Opinion



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by Allison Walter

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I always wanted to see a bear. Not a bear in a zoo, mind you, but a real, live bear in the wild. I finally got my wish while visiting Rocky Mountain National Park with my older brothers this past summer. I reveled in that climactic moment, but what stuck with me from that summer sibling trip, even more than checking off a long-anticipated item from my bucket list, were three lessons that I thought about while hiking on the trail:

Life is a journey. When we quit moving, things go wrong.

My brothers and I set out for a day of hiking through the mountains with high hopes. Naturally, we didn't get as early a start as we planned. We consulted the map, but forgot water. So all was off to a good start. Not too far into our hike, we came upon a moose with its baby. It was an incredible sight to see, so we stopped for a while to take it in. After finally moving on, we came to a big meadow that was the most wildly beautiful place I've seen. We spent a good chunk of time wandering out into the meadow and frolicking. Once we finally got back on the trail, we discovered we still had too many miles to go and the sun wasn't getting any higher in the sky. There was also the matter of having very little water. And it looked like rain. ...



Pope Francis delivers his homily as he celebrates Mass with cardinal electors in the Sistine Chapel at the Vatican March 14, 2013, the day after his election. (CNS/L'Osservatore Romano)

In Pope Francis' first homily as pontiff, he focused on the theme of movement. I don't think the lesson from the trail is that we shouldn't stop to appreciate the beauty of life around us — the opposite actually. It is that we should move through life with appreciation, no matter what comes, whether it's obviously beautiful or seemingly the opposite. It turns out that the rain cooled us off, the lack of drinking water made us appreciative for the little we did have, and the length of the trail bonded us together as we walked.

The journey involves times of solitude and times of community.

One of the most curious things to me about hiking is the interaction between hikers as they cross paths. Often, people greet one another with more friendliness than you

would a stranger you passed on any other path. Along our hike, people stopped to ask who we were, where we were from, where we were heading, and to pass on little tidbits of wisdom about the trail. "Not too much further," or "The view is worth it," or "Watch out for the poison ivy up ahead," we heard. There's just something about being on the trail together that makes fast friends. But, there's also something very lonely about being out on the trail. When you're in the back of the pack all alone with your thoughts, or the times when everything is quiet and all you hear is the rustle of the wind in the trees, the trail brings a solitude that's rare and complete.

The book of Kings talks about how God comes not in the earthquake, the fire, but in the gentle whisper. The quiet moments of solitude can be communal in that they offer the space to draw near to God in a way that's difficult when we're surrounded by our friends, families, colleagues and roommates. I think it's true that everyone goes through seasons of loneliness and seasons of strong community. We were meant to lean on one another, but not so much so that we forget to listen for God's little whispers.

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You might not end up where you expect, but maybe that's good.

The hike led my brothers and I on a 10-mile trip to a waterfall that was what I would call a disappointment. It just wasn't that cool. Sure, it was beautiful. But 10 miles of beautiful? But as we sat there joking and laughing about the somewhat pathetic waterfall and how our feet hurt, it became abundantly clear that the waterfall wasn't the point. Obviously, it was the journey to the waterfall that was the joy. Being with one another, catching up on each other's lives, playing "remember that time" and True Confessions, that was the point. That's where God wanted to take us.

Jeremiah says, " 'For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the Lord, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.' " It's one of the most quoted Bible verses, but even hearing those words sometimes isn't enough to remind us that our plans and dreams for ourselves aren't always the best. God's dreams for us are always beyond our imagination. When the destination we are seeking for ourselves isn't quite what we hoped for, it's because God was pointing us toward something else, something greater. Waterfall aside, I'm thankful that God had plans to bring my brothers and I closer together that day.

Hiking might not seem as exciting as seeing a bear in the wild, but the tiny bits of wisdom I reflected upon on this journey will stick with me far longer than that fleeting moment.

[Allison Walter is a high school theology teacher and track coach. She was formerly press secretary with Faith in Public Life and policy education associate with NETWORK Lobby in Washington, D.C. A graduate of Saint Louis University and a native of Kansas City, Walter believes in the power of faith to transform society.]

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