

Charlie Hergott

Christ in the Desert 2025

With Every Breath

A man once sought out a monk who lived in the cold, desert wilderness of Siberia in order to find out what he could do to love the Lord more. Upon finding the elderly monk who was walking near a body of water, he asked, “What must I do to love the Lord more, and with all my heart?” Without saying a word, the monk grabbed the man and plunged him under water. He held him there and he kept holding him there for a while. Finally, the monk ripped him back out from under the water and the man took a deep, lengthy breath that filled his lungs entirely. Then the monk said, “If you truly want to love God, you must desire him as much as you just desired to breathe.” This was part of the homily delivered to us on the First Sunday of Lent, moments before the twelve of us embarked in our canoes down the Green River. Before we became subject to the trials of the desert—a place that was at once terribly cold, dry, barren, and empty, while also wonderfully warm, breathtaking, and beautiful—we were encouraged to seek out God unequivocally and in everything. In breaking out of the stability and security of our modern confines, we were stripped back to our needs alone and reduced of our comforts. It was in this vulnerability that we grew in childlike dependence on God.

Through the course of the week, we scaled up rock faces, repelled down two canyons, and canoed 63 miles down the Green River. Being plucked from the comfort of a normally beautiful campus that had grown weary in the winter, I was able to encounter an entirely new world of nature unlike ever before. Similarly, when home is a town called Plainville, any and all forms of nature are breathtaking. All the more so as I was struck by total awe in sight of the massive canyons.

It is safe to say that this experience restored my own personal sense of wonder. The incessant cold and dreary weather of winter, in combination with a rigorous academic schedule, was rarely conducive to a natural sense of wonder. Everyday comforts and responsibilities had hindered my imagination, but having had the opportunity to be plunged into the desert to see incomprehensible works of natural beauty revived my sense of wonder. I began to wonder about how many millenia the river had routed the earth to form the canyons? It was in this wondering about the extensive creation around me that I came to a greater understanding of God. The Psalmist writes, “The LORD is my rock, my fortress, and my deliverer. My God is my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold” (Ps 18:2). Again, growing up in Plainville, my personal experience with any vastness of rock was that of the gravel mill across town. Before this trip, to say that God was like a rock seemed abstract, if not reductive. However, upon canoeing down the river and seeing the depth of which the river had cut through the canyon, I began to understand King David’s words. The expanse of immovable rock faces that totally encapsulated us dramatically redefined my understanding of God in the same way—total, complete, and immovable. Yet, there was one thing my mind could not cease to wonder about: why had God ordained that one day I should be there to experience all of this?

With the same river that God used to carve those canyons over thousands of years, he too used the river to rout our minds and our hearts with a profound new sense of community. There was a unique bond formed between all of us on this trip that instilled me with a deeper sense of responsibility to others than I previously had before. While I have always felt a strong responsibility to others throughout my life, the totality of this commitment has shrunk due to the comforts of adult independence. However, having been able to undergo life in the desert with eleven others, a community of total dependence was built. In order to survive and make it down

the river each day, we had to rely on one another—going at it alone was guaranteed to result in failure. When it came to meals, I relied on the other three members of my cook group day in and day out just to eat, and they relied on me as well. When it came to rowing down the river, I relied on Drew or Lauren to steer the canoe as I paddled away up front. All together, the total feat was 63 miles—a task not lightly undertaken alone, if possible. When it came to the campsite, I relied on others to help pitch our tents and transport all our gear from the canoes. When it came to navigation, I relied on the leader of the day and our expedition leaders to guide us to the next camp site. In everything, I was totally reliant on the group for survival and success. It was this sense of total dependence on one another that helped me grow in childlike dependence on God. Every night, the students of the group would pray the litany of trust just before going to bed. In this litany, we prayed: “From the rebellion against childlike dependence on you, deliver me Jesus ... That not knowing what tomorrow brings is an invitation to lean on you—Jesus, I trust in you.” Throughout my time in the desert, I was called into greater dependence on God and my peers—to truly pray for my daily needs and ultimately surrender myself to the will of God.

Amidst the challenges of taking down camp, setting camp up again, making meals, rowing a great number of miles each day, a great number of opportunities for leadership arose. While traditional leadership, or active leadership, was expressed by being “Leader of the Day,” I found that the opportunities for peer leadership helped me develop far greater than I had imagined going into the trip. That is not to diminish the importance of the task of being Leader of the Day, but being Leader of the Day encompassed the same type of decision-making and organizational skills that I had developed throughout my leadership roles on campus. Peer leadership is not something I was proficient at until it came to this trip. Peer leadership is first and foremost leading by example and can be undertaken in even the smallest of actions. Each

day, I tried to keep a humorous wit about me, while still being able to connect on a deeper level with the group through genuine conversation. Peer leadership also looked like active followership: if the group had to get something done, I tried to take action right away and get on it. Each day when it was time to pack up camp and get on the water, I made sure to pack my bag right away and begin to bring gear down to the canoes in hopes of starting a movement of everyone else getting on board, while also being able to help in the effort. But in all this, I still reflected on that question: why had God ordained that one day I should be here to experience all of this? Why was I in the desert?

In a great moment of self-discovery amidst the incredibleness and exhaustion, I began to find an answer to the question. The answer revolves around suffering—one of the initial stumbling blocks to my faith. I never understood the point of suffering in life or what the genuine faith response looks like to it. I always had been told to “offer it up” and while that is meritorious and sound advice, I still did not understand why. I understood that salvation was brought about through suffering and that in suffering, the salvific work of Christ can be participated in and contributed to, but even having recognized that, I still did not fully understand. So I prayed and prayed that Jesus would “teach me to suffer as you suffered.” Not to invite suffering into my life, but when it arises, to bear it as Christ would. I did not know how to until one of the last days in the desert.

I vividly recall the four o’clock in the afternoon Mass and adoration after a long day of rock-climbing. I was quite terrified to scale up 80 or so feet of a rock-face, even if I was totally strapped in and secure. Between the climbing and getting over the anxiety of having to totally trust the shmear (the foot technique to create friction and boost yourself), I found myself exhausted by the time we got back to camp. I remember being exhausted throughout Mass, but

when adoration came around, I had a moment of realization: I was, in my own way, suffering. I finally got a glimpse into that question of why God had brought me to this place—I was suffering and I still wanted to know how to bear suffering as Christ did. Then, I recalled the words that Anthony exclaimed after an attack by the Devil: “Here am I, Anthony; I flee not from your stripes, for even if you inflict more ‘nothing shall separate me from the love of Christ’ (Rom 8:35)” (St. Athanasius 19). Here was my answer. The normal view of suffering I had taken was that it was unjust and therefore meaningless, or just and therefore cause for despair. However, at that moment as I felt totally exhausted after days of canoeing amongst many other wilderness adventures, I realized that this exhaustion was not just my own. In the desert, Christ fasted for forty days and nights and he too would have been utterly exhausted—I finally understood that even in suffering, my life could point to Christ. This is the same conclusion that St. Athanasius drew: “This was Anthony’s first struggle against the devil, or rather this was the Savior’s work in Anthony” (St. Athanasius 17). It was not just me who bore that exhaustion, but Christ too—it was not me just bearing my exhaustion, but the work of Christ in me. Christ, who on the cross, transformed suffering into love. In order to suffer well, I had to let Christ bear it with me and allow suffering to be an occasion for love and intercession for others—not just meaningless suffering. I discovered that every moment of my life, even in occasions of suffering, my life could point to Christ.

When Jesus first encountered Simon Peter, he commanded him to take his nets and put them out into the deep (Lk 5:4). From that moment on, his life was transformed forever. So too, going out deep into the Moab Desert provided me with a life-changing encounter with Christ. I left the trip more conformed to Christ in every way: I began to rely totally on God in the same way I had to rely on the rest of my group, I learned how to let my life to point to Christ even in

suffering, and I began to desire a life with completely filled with God, just as much as I desired to breathe.