

# Belongings

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Several years ago I was visiting with my family that great entertainment center of the universe: Disney World. The Magic Kingdom. Now there is lots to do in Disney World, but I am pretty much the only rollercoaster rider in the family and so that means I am often off by myself looking for the next thrill ride. It also meant, back before fast pass, a lot of waiting in long lines by oneself. In one of these solo adventures I decided to take my turn on Space Mountain --- the great roller coaster in the dark. And as I approached the massive ride in front of me was a father and his young son. The boy had barely met the height requirement to get into the ride --- and that alone was reason enough, you could tell, for him to feel not only very proud ... but also very confident that Space Mountain was no big deal. Now as I said the lines for rides like Space Mountain are kind of long, and this one particularly so. It wound throughout the building and you found yourself walking through corridors of space paraphernalia and sounds that made it appear as if you were on your final walk to get into the Space Shuttle for lift off. And so I noticed ahead of me that this little boy who, just moments before, had been filled with a good share of bravado, all of a sudden wasn't feeling so courageous anymore. He grew more and more silent and then began asking questions of his father. Questions that betrayed a growing sense of reluctance. How fast is the ride, Dad? Are there really big drops? Do you wear a seat belt? What happens if the seat belt doesn't work? The father did his best to dispel the boys fears, nevertheless, his steps grew more and more timid. The expression on his face revealed a doubt that wondered if he was going to get off this ride alive. And then came the

moment of truth. Onto the platform the boy and his father were invited with the next step being a step into the car that had yet to arrive. And the boy froze and panic filled his face and tears filled his eyes and a tremble came to his lip. He so wanted to be brave. He so wanted to not let down his father. But there was just no way he was going to get into that car.

And so the father leaned over and whispered something into the boy's ear, something I could not hear. The little boy nodded his head and with the last ounce of courage he could muster they took their place in the line for the next car. Moments later it arrived, they stepped in. Sat down. Got pressed in by the mechanical harness. The boy stared straight ahead into the impending abyss and the father stared straight at the boy. And off they went.

Off they went. I'll never forget that scene as long as I live. There was something about it that spoke to so many things that go into the development of a human being. A child becoming an adult. You can unpack it and find a thousand lessons. In the end, though there they were: parent and child. Child and parent. One of them not knowing what in heaven's name was going to happen. And the other knowing that everything – despite the darkness, despite the sudden drops, despite the invisible turns – everything in the end was going to be all right. They were going to get through the ride together. It's been that way since the very beginning – the fear of the unknown.

We don't know very much about what goes through the mind of an infant child when he or she comes into the world. Consciousness is not very well formed in those early days of our life. But it is safe to say that when we were babies we had no idea what was happening or what was going to happen to us. All we knew was that we were cold and hungry and the only way those things were going to be addressed was through an unmistakable wail. And if we were fortunate there was a loving parent close by whose instinct it was to respond to our cry – and give us what we needed. In the best of families this is a relationship of trust and bond that continues until those wonderful adolescent years where children, despite what track record their parents have amassed, all of sudden see their parents as the least intelligent and least trustworthy creatures on the planet.

But there is something about that picture of father and son heading into the darkness – that I think Jesus had in mind when in his teaching about the meaning and purpose of life he continually referred to the God of heaven as Father. “Your Father in heaven,” he would always say. It’s how he spoke of his own Trinitarian relationship – Father, Abba, Daddy. There was something about this trust and bond between Creator and creature that Jesus was trying to point us to. There is a yearning that God has for us to see him as the Father – the trustworthy father who is taking his seat in the car as we make our way into the unknown darkness which is the future.

Now it’s not that Jesus wants us to get hung up the gender identity of God. Because of course God has no gender. This would be a far too limited view of God.

And furthermore for those who have had problematic or non-existent relationships with fathers or mothers – this idea of God as Father may be a hurdle too high to leap over. But at its very core it seems what Jesus would want to point us to – is to the trust and the bond. The belief, “I believe”, in the God of heaven who unmistakably attaches God’s very self to us. We are on this ride together.

Inside the Presbyterian Church’s Book of Confession there is a sixteenth century confession written by our European reformer forbearers – that takes the form of a catechism, the Heidelberg Catechism – questions and answers of the faith. And when they put it together I am sure they wrestled with what should be the first question. What is the question of most importance to the being of God and to the human condition – and this is what they came up with: Question #1 – “What is your only comfort in life and in death?” And the answer – “That I belong – body and soul, in life and in death – not to myself, but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ.”

That I belong! Isn't that what we are saying when we say, "I believe in God the Father, Almighty," is that we belong to someone outside of ourselves. That we are not in this thing alone. That despite the great anxiety of life that says to us that somehow we have to face this thing called life on our own – that we have to go into the darkness by ourselves – that the world is just a bunch of chance accidents and it's only you and the dice – in the face of all that -- the child of God stands forth and says, "I believe in God, the Father, Almighty." I believe that God in his Almightyness attaches himself to me. That I don't have to go through this life thinking that my only sense of belonging is to myself -- but that I belong to God. That God will never let me go.

This is the Almightyness of God, not that God somehow orchestrates every moment of my life and every action taking place around me. That somehow God is responsible for all the hurts and the hills and the hurdles of life – no, we tend to create a lot of those for ourselves. No, God in his Almightyness, in his Fatherly Almightyness, says to us that no matter what the darkness may hold, no matter how sudden the drop, no matter how unexpected the turn – nothing can pull me away from you.

Some of you have seen, I'm sure, the cartoonish picture that shows a dragon propped up against a tree. He is savoring his most recent meal. A medieval castle is in the distant background. The dragon is using a knight's lance as an after-dinner tooth pick. Scattered all around are pieces of the knight's armor – breastplate, helmet, shield and all the rest. Beneath the scene there is the caption:

No matter how hard you work,

No matter how right you are,

Sometimes the dragon still wins.

It's a truth about life that we've all encountered in some way or another. Life ain't fair. Bad things happen to good people. Awful things occur to children who don't deserve them. The dragon

wins sometimes. God's Almightyness is not about that. God's almightyess is about the love he brings to it. God's almightyess is about the love that intercedes. The love that bears the same unfairness. That when the religious rulers mocked Jesus on the cross and implored him to come down and save himself - if he really had the power. It is in that emptiness on the cross that God says no I stay here in order to save the world. The love that promises that though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam - we shall not fear - for the Lord of hosts is with us, the God of Jacob is our refuge.

The apostle Paul put it another way, "I am convinced," he said, "I am convinced ... I am sure ... I believe ... that neither death nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." This is God in His Almightyness.

It makes me think of that time when I was in Jr. High and my parents took me on a trip behind what was then the Iron Curtain. One of our stops was Moscow and while we were there my father was able to get two tickets for him and me to go see the Soviets play Ireland in soccer. What a thrill for a ninth grade boy. It was at the big soccer stadium there in Moscow but we had no idea how to get there. So we had someone right out the name of the stadium and the name of the hotel in Russian so we could give it to the taxi driver in both directions. The first driver got us to the stadium. And we saw the Soviets beat the Irish team 1-0. And when the game was over we came out of the stadium - all 60,000 of us - and found that there were no taxis. They had stopped running at a certain time. The only way to travel was by subway. The Moscow subway was a beautiful subway - but it had only one station for this stadium of 60,000 people. So we walked with probably 30,000 Russians - those who didn't have a car -- to the one subway station and my father could see that this was not going to be good. And as we approached the station we found rows of Soviet soldiers forming a human funnel for us to squeeze into as we approached the one entrance. 30,000 people funneled into one entrance. This was one of these crowds where people get separated and crushed. And before we knew it we were inside the vortex. And as we started into the vortex ... my

father turned around to me and he could see this look of panic on my face. And this is what he said to me: "I want you to do one thing and one thing only – I want you to grab onto the back of my belt. Grab on and don't even think about letting go. If you hold onto this belt then you will be all right." And so in the darkness of the crushing crowd I held onto the back of the belt of this man in whose eye I had once been a gleam. And as the crush came I held on. And I held on. I belonged. And at the end I was all right. Tears streaming down my cheeks, ribs and arms a little bruised but I was all right. Father got me through. Good news for an adolescent boy.

But you know what the better news is – this Father, Almighty of whom we speak each Sunday – this Father Almighty in whom we believe – it's not about our grasp of him, it's about his grasp of us. That's what it's all about. God's grasp of us. Though the earth should change. Though we don't know what tomorrow will bring. Though life hurtles us into the darkness. Though rulers and powers may wish to separate us. Though the dragon sometimes wins. The good news is: we belong not to ourselves – but to our faithful Savior Jesus Christ. I believe in God, the Father Almighty.