

My prayer for this message has been that you would welcome the presence of Jesus in each moment, in every emotion, and in all your weakness.

Halfway up the 3000-foot climb to the summit of Lazy Mountain, I meet a group coming down. It's not surprising to see someone enjoying the trail on a 60° sun-soaked day in June, but they are clearly surprised to see me because they saw me already; I was coming down when they were going up. I hear the part statement part question, "Your second time up to day!?" Now I must decide if I will go along with their false assumption or explain that it is my 6th time today.

It started in the first week of January when I got sick of being sick. After two weeks with less activity or productivity than I usually have in a single afternoon and more movies and naps than I allowed myself in the other 50 weeks of the year combined, I was anxious to feel alive again. I didn't make a resolution to be more active, but in defiance of my inactivity, I pushed my fatigued body up Lazy Mountain. Still weak from sickness, I summited five times in the first week of the year. With all that alone time on the trail, I thought a lot. I imagined how many times I could summit in a whole year. I questioned how fast I could make it up and back with an all-out effort. Then, somehow, I convinced myself that I would submit 10 times in a single day. I planned to do it near the summer solstice but set my date for June 20 when Nico Steinbrenner, an actual ultra runner, heard about my plans and offered to join me on that date. His plane landed at midnight, and we were on the trail by 2:00 AM.

Now I'm halfway up Lazy Mountain, after clocking 2-hour laps all morning, it is still before noon when I further shock the group of hikers by telling them that it is my sixth time up at the mountain that day. We complete lap 6, still feeling strong. Lap 7 is getting harder. We slow our pace for lap 8 and 9 before knocking off the 10th lap 10 minutes before midnight

Nico painted a rock that he picked up near the summit and gave it to me as a finisher prize. Over a colorful mountain, he wrote the words "Ultra Lazy" and "30K in one day". The rock sits on my bedside table and reminds me of when I hiked 45 miles, gaining and losing 30,000 vertical feet in under 22 hours. You might think I am tough before doing it. But I want you to realize that I am brave for telling you about it.

Hero Stories Don't Connect

It is time for a lesson about storytelling. I just told you a hero story and hero stories don't connect. If I want you to listen to me for the next 30 minutes, it is risky to open my sermon with a story about me impressively succeeding at a challenge that most people would fail.

You already know the hero story doesn't connect because you have felt the disconnection when the story you're telling is interrupted with the words, "Oh that's nothing", as someone far superior to you transitions into a hero story. You don't want to connect with that story. You want that story to be over. The hero story doesn't connect for two main reasons: 1. It's too big to relate to. 2. It's too perfect to relate to.

I learned about the dangers of “the big story” from the book Storyworthy by champion storyteller Matthew Dicks. He knows that the big story is the hardest to tell. He teaches that the trick to telling the big story is to not make it about anything but to find the small and relatable moments within the big story that will connect. He has yet to tell the story of the trial for the crime he did not commit, or when he escaped the police in a brief, but very real, high-speed chase, or when he agreed to a \$15,000 surgery for his dog while he was sleepwalking, because he has yet to find the smaller relatable stories within these big stories. When I opened with my hero story you probably weren’t thinking, “Yeah, I know exactly how you felt. That is just like the time I climbed the same mountain 10 times in one day.” If I were to tell this story effectively, it can’t be about succeeding at a big thing. Instead, I would tell you what I learned about the power of supportive friends. I wouldn’t have been successful without an experienced and encouraging partner. I would tell you about how my friends Jereld and Alina joined us for multiple ascents that day, including the 10th, when they patiently encouraged me to keep moving. The first problem with the hero story is that it is too big to relate to, and the trick is to make it about a smaller story within the story.

The second danger is of the hero story is that it is too perfect to relate to. Matthew Dicks gives two rules for telling vacation stories: Rule #1, nobody wants to hear your vacation story, Rule #2, if someone asks about your vacation story, they are just being polite, see rule #1. Vacation stories are often too full of ideal moments to relate to everyday life. The next trick to effectively telling a hero story is to highlight the non heroic aspects of the story, the parts people can relate to. When I told my hero story, you might have been impressed, but more likely, you thought I was a bit full of myself and you started to check out. Well aren’t you perfect, climbing mountains when you are sick. If I were to tell the story effectively, I would reveal that I couldn’t sleep the night before because you can relate to nervous excitement. I would tell you that it took me 6 weeks to walk without pain in my left knee and that in the four months after that day, I lost my entire right big toenail twice, because you can relate to injury. I would tell you about the mental battle I faced on the 9th ascent, feeling wasted and knowing I still had to do it again, because you can relate to self-doubt. I would tell you about the naps I took in the grass by the front bumper of my car between ascents because you can relate to exhaustion. Now we have a story that’s relatable. The story that has no weaknesses offers no connection. Perfection doesn’t relate.

Do you see how the hero story is a problem for someone who wants to connect with others? If so, you can see something of the problematic position God is in. All of his stories are hero stories because he actually is perfect.

Verse 14: Jesus is a Hero
His divinity makes him credible!

Hebrews 4:14 Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess.

If God had no filter for the hero story and he was sitting around a living room visiting with you, he might respond to your story about messing up everything by saying let me tell you about the time I created everything. You might tell about the time you made lunch for a friend, and he would top your story with the time he provided salvation for the human race. It is central to God's nature to relate to us, but our nature doesn't relate to his. So, how do you make a hero story connect? You highlight the weaknesses Our God who has no weakness desire so much to relate to you that he took on weakness so that you could connect with his story. The Christmas story and the entire human experience of Jesus is God's storytelling edit of his hero story. It is how he makes his big story a smaller story that we can enter into. The God who cannot relate 2 came in the flesh that we can relate with.

Notice the lofty language used to describe him in the first verse of this text. He is identified as a priest, which is a set-apart role already, but there are two adjectives attached that further distance him from lowly sinners, he is a great high priest. Verse 16 adds that he is sinless, which is entirely not relatable. And this great high priest has done something we can't, he ascended into heaven. After resurrecting from the dead. Can you relate?

If God had no filter for the hero story and he was sitting around a living room visiting with you, he might respond to your story about messing up everything by saying let me tell you about the time I created everything. You might tell about the time you made lunch for a friend, and he would top your story with the time he provided salvation for the human race. Does anyone want to hear another story? It is central to God's nature to relate to us, but our nature doesn't relate to his.

The command in this text is to hold on fire only to your faith. That is the application you should make from the truth of Christ's heroic greatness. It should give you confidence. Don't miss the hero story. It is a key part of the gospel. Christ's divinity gives him credibility. Jesus is God and he's alive and the faith we profess is real and backed by a great high priest. God's hero story is the best, but it is still a problem because when it is told as a hero story. It fails to connect. And God longs for connection.

Verse 15: Jesus chose weakness
His humanity makes him relatable!

Hebrews 4:15

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin.

God did not leave his story as an inaccessible hero story. He took on another story, a human story. His divinity makes him credible. His humanity makes him relatable. Christ died to give us eternal life. Christ lived to help us in our earthly life. God understood how the hero story works and that it doesn't connect without highlighting weakness. He didn't have any weakness but had such a desire to connect that he created weakness. He chose

to come in human flesh so that he might share the weakness that would enable us to relate to him.

Verse 15 gives us a double negative. There's something that Christ is not unable to do. The ESV says he's not unable to "sympathize with our weakness." The NIV says "empathize with our weakness". The KJV says he cannot be "touched with the feelings of our infirmities." In English, we make a distinction between the words empathy, to feel with, and sympathy, to feel for. The Greek word sounds like sympathy, but it literally means to "suffer with". Jesus does just see your suffering; he meets you in your suffering. He doesn't just feel for you; he feels with you.

There is a rare condition called Mirror-Touch Synesthesia in which people feel the sensation that someone else feels when they watch something happen to them. If they see someone get slapped, their cheek burns. That wouldn't be so bad if you were a waiter at a fancy restaurant and watched people enjoy delicious food and pleasant conversation all day. You'd be feeling pretty good if you spent your days observing relaxation massage. But if you were an emergency room doctor, it would be hard to want to go to work. Jesus has this condition, but he is on a different level. Not only does he feel all that he sees, but he also sees all that we feel. Jesus is simultaneously present in the feelings of the entire world.

The text says that he is tempted in every way, like we are. The word "tempted" can be translated as tested. He can relate to every test you have ever gone through. God designed the earthly life of Christ to taste something of every flavor of human challenge. The KJV says "at all points". There is no point in the human experience that Jesus hasn't experienced something close enough to relate to.

Verse 16: Jesus Connects

His empathy makes him present!

Jesus perfectly navigated the hero story. But we cannot stop with the happy truth that Jesus can connect. It becomes life-changing when we realize that his empathy makes him present. Then, you can welcome the presence of Jesus in each moment, in every emotion, and in all your weakness.

Verse 16 makes clear the results of all of this. In verse 14 we saw that with Jesus as our great high priest, we have the confidence to hold on to faith. His divinity makes him credible. Now the sympathy with our weakness moves us in the direction of faith in a more intimate way, more connected than the classic hero story. We approach the throne of grace; we draw near to him, our confidence is not just in his heroicness but in his availability to us, in his presence with us. Intimacy should be the result of his empathy.

And where is Jesus intimately present? In every moment because he has been tempted in every way like we are. Right where we feel most abandoned, he refuses to leave us alone.

Wherever we feel too far from him, he comes to us. The places you thought were unredeemable are the places your redeemer specifically went to.

Christ didn't just die for you, he lived for you. If Christ's only human mission was to die for you, he could have done that by not fleeing from Herod's persecution and saving 30 years of difficulty. But he didn't just come to die for you; he came to live for you. Not just as an example but so he could have empathy and meet you in your weakness. When the text says that he was tempted in every way or at all points as we are, we should understand that God saw to it that Jesus would experience something of every flavor of trauma and brokenness and difficulty in one lifetime to relate to the experience of every human life.

Let's take an overview of Christ's life through the eyes of a trauma-informed therapist and notice how God intentionally designed the humanity of Christ to relate to your weaknesses. Jesus's disadvantages started before his birth. When a child is more likely to get into trouble because your grandpa was a scoundrel, it's called generational trauma. Our genealogy matters. In Jesus's well-documented bloodline, we find the intergenerational lying, killing, and oppression oppressive treatment of the disadvantaged. His genealogy includes prostitution, polygamy, and corrupt monarchs. His people carried the institutional memory of two prominent exiles; they were slaves, refugees, and victims of hate crimes. Jesus came from a rough line. If you have some history of abuse on your mom's side of the family and a heritage of systematic racism on your dad's side, Jesus can sympathize with your weakness. If your genealogy gave you a bad start in this world, Jesus knows how you feel. And this was designed by God so that Jesus could meet you in your weakness to be present with you and free you. Jesus doesn't just understand, he is present with you in this place.

Jesus experienced trauma in his early childhood development. He endured the most disruptive and unique prenatal experience in history. Babies pick up on everything in the environment outside the womb, and his mom had some heavy emotions to process after being informed by an Angel that the Holy Spirit impregnated her. On top of the bewilderment, she had the stress of the gossip and the condemnation that would spread about her, the stress of the pregnancy that put her in a position to be killed by stoning, and the stress of the fiancé who intended to break off their engagement or divorce her quietly. The only reason Jesus wasn't raised by a single mom was because there was a direct order from an Angel for Joseph to not leave her. It was not a stable prenatal environment.

Disadvantages and humble circumstances shade Jesus's famous birth story and humble circumstances: Away in a manger, no crib for a bed. As an infant, the most powerful man in town led a campaign to kill him, but his family escaped by another angelic order. They were displaced as refugees in Egypt. If you had a challenging early childhood, Jesus can sympathize with your weakness. If your house was not a stable place in your childhood was not a safe space, Jesus knows how you feel, and he meets you there. He is present in your early childhood trauma.

We get a sense of the challenge of his adolescence in Isaiah 53:2-3.

He grew up before him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of dry ground. He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. ³He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain. Like one from whom people hide their faces he was despised, and we held him in low esteem.

God made Jesus ugly, unpopular, and unwanted. There's no time of life when appearance acceptance matters more than the teenage years and his were undoubtedly weird. He knew at 12 years old that he was God. He would never fit in. And he experienced all of that in the rough neighborhood. Can anything good come out of Nazareth? If you didn't get the scholarship you applied for, or you were dumped by the person that you wanted to be, with or you have always felt like an outsider, Jesus sympathizes with your weakness. Jesus knows what it is like to be ugly, unpopular, and unwanted. Why was Jesus ugly? Because God know that sometimes we wouldn't feel attractive. God did this on purpose so that when you felt that, he could be present with you in those emotions.

We have a great deal of detail about the sufferings of Jesus's final three years of life, especially the last week. If you have experienced housing insecurity, remember that Jesus was homeless. If you've been a victim of injustice in the court system, he knows how you feel. If you've endured physical, emotional, or verbal abuse, he knows how you feel. If you've been hurt by religion, remember that it was Jesus's church that crucified him. He knows what it's like to have friends fall asleep when he needed them most, to be misunderstood, to be betrayed by a kiss, to be arrested. He knows what it's like to be tired. He knows what it's like to be doubted and then denied. And though he never sinned, he knows what sin feels like because it crushed him.

We need the atonement accomplished by Christ's death on the cross to enter eternal life. We need the weakness of his life on earth to get us through this life. Christ's death redeems us. Christ's life relates to us. Jesus doesn't just get it, he is present with you there.

This week, there was a school shooting at the Feather River Seventh-day Adventist School. People are injured, traumatized, and grieved. Any time stories like this hit the news, people will ask, where is God? God is present with the wounded as the one who was wounded for our transgressions. He is present with the grieving as the one acquainted with grief. He is present with the victims as the victim of cruelty and murder. He is present with the gunman when the sin of the world pressed upon him on the cross it included that man's sin this week. When we ask, "where is God?" we really ask, "why didn't he stop it?". He didn't have to stop it because it can't stop him from being present with us through it all. His presence is not only available on the other side of our weakness but right in it.

In March 2022, America was introduced to Jesus commercials when a \$100 million advertising campaign aired the commercials during March Madness, paid for billboards across the country, and gave away free hats and t-shirts in order to reintroduce Jesus to America. If you had \$100 million available to get a message of Jesus to America, what

would your message be? Based on 8000 interviews with people who thought they knew what Jesus was like this campaign put their \$100 million towards the message “he gets us”. They wanted America to know that Jesus is for us and that Christians aren't just against things. Ironically, Christians reinforced to many that they're more interested in being against things when articles and videos came out of Christians who were against the Jesus commercials. The top criticisms include that the advertising campaign is poor stewardship. Many comments sounded like Judas's argument that the money would have been better spent on the poor. Critics poked at the fact that the message is focused on the humanity of Christ and not his divinity. It is not a full gospel message. It should say, “he saves us” not just “he gets us”. Jesus isn't an advertising campaign. Others complained that the message and the graphics are a bit too woke for their taste. Others pointed out that it is a human-focused message, it is about us not him. Others did not like the focus on social justice. But the people willing to spend 20 million dollars for 90 seconds of Super Bowl advertising felt that this was worth it. Is that too high a price to pay to communicate the message that Jesus gets us? Jesus paid an even higher price.

How far will Jesus go to show you that he gets you, to be with you in those places? In the intensity of pain, Jesus was offered some pain relief and he refused it. It wasn't about being tough, it wasn't about abstaining from wine on moral grounds, it was just to fulfill prophecy. He wanted to feel it because he wanted to relate to you. He paid a high price to go deep with you into your pain so he can sympathize with the one who has no relief and so his presence can be enough for the one who is tempted to make a poor choice to take the edge off their pain. We give in to temptation before it reaches its full force. Jesus was tempted, but he didn't sin, so those temptations got strong. He can meet you there. When he was mocked at his trial, he did not open his mouth. He could have defended himself, but he wanted to experience the full force of the mockery.

The cross illustrates how deep Jesus goes when Jesus cries out, “My God, my God why have you forsaken me?” None of us have experienced this separation from God. This is the experience of the wicked at the second death. When fire falls from heaven and they are separated eternally from God and from life. Jesus can sympathize even with this. If he can go, there he can meet you anywhere. Jesus considered no price too high to pay to let you know that he gets you so that he could be present with you in every moment.

Don't leave that offer on the table. Are there moments you go without Jesus? Are there emotions that you thought he had no place in? The Christmas story is about a God who chose weakness because he refused to be separated from you as an unrelatable hero. Welcome his presence into your mundane moments, your heavy emotions, and your broken relationships. Stop trying to get past those things to get to Jesus and welcome his presence into those spaces so that he can get you through them. This is the ultimate hero story.

