



Blessings Abound in Brush with Scarcity

by Franz Rigert

We arrived in San Jose, Costa Rica on Christmas evening. Trinn and I planned to savor precious time with our three mostly adult children and to celebrate her 50th birthday in a rental home high up in the rain forest overlooking the Pacific Ocean. After a night in the capital we drove over the famous “crocodile bridge” to the coastal city of Jaco, and then headed south toward Manuel Antonio National Park. Just a half hour before our destination, we stopped at an open air roadside restaurant for lunch. Upon returning to our definitely locked car, we discovered the passenger side door lock had been picked and burglars made off with four backpacks containing our passports, wallets, glasses, numerous electronic devices, and all sorts of sentimental valuables. Among other things, I lost a journal in which I had chronicled all of the Sunday preaching, clergy visits and church leadership meetings experienced in my first three years as Conference Minister. Ugh.



We stood there dumbfounded, feeling utterly violated and helpless. A day that began with excitement, scenic beauty and lots of confidence (despite the language barrier and lack of GPS) had suddenly left us feeling insecure, vulnerable and – at least momentarily – bitter at those thugs who would prey on tourists. It occurred to me more than once that Jesus called me to “pray” on them, but that night I didn’t have it in me. I still had to go to the local police department in Dominical to file a report, while my family rounded up a few groceries at the local market. When I arrived at the police department two things became abundantly clear – 1) nobody knew English and 2) this was going to take forever! To my delight, a bilingual woman who had given me directions volunteered to translate, and a kind young officer allowed me to write up a narrative of the events overnight and return it the next day. I left deeply grateful.

For years I have preached about the concept of resilience – that spiritual and psychological determination to make the best of a bad situation. What unfolded was a series of blessings that were nothing short of the manifestation of God’s love in this world. We were welcomed immediately by the office staff of a real estate company. They gave us unlimited use of phones to handle banking and credit card concerns, to connect with the US embassy and to contact friends back home who could retrieve pictures of our passports and email them to us. We were escorted to our rental home by gracious hosts who promised to line up some excursions for the coming days so that we could begin to salvage the vacation. We were greeted at our mountaintop villa by monkeys, toucans and wild boars, and we were treated to lush greenery, beautiful flowers, and breathtaking sunsets over the Pacific horizon.

The next day we had to travel all the way back to San Jose for emergency passports. We arrived at the US Embassy expecting long lines and major hassles. To the contrary, we were treated so graciously and expediently! Not only did our children refrain from complaining, they actually participated in the experience of rallying, giving thanks for life, for family and for the many blessings that surrounded us. One son quipped, “Pop, you have lots of sermon material in this story!” And our daughter reminded us, “We can replace stuff. We have our lives.” Indeed, just a few days later, tragically, two families from the States (and a plane crew and tourist guide) died in a fiery crash just a few hundred miles away.

Admittedly, we carried some residual effects throughout the week. We worried, probably to the point of paranoia, about our safety and the security of my wallet (the only credit card left). Anger crept in every time we remembered another item that was lost. In fact, it took several days for each of us to compile the lists of “stuff” taken, but this proved to be a cathartic process and a continual reminder that each one of us enters this world with nothing and leaves this world with nothing. What matters in our brief time here are the relationships we build, the love we share, and the inherent goodness of humanity that touches our lives, often times when we least expect it and most need it.

Perhaps my favorite Costa Rican wildlife experience was a close up view of a three toed sloth moving ever so slowly up a tree. I’m often guilty of moving too fast! Consequently, on occasion, I miss the chance to savor life’s meaningful moments. While I refuse to become slothful (and will probably always lean a little more Martha than Mary), I promise to pause more often this year from the constant drone of “doing” in order to experience the wonder and joy of simply “being.”

May this unfolding season of Epiphany invite you to look for love and long for light, as together we keep the faith and proclaim hope for the world.