

“Creation Encounters Discipleship”

Genesis 1:1-2:4a, Matthew 28:16-20

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A lot of times when I'm thinking and praying about the scripture we will use on Sunday, I reach deep into my memory to find the stories that best connect with the verses. But, this week, something amazing happened. As I meditated on the passages from Genesis and Matthew, I lived them out! I wasn't expecting it but bam! Right before my eyes! Scripture came alive, even while I was on vacation. Of course, I expect to live out God's word when I work at a church, but who would have thought it stays with you on vacation?

It helps that I was on vacation in Yellowstone and the Grand Tetons. When it comes to witnessing the best of God's creation, this is the place to do it. I went with my girlfriend Beth and I expected to retreat into the wilderness and have a week long spiritually refreshing experience. I may have thought everything would be serene and peaceful and it would be my own Garden of Eden where the voice of God would come to me through a moose or a burning campfire. And, in a lot of ways, I had that experience. Lakes glittered with the reflection of the sun, there were lights in the sky that came from the sky, not from streetlamps, wildlife surrounded us, and even the squirrels seemed friendlier and natural part of the wilderness instead of a suburban nuisance. When we drove into Yellowstone on our first day, it wasn't five minutes before an elk walked across the road in front of our car, looking at us as she passed, as if to say, “Welcome,

friends! We're glad you're here!” The parks contained all of the beautiful, timeless elements of our own creation story. It was good.

Sometimes though, it was not all good. When Beth and I arrived at our first campsite, prepared to set up our tent, it was covered in snow. I expected the cold, but I didn't expect four feet of snow: four feet of snow that completely hid the fire pit, and unless you wanted to sleep on the concrete, required shoveling out a spot for your tent. When we woke up the next morning, prepared to overcome a freezing night with a hot cooked breakfast, it started hailing. During our first morning in the Grand Tetons, it was so foggy I couldn't tell if the mountain range was to our left or to our right. One night it was raining so hard that we drove an extra hour and a half to be able to stay in the very last cabin available in Yellowstone, only open because someone cancelled. Overall, it was an incredible trip, but one of our sayings was that we made a lot of lemonade. Thankfully, I was with someone who knows how to laugh in the face of the unexpected and the unpleasant moments that we can't control.

While we got our majestic vacation with many moments of peace, we got more than that. We got some of the parts of creation that Genesis leaves out, like the weather. There was a lot of weather. I keep rereading, but snow seems to be omitted from the Genesis story. And, honestly, if our trip had been what we expected it to be, it would have been disappointing. Our expectations would have let us down. Fortunately for us, the weather wasn't the only surprise.

We met a lot of people throughout the week and they were some of the most fantastic people I have ever met in my life. If you need to be reminded about human decency, get in your car and drive a few days until you reach really big mountains. The

park volunteers and rangers didn't just help us feel comfortable in the campgrounds, they shared their stories about the lifelong dreams and bucket lists that led to them working there, and shared their favorite spots in the parks. When the weather got us down, we met other campers who showed us how they built a fire in the snow and stood side by side with us as we took pictures of purple mountains covered in gray fog. Whenever someone was pulled over on the side of the road and we hollered out, "What are you looking at?" they told us! Some shared their binoculars and scopes to safely view grizzly bears and wolves. One man even left his vantage point to cross the road and point out two coyotes we had been unsuccessfully trying to pinpoint in the hills for thirty minutes. Everywhere we went we encountered people who made me feel safe, comfortable, welcomed, and loved. I don't know if love is how any of the people we met would describe their small, simple actions, but it was love to the core. People did not think twice about sharing their dreams and experience with the strangers they encountered. We all had the same goal—to fully appreciate the beauty that surrounded us—and it took all of us together to achieve it.

My favorite moment was in the Grand Tetons when our camera ran out of batteries. We had been taking a walk in the woods behind our campsite when the camera stopped working, so we decided to return and switch the batteries before continuing our explorations. On our way back, we stumbled upon our very first moose. He was beautiful and probably too close to be completely safe, but close enough to make a beautiful portrait. Of course, our camera was still dead. Another family had also discovered him and was getting amazing shots. When they heard our batteries were dead, they took the batteries out of their camera so that we could get a few pictures on ours. I will never forget Beth leaning forward to photograph the moose in the bushes as this family of four

cowered with me behind her as we all whispered excitedly to her. “Right there! That's a beautiful shot! Would you just look at that?!” We traveled up and down the Tetons that day, and coincidentally, everywhere we went, we ran into the same family. Because of their kindness and selflessness, they felt like an old friend whom I could trust. I never could have anticipated the love I would feel for a family whose name I don't even know.

That's the heart of what I see in the gospel of Matthew when Jesus sends out the disciples to all the nations to teach them all he has taught them. Jesus sent them to Jerusalem and Egypt and Germany and the Grand Tetons. Even the disciples who doubted must have been wonderful teachers because Jesus' message of love for God, yourself, and your neighbor spread throughout the whole world. If you look at the person beside you right now, you will see that message. If you look to your left you will see a love that gives. If you look to your right you will see a love that empathizes. If you look at the person in front of you, you will see a love that is patient and kind. If you turn around and look behind you, will see a love that be with you no matter what you go through or who you are. When I stand up here and look out at all of your faces, I see a love that is passionate, welcoming, sincere, and a love that is deeper than any of us can name. I see a love so strong that it makes me proud to say, “I am a minister at South Church.” I love all you dudes and dudettes. (that's what they say in the West.)

The secret to Jesus' message is that he understood that the creation story in Genesis is not the only story we will encounter. He understood that between God declaring “It was very good” and our personal lives, a lot would happen. There would be fights, and disappointments, and anger, and violence, and accidents, and tornadoes, and even snow in our campsites. In order to wade through all of that to find happiness and

contentment and rejuvenation, we would need to keep teaching each other how to love. We would need to demonstrate to a stranger, with the simplest of actions, what it means to care for someone; what it means to be a part of a community. The call to the eleven disciples has been passed on as *our* call to discipleship. This call requires that as often as we experience God's love in our neighbor and in all of creation, we repay that love to the next person we encounter, and the next, and the next, and the next. Since my last week was overflowing with love, I'll start by telling you that I love you all, each and every one of you. And I'm so glad to be a part of your community.