

1

Allow Disruption

“Can these bones come
back to life?”

Ezekiel 37:3

Seeking in the Desert

Throughout the scriptures, people come to understand who they are in relationship with God through the central image of the desert. The desert, as terrifying as it might be, can also be precisely the place of discovery of the true self. The fundamental narrative of the Old Testament, for example, is that of the Exodus. When the people of God wander far away and find themselves stuck in slavery, God hears their cry and leads them back to union with himself, back home. But the way back is through the desert. They must be led through the place of greatest insecurity, where they cannot provide for themselves but must be taken care of every day, at every moment, by the God who loves them, feeds them, and tends to them. If they try to store up resources for themselves and begin to not rely on God anymore, it does not go well. God gives them enough to eat every day in the desert by providing manna

from heaven. But it is only enough for the day. The Israelites begin to grumble under these conditions. They long to go back into slavery, where they at least felt more at ease and in familiar circumstances. But God continues to lead them on, in friendship with himself.

Pope Benedict XVI, in one of his writings about the worship of God that liberates his people, makes a fascinating, if troubling, observation. He notes that during the Exodus, the word of God comes to the people indicating that he wants to lead them out into the desert *so that* they can properly worship him, to be in union with him. Seen in this light, the desert is not so much a necessary evil to get through, but exactly the place where God wants to meet his people, that they might enter into union with him, into true intimacy and friendship. In a sense, the desert is the destination itself. Only in the desert, when we have nothing to rely on of our own making or of our own doing, can we truly *find God* and therefore become our true selves, in reliance on God's care and friendship.

At another time when God's people had gotten themselves in a bind, the word of God comes to them through the prophet Hosea: "Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk, who took them in my arms; but they did not know that I cared for them. I drew them with human cords, with bands of love; I fostered them like those who raise an infant to their cheeks; I bent down to feed them" (11:3–4). To me, it's good to be reminded, in times when I'm not necessarily in crisis and in a fog of confusion, that this is what God is like. This tenderness that God has when looking upon his beloved ones drives how he wants to communicate with us. And he yearns for us to cooperate a little bit so that he can care for us in this way and draw close, through "human cords" and "bands of love." The desert, then, the place of what feels like alienation, can become a place

of great tenderness and union with God, if we allow him to draw us close. Only if we give way to this intimacy will we begin to find our way back onto the path that leads us home, to freedom.

Vision on the Beach

I had one of these life-changing encounters, not in a desert, but on a beach. The summer after high school I lived, along with two other American high school kids, with a family in a very small village in the Andes Mountains in Ecuador. I applied for this program at the beginning of my senior year, not so much out of altruism, but frankly, for something different to do, for some adventure, and maybe as a way of making new friends. The decision to take part in this program would never have come about if things had not fallen apart pretty drastically for me.

A little bit of a context. My mom, dad, and I had moved in the middle of my junior year from Phoenix, Arizona, to Dallas, Texas. My older siblings were already out of the house, into college and beyond. So I was the only kid at home when my dad got a great new job in another state that was a way forward for him after conditions at his previous job had deteriorated. It wasn't just me; my whole family experienced being destabilized. For myself, though, I was totally upended. I was "taken away" from friends and an increasingly fun social scene—from driving around town with my new driver's license and going to parties (and getting grounded thanks to those parties!). I also was separated from a great girlfriend. A truly tragic romance! It felt like the end of the world. I wallowed heavily in self-pity during those first several months, and I'm sure I made everyone around me, especially my parents, miserable. I wanted to

drag them into my misery as only a sixteen-year-old boy can do, I suppose. Anyway, it was awful all the way around.

In the midst of that cloud, however, I heard about a program where high school students could spend the summer volunteering in Latin America on a health project. That sounded exciting and at least something different, so I applied for it and was accepted. I probably had some noble hopes of wanting to help people as well, but mostly I saw it as a chance to meet new people, make some friends, and have an adventure. I was motivated, at least in part, by self-centeredness, looking back at it.

It was a bit of a rough start. Since I didn't know much Spanish, I was mostly smiling and nodding in our initial conversations with various families. Thank God the two girls I was with were much better at Spanish. So at first it was pretty jarring and disorienting. But along the way, I was drawn out of myself. In a new culture where I didn't know the language, in a rural setting where there was nothing to entertain myself (malls, TV, etc.) as well as no running water or electricity, I was feeling pretty vulnerable. But in the midst of those circumstances, I also began to feel happier than I ever remembered being up to that point. I was surprised. With everything stripped away—all the material goods, the comforts, the familiarity of life—I actually felt freer and more joyful. That summer shifted a lot inside of me.

When we were debriefing at the end of the summer on a beach outside Guayaquil, on the Pacific coast, I was sitting one evening with four or five friends who had just gone through the same experience. I recall looking out at the horizon over the ocean and thinking about what was coming up for me as I was about to start college in a couple weeks. Having just had my world pretty well rocked and thrown up for grabs, I felt like that future ahead, that vision before me, was infinitely

wide open and uncertain. I knew that I had changed and had new desires, and what I had been planning for college and beyond was now all out the window. My thoughts about being an investment banker didn't resonate in the same way now. I had absolutely no idea what to expect, but somehow I knew in the deepest part of myself that whatever was ahead in my future was going to be great. And I had no control over it, apparently. I was wide open. Excited and petrified at the same time. And with all that moving around in my mind and heart, I started to bawl like a baby on that beach. I felt so raw, so helpless in a sense, so out of control. But I also felt so excited, so hopeful, and somehow so grateful and humbled by where I was at that moment. I felt small but also great, like I had a big future ahead of me. And in a very elusive and yet tangible way, what moved me most was the sense that somehow I was going to be most powerfully cared for and loved throughout it all. Only years later would I attribute that sense to God caring for me—with “human cords” and “bands of love,” you might say.

A New Path

I think in many ways that moment on the beach is where my vocation to be a priest and a Jesuit started to take root. I wasn't particularly religious and certainly not prayerful at that time, but still, something overtook me inside that made me pay attention, that opened up my vision and a way of imagining my future. If I hadn't been decentered in so many ways prior to that, I doubt that I would have been disposed to discover that my path was going to somehow be about serving others and having the presence of God one way or another accompany me throughout the whole thing. Somehow the whole path, if I lived it well, would be taken care of, provided for, sustained. In hindsight, I would say that moment was one of the most

profound experiences of the care and providence of God that I have had even though I did not have the language for it at that time. I just knew that my life was going to be good and exciting and that I couldn't wait to get after it!

On a very natural level, then, my life's circumstances brought me into a place of vulnerability and a feeling of being decentered, not in control. In that place, it became more possible for me to pay closer attention to the movements of my own heart and soul. Because things had become destabilized, I could begin to make some fundamental choices for my life that would lead to greater freedom, greater life, and greater joy as well as set aside some other options that would lead me into self-centeredness and less happiness. Without knowing it, I'd say God was using that experience to begin to teach me about how to discern the various spirits operating on me that I didn't know were active or even existed. Even more important, I received a glimpse of a big vision of what my life could become.

Maybe you'd like to take a moment now and think back on your life and see if you have had some experience that really threw you, but that ended up opening new possibilities for you. Maybe speak with God a little bit about that history and thank him for staying with you and opening up a new pathway for your life.

“The First Principle and Foundation”

That experience in Ecuador helped me to let go of preconceptions of what my life would be like and gave me a bigger vision for the future with God leading the way. It was, in hindsight, a lived experience of what St. Ignatius talked about five centuries

ago. “The First Principle and Foundation” I alluded to in the introduction is something like a preamble or an overture to the whole of the *Spiritual Exercises*. In that text, St. Ignatius gives a very big-picture perspective on the aim and purpose of our lives. We are created by God for the sake of union with God, ultimately. We are to praise, reverence, and serve God. Our ultimate happiness comes only in that union. In everyday life, then, our days are filled with countless particular possibilities and scenarios that, depending on how we respond to them, might draw us closer in that union with God or else move us farther away. That’s why it is so important, Ignatius says, to try to keep a disposition of indifference about the things and the choices before us. The indifference we do well to practice is to be understood, not as apathy, but as an interior disposition that is unattached or unbiased ahead of time about which direction to go in with any particular choice.

Being in this state of “holy indifference” is important because life can surprise us. That is to say, the grace of God in the midst of life can surprise us. It is not uncommon that when things seem to fall apart, we actually come a lot closer to being opened up to the fullness of the grace of God in our lives. Ignatius goes on to explain that it is better not to prefer “wealth over poverty, health over sickness or a long life over a short one” because when life presents to us what is not most obviously desirable, new life can unfold in surprising ways. Out of suffering, loss, or uncertainty can come new realities in which we are drawn closer to God precisely because of circumstances that we would never have chosen for ourselves or for anyone else.

This ability of God to draw close and make his presence felt in the middle of difficult circumstances makes it all the more essential that we practice discernment. We need to be

able to tell the difference between how the Holy Spirit is leading us on toward union and true freedom, and how the evil spirit is leading us away from God into fear, anxiety, and isolation, in the midst of those same uncertain circumstances. But this ability to discern spirits takes practice. Lots of it. The good thing is, every moment of our lives presents opportunities for us to keep practicing and to keep on learning!

Finding or Seeking?

Perhaps the fundamental aspect of spirituality in the tradition of St. Ignatius of Loyola is the proposal that it is possible to “find God in all things.” But there is a bit of a controversy about this motto even in Ignatian spirituality circles. Did Ignatius say *find* God in all things or *seek* God in all things? I felt a little energized when I was introduced into that debate. *Finding* God seems pretty definitive, and it also seems a bit of a tall order at times. But the admonition to *seek* God in all things, in the ordinary, daily experiences of our own corner of the world, strikes me as more realistic. *Seeking* suggests that we may or may not be “successful” in that daily quest. Some days might present more challenges than others. *Seeking* characterizes the realism of the struggle that we often face to find God when God can be hard to find.

Bishop Robert Barron, in *The Strangest Way*, a book that I use when I teach college freshmen, talks about the pathway of Christianity as one that must involve becoming decentered, or destabilized, at times. Only when we experience being unsettled (which comes naturally enough with life, anyway) can we be opened up in new and fresh ways to the grace of God that comes with encounter with Jesus. Finding and encountering the presence of God can be challenging when our vision so easily gets clouded. Especially when we have become

disoriented, been displaced in any number of ways—by losing a job, experiencing the death of a loved one, being significantly wounded in a relationship that we thought was a constant—we can be thrown off balance and begin to ask, Where is God? What is God doing here? How am I to respond? In these times of being displaced or decentered, our *seeking* for God becomes not just a nice, pious thing to do but an urgent necessity.

This striving to find, this seeking, is imperative for us on a daily basis. It is not easy all the time. In fact, that's why Ignatius encourages us to cultivate habits of seeking. He says it will be work. These are *exercises* to be undertaken, and exercise, at least for me, does not come easy! But the more we exercise, the better shape we get into. Or at least so I've heard. I am no model of fitness at the present moment, physical, spiritual, or otherwise! And yet we always have another chance to begin to cultivate these habits. When things fall apart a bit, when I lose my center and my way, it is then that I not only need help to get back on track, but also especially want to know that I am not alone. That I have a friend. A companion on the way in a tumultuous time.

Going to the Desert Daily

When we speak of discernment of spirits, we are talking about an ongoing process. It is not a one-and-done thing. In fact, the Latin root of the word “discernment” means “to separate out, to distinguish.” This implies a multiplicity of things before us, and we need to sort out what's what. Separate out the good from the bad. Separate out what is most authentic from what is less so. Separate out truest, deepest desires from more superficial ones. Separate out truth from the deceptions that we sometimes fall for.

My experience in Ecuador and subsequent reflection on that experience on the beach was a major grace in my life, and it happened without me doing much to help it along. It was *given*. But I did make a choice to go somewhere that was uncertain for an extended period and tried to be open to what would happen. In that sense, I was disposed to receive such a powerful grace. And that's been a good reminder for me ever since. Putting myself into unknown, uncertain, somewhat insecure circumstances has a way of disposing me to receive something greater than I could have expected. That has been the case for me in my vocation as a priest and as a Jesuit. Taking vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, trying to fundamentally say yes to that call and commit to a way of life that is inherently insecure and decentered, has afforded me countless opportunities to experience new things, meet new people, and be drawn into new works that I never would have discovered otherwise. I don't live this life well every day, but fundamentally, I'm grateful I've said yes to this invitation from God to dispose myself to be opened up to what is greater than myself.

That same kind of grace can be given on a daily basis in less dramatic and yet very important ways related to our desire for happiness. There is a deception that can take over in our daily lives, in the midst of our busyness and all the responsibilities of work, family, household affairs, and so on. We can come under the illusion that we are running all of these things. We are in charge. We are in control. We might fail at times, but still, we are the ones really taking care of business! But in my own life I have learned that when I take time to step back, to detach a bit and reflect on what went on in the day, I get the sense that yes, I was active, but so were a lot of other things. A lot of life happened without me being at the center of it. I'm