

What We Might Miss Seeing When We Think We've Seen It All

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For many of us, summertime is the perfect time for camping, kayaking, and wildlife viewing. One of our favorite places to visit is Williwaw Campground near Portage Glacier. In fact, our trailer is down there right now - we just drove in last night so we could be here this morning for worship - and then we'll go back out later today. We like to float the creek down there and visit the Alaska Wildlife Conservation Center, which is home to many rescued animals. Some of you may know that a few years ago, the center added a new attraction with an open walkway overlooking the black bears on one side and the browns on the other.

They also started feeding the bears from the walkway in the afternoons so that visitors could get a close look at these amazing creatures.

The first time we experienced this, though, we almost missed seeing the brown bears because they fed the blacks first, and we thought the show was over after watching the blacks come out of their caves to catch berries, and then drag their salmon into the tall grass to finish their treat. Many visitors left at that point.

We hung around a bit, though, then started to leave, but we sensed that something else might be coming, so we decided to be patient and persevere in the hot sun a bit longer. We were rewarded when we suddenly saw 3 big brown heads emerging in the distance, and the keepers returned with larger fruits like whole watermelons, and big meat chunks to entice them closer. Pretty soon we found ourselves peering down wide-eyed at some of the biggest bears we've ever seen.

Interestingly, these bears even have names they respond to when they're sufficiently tempted with tasty treats; and they stand up against the trees.

The largest bear, Joe Boxer (or JB as he's known), will even flop down and strike teddy bear poses, and they chase each other around to the delight of all onlookers. We were mesmerized. Over the years we've learned their habits and caught close ups of them

while playing in their pond and in other areas of their wide range. Actually, the feeding pattern has changed somewhat this year, and sometimes the browns eat before the blacks, too. But, that first year we were there, we DID almost miss seeing the brown bears, really just because of impatience; and we almost missed beginning a yearly tradition of the many amazing experiences we've had of seeing them since.

In the Gospel of Mark, we're told that Bartimaeus was blind, but his patience and perseverance actually gave him *greater vision* than many others among the large crowd who followed Jesus in Jericho. Bartimaeus didn't miss SEEing just how deep Jesus' love was for those who were suffering, and how much Jesus desired to heal and save his people in distress.

So Bartimaeus acted - he took a risk and received his *physical eyesight* and an amazing relationship with the Lord in return.

Another of our family's favorite things to do is football watching, and it is no surprise to anyone who visits our home on game day that we're Packer fans. (Well, all of us, except for some in-laws and friends who range the gamut of Seahawks, Eagles, Bears, Giants, Pats, Vikings & more. We often play host to "ecumenical" football gatherings at our house.)

But I do have a favorite player who is now retired. He's Donald Driver, and my favorite Valentines Day gift ever from my husband is my official #80 jersey.

This morning I want to share why Driver is my favorite - because the "why" has to do with the Christian witness of his life - a witness that a lot of people may have missed seeing, for there are both black bear and brown bear elements to his story. He was spiritually extremely blind for a time, but now he definitely SEEs. .

There are many of Driver's achievements that are impressive; and like watching the first part of the wildlife show - the black bears - Driver's famous career is fun for any Packer fan to celebrate. He was a wide receiver for the Packers his entire career. He set a bunch of records including all-time receiving yardage. He supported the whole team and the fans, alike, with his *always* huge, kind, authentic smile.

The city of Green Bay threw him a public retirement ceremony, built a statue of him, named a road after him, and gave him a key to the city - so yes, he's popular with a lot of folks.

But, even though Driver's career was long for a wide receiver, it was very short against the backdrop of a lifetime, which is what I find to be the even more amazing brown bear part of his story. Little Donald Driver's childhood and youth were not impressive. They were spent on some of the meanest streets of Houston, Texas. His single mother encountered significant troubles.

I read his autobiography, and the difficult honesty of his confessions brought tears to my eyes. He and his family were sometimes homeless, often hungry, and consistently poor.

As he entered young adolescence, he was tempted by older male family members and friends into selling drugs in order to make money.

At that point in his life, he may have more easily ended up as prison inmate No. 80 than NFL player No. 80. And in fact, he was in situations where he very easily could have lost his own life, or contributed to the loss of someone else's life, on those mean streets.

By the grace of God he did neither, though, and even during his worst moments, young Donald felt compassion for others. He never gave into taking street drugs himself, and he guarded his younger siblings against that culture. He used his cash to feed his siblings, and would sneak money *into* his mother's purse, rather than out of it.

Many times, he practiced patience and perseverance in coping with their family hardships and in developing his athletic ability - always looking for opportunities - which was how he gained college admission. Then it was at college that he met the young woman he would one day marry, and who encouraged him in developing a relationship with the living Lord.

As a direct result of his newfound Christian faith, young Donald patiently began to SEE much more clearly, he gave up his old ways, persevered in honest work, and began to

dedicate his life to serve the needs of the poor and suffering - those who feel powerless, stuck in the same kind of life he once had.

Throughout his athletic career, the adult Driver also made over 300 charitable appearances. In the spring of 2001, Donald and his wife Betina created the "Donald Driver Foundation", which offers assistance to ill children with unmanageable hospital bills, provides housing for the homeless, and donates to a variety of local charities.

The mission of the Foundation (and you can find more about it online) is to display Strong Hands, Strong Minds, and Loving Hearts to serve as a hand up, not a hand out. Driver was named the 2013 AMVETS Humanitarian of the Year.

For us, like blind Bartimaeus (and like young Donald Driver), SEEing the living Lord at work in our lives takes patience and perseverance – it takes actively seeking God’s presence in sometimes unexpected places.

It takes putting ourselves in advantageous settings to encounter the living Christ, waiting for and listening to and focusing on the Lord in the lives of those around us, and in our own lives. So, where are we most likely to powerfully SEE God living and moving?

Well, the Bible tells us story after story of Jesus’ preference to spend time with the most vulnerable: the sick, dying, unclean (those labeled “sinners”); the poor, homeless, imprisoned; the starving, widowed, grieving; and the little children.

If we want to see what we might be missing – if we want to see Jesus more clearly, and to follow him more closely, we can take a walk with him, we can venture out into the world and walk along with him among the vulnerable, bringing whatever hope we can to those who suffer most.

There are no easy answers to why suffering exists in our world, especially for the most innocent, but God does give us the assurance that God loves each of us enough to comfort and walk with us and give hope to us through any suffering we may have to face – we are never alone in our pain.

Another way to think about the presence of God in our lives, is to talk about the incarnation of God in Jesus - that mystery of Immanuel (God With Us in Christ) that we talk so much about at Christmastime - the realization that God was somehow fully present in the life and person of Jesus throughout his earthly journey, empathetically experiencing everything Jesus faced with full force.

Pastor Alan Brehm wrote [1]:

As hard as it may be to comprehend, one of the major points in the doctrine of incarnation is that God really knows and understands all of our struggles and sufferings, because in Jesus God experienced them. The idea of the incarnation is not just a matter of God “pretending” to be a human being. [2] It’s a matter of God fully entering our reality and fully sharing our humanity in order to redeem every aspect of human experience...

...Plenty of times in our lives we may feel like we are forsaken by heaven. But the idea of the incarnation is that the one who fully shared our experience took on even that experience of forsakenness in order to redeem us. Jesus actually felt “God-forsaken” in the agony he underwent. But even in the depth of his despair, God was there with him. [...experiencing that agony, as well.]

If God was fully willing to experience weakness and powerlessness, forsakenness on the cross with Jesus in order to compassionately be with us and save us; then as disciples of Christ, this is also our calling: to risk following along with Christ as he seeks out the vulnerable and to reach out with compassion to those whom he calls us to reach out to.

Now we can do this in many ways. Since we all are vulnerable and are all in need sometimes, some of us may find our deepest callings from God are to simply reach out with compassion to our neighbors we see in church. Others of us might be called to follow God’s lead a bit farther afield, heading downtown to serve at the Hope Soup Kitchen or Bean’s Cafe. Some of us might even feel God lay it upon our hearts to fly out to a

more remote part of Alaska to help build a church or teach a Vacation Bible School, or maybe to travel across the world on some mission of faith and love.

Husband Rick and I have only experienced a few callings to leave the U.S. on a Godly mission, but the one on which we were sent in 1999 marked one of the greatest challenges we would ever face. On the front of your bulletins is a picture I took in Magadan, Russia - a city that was originally built as a Siberian prison camp. We traveled there in the summer of '99 to adopt children.

That summer had followed a brutal Siberian winter, during which, many of the orphan children had only two hours of heat a day and the equivalent of one potato a day for food.

While we truly believed God had called us to this mission and that we were walking with Jesus right by our sides, it was still one of the most vulnerable and frightening times of our lives, as we attempted to rescue some vulnerable kids. Our arrival in Russia was greeted by armed soldiers escorting us off the plane and onto a bus that delivered us to the customs building. Everywhere we went (and we had to travel all over Russia with those kids) soldiers were always present.

You can imagine how very hard it began to be for us to continue to see God and really feel his love and peace carrying us through this. But then God gave us a *brown bear* moment, and that's the picture on the front of your bulletins.

To understand it, I have to quickly take you back to my childhood. My dad was a minister and my mom had always supported international foster children through a Christian agency - I grew up receiving pictures and letters from foster siblings all over the world throughout my young life. It was one of my mom's dearest callings. Then when I was 22 years old, my mom died of cancer. I was with her on that very rainy, dreary, and disheartening day; and I felt devastated by her loss.

After she passed, though, and just as I walked out of the hospital, the sun broke through the clouds and a huge rainbow emerged in the sky. To me, it was as if heaven was rejoicing in my mom's arrival home.

The rainbow's appearance helped to begin my healing, and it renewed my faith in God's beautiful promise to love us and be with us always through everything.

So, fast forward to sixteen years later, as nervous husband and I emerged from a Russian courthouse with our eldest new daughter, having just sealed our adoptions of our new international kids, whom we couldn't even speak to without an interpreter. Suddenly - I felt *transformed* by God's greeting in the sky by what I think of as "my Mama's rainbow."

It wasn't even until some months later, that I noticed the little neighborhood church with a simple cross, centered in the snapshot - looking very like the churches I grew up in with my parents - and I felt amazed again at this beautiful display of God's faithfulness and love.

Our Russian rainbow was a much needed blessing, at just the right time, on us as parents, and on our new children, and as a reassurance that we clung to through the rest of that trip, and through the years to come as we found our way into becoming a new family.

Much of Jesus' ministry was spent simply reaching out to the vulnerable with faithfulness, love, and compassion; and he continues that very same ministry today - and we're a part of it. We meet Jesus in a whole new way when we meet him in the face of a person who needs the faith, hope, and love that we have to share. I thank God for giving us hearts to sense our deepest callings and eyes to *see* the amazing beauty of life's opportunities to serve others in our walks with Christ.

Amen.

[1] Alan Brehm, <http://thewakingdreamer.blogspot.com/2009/10/god-knows-our-way-job-231-10-ps.html>

[2] Shirley Guthrie (as quoted by Alan Brehm,) *Christian Doctrine*, 240