

I have a complicated history with the rollercoasters at Disney World. When I was five, we went to Disney on vacation and waited in the long, long line to ride Space Mountain. If you've never been, that roller coaster is entirely inside, in the dark, with special effect lighting. We made it all the way to the front of the line, then I chickened out and wouldn't ride. Years later, when I was in high school, by then a seasoned roller-coaster rider, we went back to Disney World. This time I was certain I could handle Space Mountain, but when we were about halfway through the line, a mechanical problem caused the ride to shut down, and while we were still in the process of exiting the building, the emergency safety lighting came on, and—spoiler alert—we could see that the track of the ride isn't wicked at all; most of the sensation of fast and furious movement comes from being in the dark and the way the lights are sequenced to make you feel like you're going faster than you really are. 20 something years later I made it back to Disney World; I can still ride roller coasters; not so much anything that spins. So the tea cups were out, but we did Triple Mountain Whammy: that's when you ride Space Mountain, Big Thunder Mountain Rail Road, and Splash Mountain all in one day. I could do that without feeling ill because Disney is geared more toward whole family fun than gut-wrenching mega-coasters. But I was lulled into a false sense of security; so I wasn't prepared when the Rock n' Roller Coaster, which is also inside in the dark, launched us upside down, or when Expedition Everest stopped, paused, and then started going much faster, backwards. Had I known, I might have opted out of those at 40 just like I did when I was five.

We have come to the end of five weeks of John's bread of life discourse, where after feeding the multitude with a few loaves and fish, Jesus teaches that in order to be true disciples, we have to remain in relationship with him, finding sustenance for the journey of life by eating his flesh and drinking his blood. As Jesus wraps up his explanation of how to live into eternal life in the Father through abiding with him, the Son, the disciples—possibly including some of the twelve but also the larger group of followers—state the obvious: *This teaching is hard. Who can accept it?* I hear in that response echoes of my years as both a student and a teacher. *This thing that we're learning isn't easy. Can anyone actually do this? Are we going to get graded on a curve? Can't I do something else for extra-credit?* (This isn't a bad reading for the Sunday before school starts.) Hearing their confusion or frustration or disappointment, Jesus asks them, rhetorically, *Does this offend you?* Because Jesus already knows the answer to that question: yes, they are offended, because the gospel of Jesus Christ is offensive—comforting the afflicted but also afflicting the comfortable, bringing the peace of forgiveness but only after the turmoil of judgment.

John's gospel frequently foreshadows Holy Week; he's always pointing out that there is a traitor in their midst who is going to betray Jesus. But the not-so-subtle references to Judas' betrayal are not focused on his handing Jesus over to the soldiers in the garden; where Judas fails is

ending his relationship with Jesus and ceasing his discipleship. Jesus so often taught that his disciples were to abide with him and remain in him; Judas is the one who doesn't abide and doesn't remain; he leaves—and immediately, John tells us, it's night. Judas, without the light of Christ, is in utter darkness, even before he goes to the authorities and leads them to Jesus. Judas stops believing. John's gospel talks all the time about “believing” but that belief is not a mere intellectual exercise; believing means following in Jesus' way because, as Simon Peter puts it, *Lord, to whom [else] can we go? You have the words to eternal life.* Judas' betrayal is no longer believing, no longer living in relationship with Jesus. But Judas isn't the only one.

The disciples heard the difficult teaching of Jesus—not just the part that sounds like cannibalism, but Jesus' overall message: be so intimately part of me that you eat and drink my body and blood, that you take life from me at the expense of everything else this world tells you is important, know your life as it was envisioned for you by the eternal creator of the universe through disciplining yourselves to serve the world the way I do. Some of them, at least the twelve, led here by Simon Peter, hear this call and follow out of what almost seems like desperate resignation: *Well, we have to follow you, because who else is there to follow? Like it or not, you've got the key to eternal life; we're never really going to live without you...* But they hardly sound happy about it. And of course, when it comes down to it, they deny and betray and desert Jesus even after making this profound profession of faith. But John tells us that many of Jesus' disciples—not just the hungry crowds who ate some bread or witnessed a few signs—but those who had been practicing living like Jesus heard how difficult discipleship really is, and even they turned back and no longer went about with him. Frankly, they are the ones who appealed to their common sense and, in a way, got off easy. Because Jesus' teaching is difficult—they weren't wrong about that. They maybe didn't end up martyred, the way most of the twelve were. They didn't take on the hard work of serving others, of loving neighbors as much as they loved themselves, of forgiving seven times seventy times, of turning the other cheek to their enemies...of all those hard things that Jesus did and taught us to do.

Sometimes we wait in line and get right up to the moment of truth...and decide not to take the ride. Sometimes we boldly—or fearfully—take a chance and find out it's not as scary as we expected, and are thrilled by where the journey takes us. Sometimes we're not at all prepared for where we end up when we follow, and maybe we even question if we should have gone. This life of faith isn't something we choose one day and live out perfectly ever after. But God has chosen us for a life enlivened and empowered by God's own eternal Spirit. It's certainly safer to opt out, but that's not what we're made for. When we wish to go away, may we, too, sing with not just our lips but our hearts: *Lord to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.* And then may we listen to those words, and follow the One who speaks them.