions, somehow the G-force in the cabin had changed. It literally took my

breath away and I thought I might die. An announcer told me-- the pilot-- that I should press some buttons which somehow seemed to transport me out of my panic. I pressed my buttons and then luckily the pressure let off once we left the atmosphere and floated to space. There was some jerking as we approached Mars, and I found that diving forward and moving my body to correspond with what the screen was showing me and also taking aggressive control of the lever helped me regain my sense of orientation. Thankfully, when we landed on Mars, the ride was over. I learned afterward that all 4 of us adults were dreading the trip back to Earth. We all agreed upon exiting that it was the worst ride Disney had to offer; my sister was a new shade of green. The children? They thought it was awesome and were ready to ride it again!

Mission: Space was a simulator for a rocket trip to Mars. In a sense, Lent is a simulator for the challenges we might face as disciples of Jesus Christ. But instead of Mickey and Minnie and all the trappings of American capitalism, the preparation we are given for these 40 days is a bare wilderness. No gimmicks except those which we can conjure from within. Don't think that Lent cannot do its work on you without the bells and whistles. Laid bare, you will know your human vulnerability to hunger and thirst. Denied your privileges, you must consider the source of real power. Faced with your mortality, you will ponder what truly lasts.

Just as there were many times as we stood in line for Mission: Space when staff, through their dire warnings, invited us to turn back and enjoy the relative safety of Disney's parks instead of taking a dangerous ride, Jesus in the wilderness faced the invitations-- three times over-- from the devil to find comfort and safety: in food, in power, and in immortality. It could all be his! He would only need to leave his journey and his calling, and side with the devil.

But Jesus opted to take this ride from start to finish. His 40 days in the wilderness included several encounters with the devil. The devil was not a terrifying Disney ride or character. The devil was not even the frightening beast with fire in his eyes. Instead, the devil appeared as something very familiar, as near to Jesus as his own voice. New Testament scholar N.T. Wright suggests, "The devil's voice appears as a string of natural ideas in his own head. They are plausible, attractive, and make, as we would say, a lot of sense." Not only that; the devil was well-versed in scripture: "It is written, He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,' <sup>1</sup>and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'"

And yet... and yet. While we know the truth of God's love, who among us has not dashed a foot upon a stone? We have each, in our own ways, known the burdens life

weighs on us, some more so than others perhaps, but not one of us has never stubbed a toe.

I have a friend who suffers from paralyzing anxiety. When she gets bouts of anxiety, she might be bedridden for many days. She is one of the smartest people I know, but she cannot outsmart her fears, the voices that tell her she is not good enough, or smart enough, or interesting enough. They tend to diminish her. I had not seen her in years, because each time we had made plans, she would come up with some excuse for why we could not hang out. At first I took it personally; on social media, I could see she was doing all kinds of interesting things. Why did she not have time for me? But we know that social media does not paint an accurate picture of our real lives and struggles, and once I learned how severe her anxiety disorder was, I realized this is not about me.

Something changed in the past year, however. She took a demanding job that requires travel and meetings with high-level people. And all of the sudden, she just got better. I asked her at a recent visit what had changed. She said that with anxiety, you can take two different approaches. One is to turn within: to shut out the world, and diminish yourself to the smallest, safest space you can find. She had been doing that for a couple of years, along with therapy and psychiatric care. Another approach, she told me, is to “just go big.” She continued with her therapy-- **any serious depression or anxiety disorder needs consistent, professional therapy**-- but also took a big, giant leap into the fears of her nothingness. What she learned was that the thing she feared most-- nothingness-- was a false idol, a devil to whom she had temporarily sworn her allegiance. By actually accepting her nothingness instead of fighting it and fearing it, she was able to go big.

Jesus went big. Instead of confining himself to the safest places-- that space where he would not hunger, or be alone, or die-- Jesus took the path that would lead him through the most vulnerable places, exposing his deepest fears and hungers, a path that would make him more human and in fulfilling that, make him more divine as well.

We have to lean in to the wilderness times, with our eyes wide open, in order to learn what God is teaching us there. As we experience hunger, we also learn the strength to feel the contours of our emptiness instead of seeking fullness from that which does not satisfy. As we experience isolation, we learn what it means to live in insignificance rather than privilege. As we ponder our mortality, we learn to accept our vulnerability without grasping to be rescued. This does not mean that God wants us to be hungry. It certainly does not mean that God wants us to be alone, or unrecognized. Nor does it mean that God does not value and even cherish our lives. But hear these wise words

from writer Debie Thomas: “If the cross teaches us anything, it teaches us that God’s precious children still bleed, still ache, still die. We are loved *in* our vulnerability. Not out of it.”<sup>1</sup>

Our passage from Deuteronomy ritualizes this kind of vulnerability. The words instruct the Hebrews, when they enter into a new land, to take all of the first fruits and gather them in a basket as an offering to be shared with God, and with those who do not have food: these would be the widows, the orphans, the Levites, and the aliens, or those without citizenship. Before anyone can enjoy the profits of their success, they have to recognize that none of it is theirs; it belongs to God, and no one is to profit until all are fed. The reason why, Deuteronomy tells us, is because “you are descendents of a wandering Aramean. Your ancestors, slaves in Egypt, knew the brutality of Pharaoh’s hand. Only by the grace of God were you brought out of such suffering and into a new land; the milk and honey you find is not of your own doing, but of God’s. Therefore, it must be shared with today’s vulnerable.”

Now, we approach Christ’s table, each vulnerable in our own ways. Let us walk forward with open eyes, ready to see what the Holy Spirit will show us on our journey. Know that this bread and this wine are not the devil’s offering, but instead an offering of Jesus’ own vulnerability, his body, his blood. In turn, we offer our holy, human lives as first fruits for what God is trying to do in us and through us. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Debie Thomas is a blogger at *Journey with Jesus*; this blog, “Human and Hungry,” was posted on March 3, 2019.