



Summer vacations are not always ideal for our us on the home front, with a few under 5 years old and all, but I still remember one trip Sarah and I took before children entered the life picture: to a family wedding out west, giving us just enough time to explore the Badlands and the nearby Black Hills of South Dakota. Now, this particular national park may not appear high on anyone's bucket lists to hit the natural treasures around our country. For many people, the Badlands appear to be just a bunch jagged rocks clumped on one another as part of numerous peaks and valleys interspersed through surrounding prairies for bison and other animals to roam. However, it is also referred to as the Land of Stone and Light, because amidst the over 240,000 acres of one of the world's richest fossil beds, is also one of the most picturesque and breathtaking settings to get caught up staring at the heavens, for you are far removed from the city lights, in order to better see the crystal clearness and absolute brilliance of the stars in the night sky. A different way of connecting with the disciples of long ago, who get caught up staring at the heavens after the Lord ascended into heaven, perhaps gazing not so much out of tremendous beauty, but for fear and worry about what's bound to ensue on the jagged ground of earth, in the most intense peaks and valleys of the all-around human landscape.

And then, about 70 miles to the west, are the Black Hills, where you will find millions of acres of forests and mountains, leading to a fair share of looking up in amazement as well. Except, something happened almost off the prototypical beaten path that has stuck with me just as much any natural eye-catching wonder. As much as we had done our best to plan every attraction to stop by, that particular afternoon, we had some extra time to explore, which could be a blessing and a curse all at once. Doing the usual annoying tourist thing, I didn't exactly know where I was going, but always keeping a side-eye out to see if anything was worth stopping our rental car for and doing the obligatory cell phone picture-taking for memory keep-saking or to show absolutely everyone upon the arrival home. And so came this waterfall off to the left of the road, that, being the annoying tourist and not taking an extra split-second to be aware of all the other traffic surroundings, I might have turned in to the side parking lot a little too close for sanity comfort for the oncoming traffic. And not in front of other wondering out-of-towners, like us, but in front of a bunch of local bikers, and not the bicycling bikers, either. Of course, they had to pull in, too. Of course, they wore the stereotypical leather jackets and different color bandanas. Of course, I had to cave into the stereotypes, leading to my heart picking up speed just a bit, wondering if I had anything miraculously within me to withstand what I so richly would have deserved from this toughest of the tough groups of humanity, as I was yet another annoying tourist not doing nearly enough contributing to the local economy to make us all worth it for them. Nevertheless, one of the women of the leather-jacket adorning crew came up to us and welcomed us, asked how our trip was going, and if she could help us

find wherever to go to next. It made absolutely zero sense what she did. She thoroughly defied every stereotype and expectation. Her grace and care may just have been as awe-striking as anything seen in the sky or the heavens those days out west. So maybe the question asked long ago of the disciples still stands just as beautifully true today: “Why do you stand up looking toward heaven?” Because, in case you haven’t noticed, there’s plenty of beauty, including the very work of God going on right down here, too.

And so I cannot help but think of these next several weeks, as we venture to a different worship schedule and the rest of our school and plenty of other human operation shifts to summer mode; I cannot help but think of the out-of-towners who venture into our cherished region of the country, perhaps for Rock & Roll Hall of Fame or Cleveland Orchestra or Playhouse Square proceedings, but may also venture into suburbs to visit family: tourists, who may not always know where they’re going, who may hold up traffic and get in our way. I hope we can still manage in spite of some fears and worries and tensions amidst the human landscape, to openly defy the stereotypes of how we humans treat each other. I hope we in the church, still called not just to be light, but a glimpse of the most breath-taking light of God; I hope we can still manage to get people from being caught up staring at skylines and starry nights, and remember that although Jesus may have ascended into heaven; he still somehow more than lives down here too.

So, yes, I still remember a summer several years ago with mesmerizing sights to be sure, but I still remember a leather-jacket biker who did something that made absolutely no sense. And then I remember that our entire faith is actually based on someone, the One, who did something that made absolutely no sense either. And, in fact, did many things that didn’t make any sense at all to the standard human operation. But Jesus went ahead and did it anyway, for the locals of Galilee, and well, well beyond. He went ahead and did all the love and grace and compassion anyway, because it all made perfect sense for the eyes of God to reel us in for an eternal lifetime. So for that Greatest News of all, we most certainly give thanks to God, indeed! Amen!