

SPIRITUAL MOUNTAINEERING

What made Mount Sinai so alluring to me was the story that God and human beings once made contact in this place. God broke the silence between us. Though I didn't admit it to anyone, I wanted that silence to be broken again. I hoped that my earnest searching for God would pay off, just a little bit.

At the same time, I was unsure of what I actually believed about God. I wanted to hear—or experience—something real. So I tried to silence my questions and turned in good will toward the Sinai desert.

I was a twenty-eight-year-old grad student living in Jerusalem on a weeklong field study for class through Egypt and the Sinai Peninsula. The class ended with a night climb to the top of Mount Sinai for the sunrise. It's an amazingly stark and beautiful place. The Sinai Peninsula is one of the most pristine and untouched biblical landscapes left on earth. In this barren wilderness stands the mountain where

God gave Moses the Ten Commandments, the mountain where God's dark and fiery presence came to rest in a cloud of mystery.

I could not think of a more inspired place to ask God for direction in my life. I needed help. I was anxious and uncertain about the future. I'd been leading worship music at a wildly successful megachurch called Mars Hill Bible Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan before moving to Jerusalem with my wife and eighteen-month-old daughter for school. The desire to find out what the Bible *really* said and to search for the historical Jesus had inspired me to make the move. But now that my studies were coming to an end, I didn't know what to do with myself or what was best for the family. I wondered if I should stay on the academic path in Israel or go back to work in a church.

I'm not sure exactly what kind of answer I expected from God on the top of the mountain. I didn't need stone tablets from heaven—just a hint, a nudge, a clue about what to do with my life, or even a suggestion about what really matters in this world. I kept thinking about Elijah who heard a “still, small voice” when he came to Sinai in search of God.

Part of me hoped that God had a special plan for me, that God was working out some secret divine math behind the scenes. This is what I was taught about the way God works: “I know the plans I have for you declares the Lord, plans to make you prosper and not to harm you.” Never mind this passage in Jeremiah is about the ancient nation of Israel. As evangelicals—the tribe in which I was raised—we understood it individually and personally. It was risky to move to

the Middle East, more so than I ever knew when we boarded the plane, so I was really hoping there was a divine plan. And if it wasn't a clearly defined plan, a little assurance that my life had some greater purpose would be just fine.

I'd moved to Israel without a career goal. I squirmed and struggled to answer when one of my professors asked me, "What's your professional plan?" I made something up about writing historical fiction, which he called, "Interesting." But I was actually just curious about faith—my own faith, Christian faith in the Bible, and whether I really believed it all. Although I'd been raised inside the evangelical church—deep inside—I knew very little about the history of my own tradition or the Bible we cherished so much. And now I was about to graduate with a master's degree in biblical history and geography. I figured this piece of paper was going to serve me about as well as my undergrad degree in English. I sincerely wanted to ask God if I should stay in Israel for more schooling or go back home to the church, a world about which I felt increasingly confused.

On the overnight train from Aswan, I read the Sinai account in the Torah very carefully. Crammed into the top of a bunk bed, without enough room to sit upright, I stared at this 3,000-year-old story, hunting for clues. According to the book of Exodus, Moses instructed the Israelites to "deny themselves." I knew from my Jewish studies that this was interpreted as a requirement to fast. I laid down on my back and looked at the smoke-stained train ceiling. I wanted to be as prepared as the Israelites in case of any divine mes-

sages. So I decided to fast from that point on, quietly, as good Christians are supposed to do.

SEARCHING FOR GOD IN THE PROMISED LAND

In Israel, away from my church and my parents, I felt a new-found freedom to doubt out loud, to wonder, to question the way I felt about God. A lot of my faith had stopped making sense, and so had a lot of church stuff. I was tired of my worn-out belief system, the one I was supposed to hold. It was like searching for some spiritual country that I'd heard rumors about.

Life in Jerusalem was just the ticket out of my old life; except it wasn't the nice spiritual homecoming that tourists talk about. I've heard many Christian visitors say that when they stepped off the plane, they just knew they were "home." My dad said this when he first visited Israel—as the story goes, he even got down on his hands and knees and kissed the tarmac. But for me, it wasn't a homecoming. It was a struggle: trying to pay my bills at the post office; negotiating a rental agreement; going to the mall to pick up my army-issued gas mask.

If you want to be shaken to your core, if you want to eat amazing food, if you want to unlearn all your political positions, if you want to marvel at the complexity and beauty and ridiculousness of religious expression, if you want your faith to fall apart, if you want to stand in awe while waiting for the bus, if you want to barter in the market the old-fash-

ioned way, if you want to be at the center of the world's psycho-spiritual upheaval, then Jerusalem is your place.

One night a teenager with a suicide belt blew up Café Hillel, just down the street from my apartment. Hillel felt like *my* café, on *my* street, where I shopped and ate and met friends and brought my kids. Seven people were killed. A father and daughter died while sharing a meal; she was to be married the next day.

I felt the blast as I was working on a paper for class. I had never felt such terror, crawling all over my body. Moments later I was in the street, with the spin of emergency lights, and the shouts of Orthodox Jewish EMTs, their side curls bouncing on their shoulders. A water pipe had burst in a garden across the street, showering the asphalt like it was trying to wash away the terror.

The shock of the bombing unearthed a lot of my own internal hurt and fear, which I'd been trying hard to ignore—fear that was rooted in questions about the arbitrariness of life, questions that flew in the face of my evangelical upbringing: Some people get married. Others do not. Some people happen to sit in the wrong seat at the wrong time in the wrong place. Some people get sick. Some people get ALS like my dad, others do not. That very night I had considered texting my friend Matt to see if he wanted to grab a late-night coffee at Café Hillel. But texting on a flip phone is annoying, so I stayed in.

In that moment, shivering in the dark, I knew that God didn't cause this madness—if God existed at all. God did not even “allow” this random act of violence, as Christians

like me are prone to say. This was not “God’s will.” And God could not stop it. *There was no plan.* There was no man upstairs. I could no longer believe in a puppeteer God pulling the strings of circumstance. The pizza place next door turned the suicide bomber away, so he just walked to the next crowded restaurant. That’s the way it is. Totally arbitrary. Random.

Something was collapsing inside me, and it had been for a long time before that night on Emek Refiam in West Jerusalem, the night the café was bombed. And whatever it was couldn’t be put back together again. But I didn’t have words for what was falling apart. I didn’t want it to fall apart. I wanted my faith to grow. But even more, I wanted my family to be safe. I wanted to be alive and do normal things. I hated looking for the safest seat in a café, or holding my breath when a bus passed by, or constantly sizing up who was Jewish and who was Palestinian, a skill I had mastered.

Café Hillel, and Jerusalem, and all my studies and confusion were with me on the way to Sinai, on the way to find out what it all meant, on the way to meet a God who didn’t seem to exist, on the way to a mountain where a divine, biblical encounter may or may not have happened.

I was desperate for some kind of answer. But I wasn’t sure if I was asking good questions anymore.

I also wanted to pray, even though I had a whole history of failing to pray in any consistent way that felt real. In my pocket was a Hebrew-English version of the Psalms. It had the look of wisdom and depth. I said these short Hebrew prayers in the ancient language, as genuinely as I could,

through my doubts and my struggle to understand the words.

When I first moved to Israel, I flirted with converting to Judaism. My head was full Chaim Potok novels and Abraham Heschel quotes. I loved the Jewish embrace of questions. And unlike my own faith tradition, the practices didn't feel like they were made up in the 1970s. What would Jesus *really* do, I wondered? He was Jewish, after all.

My Orthodox landlord was like a rabbi to me. He took me to his synagogue on the Sabbath and we talked about the Torah when I dropped off my rent. One night he picked me up in his tiny Ford and told me to bring a *kippah* (also known as a *yarmulke*) and wear a white shirt. We drove to an Ultra-orthodox neighborhood a few blocks away. The Jewish festival of Sukkot was in full swing, the only festival where the Bible commands the participants to celebrate with joy. Next thing I knew, I was dancing with Russian Jews in striped coats, holding hands with strangers, sweat pouring down my face. My landlord kept smiling and laughing, like we had a great secret. Surely I was the only Gentile in the room, and probably one of only a few to be a part of this world, if only for a night. My heart swelled with the music as we spun in circles till we were both exhausted.

But ultimately, I was just a visitor. Judaism is an ethnicity and a culture, not just a religion, not something I could just sign up for like a class. As my respect for Judaism rose, my heartfelt desire to be one of the "chosen people" diminished. Trying to join another faith seemed a little crazy after a night of dancing to Yiddish songs and trying to keep my

kippah from falling off my head. When I got back to my apartment, drums still ringing in my ears, I could feel my own growing religious homelessness, even as the joy of this totally insane night made me smile.

BEDOUIN LAND ROVERS

The day or so leading up to Sinai I spent occasionally praying, hiding my hunger, reading the Torah, and otherwise killing time. My inner state of mind was probably the real issue, but Egypt felt a little depressing and dirty, with a lot of mangy cats. One of the oldest civilizations on earth was selling every kind of cheap tourist trinket at every stop. I longed to get away from the Nile and into the Sinai Peninsula. When we finally entered the Sinai Desert by bus, our professor announced that he had arranged a great surprise: we were going through the wilderness, not by bus or camel, but by Land Rover. The Bedouin would be our guides, their ancient faces our maps of the desert.

Happy with the thought of adventure, we crammed into the back of two old Land Rovers, facing one another on bench seats. The Bedouin were all smiles and cigarette smoke as we set off on our biblical trek. The first fifteen minutes were wildly exciting as we jerked and swayed on sand and rocks, over only the faintest signs of a road. We took turns gripping the ceiling and bracing for the next bump. But then a sixty-year-old student who was auditing the course hit her head on the ceiling. Our enthusiasm waned. She looked frightened and hurt. The Bedouin were giving

us the thumbs up, smiling and lighting more cigarettes. After an hour at speeds near forty-five miles an hour, we started hating our professor and the evil Bedouin.

Because our Land Rover was second in this convoy of torture, we were also inhaling dust. I cursed the Bedouin, the Sinai, and my empty stomach. I felt like a child of the nation of Israel, bitching to Moses about the liberation of the wilderness, longing to go back to slavery in Egypt.

Two hours later we stumbled out of the vehicles. We were at an ancient Egyptian mining site, a long-forgotten archeological blah, blah, blah. Sinai was still a long way off. The Bedouins' bread and tea were a welcome sight, except that I was now super-spiritual and couldn't eat. I spent lunch regretting my newfound religious discipline, but I managed to avoid eating without making a scene.

I poked around for the road to the bus, but alas, one more surprise: we would be taking the Land Rovers all the way to the hotel next to Mount Sinai. Bloody hell. As the miles bumped by, we took turns talking about food and lamenting the whole trip. As nightfall descended and the hotel came into view, after hours of spine-rattling abuse, all we could talk about was food. My classmates went straight into the dining hall like wild dogs. Some were hugging; one person was crying.

I left my personal religious devotion back in the Land Rover. I not only went straight to the buffet, but also started eating while in line. If I was a religious failure, I might as well embrace it. Maybe I could make amends on the way up the mountain. I ate till I was stuffed, and then I wandered back

to my hotel room, deflated and sore. I turned over in my bed restlessly till the alarm went off at 3:30am to start the climb.

CLIMBING THE MOUNTAIN OF GOD

It was clear and cold, as the desert should be. The stars were close. The path was primitive, as if Moses had cleared it. I felt alive this cold night, looking into the darkness and the unknown. I imagined a silent pilgrimage to the summit. My head was full of monks and prayer books and the heart-felt undertow of adventure. Within a few hundred yards I heard, "Camel ride, camel ride." The Bedouin were back. I shrugged off the first few offers with condescending swagger. But they kept coming, "It's too far. Camel ride. You, my friend, Camel ride." I put my head down in resolve and passed through their clouds of smoke in the night air.

I remembered that the Torah said to put a perimeter around the mountain so that no animal could ascend. Suddenly I was a fundamentalist wanting to enforce the rules, "Haven't you read the text, you hypocrites?" I wondered. I tried to shake it off. But as I continued, I realized that I was not alone, and the Bedouin were just the beginning. The trail was crowded with Russian women in high-heels, Asian tourists laughing and posing for photos, and the spiritually lazy riding camels.

It was cold and getting colder. I felt a growing solitude as I climbed. I wondered what I was doing with my life. I started thinking about God and Jesus. What was this whole thing anyway? What was I searching for? My classmates

receded into the night. The climb was hard. I sweated through my thin layers. The cold began to break me down. Sinai was more difficult than I expected.

I began shivering, then shaking, getting nervous. I imagined what hypothermia did to the body. I'd forgotten about my lonely pilgrimage of prayer. I paused again to catch my breath, rubbing my arms to stay warm, and looked down at my feet. In the crag of a rock I saw some fabric, dusty and trampled. I reached down and grabbed a ski hat. How lucky! Maybe Aaron had worn it. Even in the moonlight I could see that it was filthy. I shook it off and put it on my head, glancing around to see if anyone noticed how little shame I had. The dust settled on my eyebrows. I was feeling more and more defeated, less and less spiritual, wondering what on earth I was doing up here.

After a couple of hours of climbing, the summit appeared ahead. Of course, just below the final climb were Bedouin tents, their generators humming, an encampment of comfort for the fools who had made the climb. I blinked a few times, as if this might be a dream, which it wasn't. I went straight into a tent, bought a hot chocolate, and ate a Snickers bar. I felt like a spiritual slob. What an opportunity I had been given. But I felt like a waste, like a spiritual waste. I sat in the tent with a few of my fellow students. We all felt a little strange in the pre-dawn of this holy site, in a tent with tourists from all over the world.

When I began to thaw, my good spiritual thoughts returned. I remembered that I wanted desperately for God to make sense of my life. I headed out to the summit with

a few classmates, and I wised up. For \$10, I rented a nasty, camel-scented blanket from a Bedouin. I wrapped it around myself and sat just below the strange crowd gathering in this dark wilderness. And I waited.

It was vast, this ocean of silence and rock. In that moment, it did not matter to me if this was the real Sinai or if the biblical events really happened here, or happened at all. The desert was real. I wondered how this expanse of quiet harshness had birthed Israel, the Bible, and maybe even God.

The rounded granite mountaintops lit up first, like a creeping orange fire. The world was being born. It was the first day of creation. The sun came over the horizon. I felt the first real warmth on my face in the last four hours. A swell of tears started in my chest. I heard quiet voices beginning to sing, a hymn perhaps to the waking up of eternity and time. It grew louder. I recognized the song. It was the Beatles, "Here Comes the Sun." Seriously?

Who are these people? What the hell is going on?

The crowd began to clap and cheer like we had just won something. The hillside was full, hundreds of people, from all over the world, happy to be alive and to cheer on the sun. My personal questions faded for a moment. I forgot all about my search for the meaning of my own life. What had this ghost, Moses, started 3,000 years ago? Were we all here for the same thing, all wondering what the point of life is, all looking for some guidance, a plan, a hint, a message, a word, a whisper, some peace, well-being, happiness, warmth? And just now, we were happy to be alive and to be warm. Here we

were, in awe of the endless ocean of silent hills coming into the light.

As the crowd dispersed, I climbed onto an outcropping of stone and took out my book of Psalms. I tried to read a few. Then I asked God what I should do with my life, what was next, what direction to walk. I closed my eyes. I prayed. I wondered. I prayed again. I waited. I felt silly. There was a lot of silence, no sign, no divine word, no guidance, no rush of clarity. My studies were coming to a close—this I knew, but not much else.

When I opened my eyes, I felt small. For a moment, it was like I could feel my actual life, without all of my theological filters or ideas or even questions. I was just a guy on a hillside in the desert holding a rented blanket and book of psalms. When I look back now, I know that my actual life was not lining up with my supposed beliefs, that a rupture had developed between them. At the time, however, I couldn't see this rift. But it was going to change my life.

I could also feel my fingers again. I'd grown fond of my nasty hat. I looked around, thinking I would never be up here again, and wondering how I ever ended up here in the first place. I returned the blanket and headed down the mountain. I thought that my Sinai adventure was over.

CAMEL TEETH

I came around a bend and saw a camel, resting from his night of forced labor. People were walking past and carrying on with their business. As I walked by, the camel reached

out, opened his massive mouth, and lunged toward my face. Like a ninja, I blocked his attack with my arm. But now my elbow was in the back of his throat. His rotting teeth were inches from my chin and digging into my upper arm. I could feel his hot breath on my face. He began to yank like a dog with a chew toy.

I looked around desperately for someone to help me. There was no one. I released a flood of expletives. I yelled things that have never been uttered on Mount Sinai. I broke all the commandments.

The only solution I could think of in my panic was to punch the camel in the face. I reached back with my free arm, and started to swing. But with prophetic vision, I suddenly imagined a Bedouin leaping on my back, his curved knife in hand, ready to slit my throat, screaming, “Don’t touch my camel!” I hesitated. The camel let go.

We stood face-to-face and eye-to-eye. I was looking into his massive, black pupils. Then he took a short breath and blew snot all over my face. The whole world stopped spinning. It was perfectly still. We had both ceased to breathe. There was no noise. Then I took a breath and felt my arm. I checked to see if my elbow was still working and calmly backed away. I stood there in shock for a moment, and then turned away. I resumed walking down the trail, totally bewildered and in pain.

Now seriously, why did I climb this mountain? I wondered. What was I even doing up here—I mean *really* doing? I didn’t know.

In fact, it took me a long time to even admit to others

or myself what had happened on my spiritual quest. I didn't know if I could make sense of it, or if it was even something worth trying to make sense of. But the story would not go away. Sinai kept flashing up when I least expected it. Sometimes I wondered if it really even happened. The more I tried to make sense of it, the more elusive it seemed. For the first few months, I only told a couple of people. When I finally told an Israeli friend of mine a few years later, he laughed so hard that he cried. Every time I see him he tries to get me to tell him the story again. He begs. He tried to pay me 100 shekels to tell a group he was guiding, just so he could laugh.

But for a moment, in the morning light of Sinai, with saliva on my jacket and pain in my arm, I knew there was no right path. I knew there was no clear plan, not like I'd hoped. Whatever I was looking for was utterly unlike what I was looking for. I'd been reduced to just being me, faults, hang-ups, misgivings, desires, dirty clothes, and doubts. I was only myself, and to be frank, I barely knew what it was like to be me. In all my earnest devotion, I was trying to get away from myself, or fix myself, or make myself believe something, or do enough righteous stuff to find myself, and also to find God.

What happened to me on Sinai? It's hard to say. It was the start of something, and the ending of something. Being bitten by a camel closed some hard-to-name door, and it helped get new things going. Coming down the mountain was the start of something more difficult—a fruitful dark-

ness that is more expansive than I had ever thought possible.

On Sinai, I didn't find the God I was looking for. I descended the mountain as an utter spiritual failure, unable to fast, unable to pray, unable to say what I believed, unsure of the Bible. But it was the start of a new faith journey, though I didn't know that at the time. Jerusalem and Sinai were metaphors for what was happening in me. I went out to find something over there, in a special place, but that something never showed up, not in any way I could recognize. I couldn't find God in the most holy place on earth. So I had to stumble back home and say, "I don't know." This was all the enlightenment I could muster.

A WINDING ROAD

My family and I moved back to Michigan shortly after my Sinai debacle. I thought maybe it would all make sense soon enough, but I had a hard time finding a job and adjusting to America. It didn't feel much like a new chapter, in part, because we rented my childhood home from my parents. I pitched a job to Mars Hill Bible Church, which I pretty much invented, only to be flatly rejected. I hoped to bring back to the church the volumes of biblical stuff I'd amassed in a short period of time. This was a blow. Why had I gone to Israel? I wondered. I delivered phone books to make ends meet. Then I went to the hospital, without insurance, with a "non-specific stomach ailment." I also got shingles, which really, really hurt. So we left Michigan for Georgia and I

started working for my father-in-law as a (pretty poor) carpenter. I broke as many tools as I learned to use. I couldn't find my feet, to say the least.

So we moved back to Israel with two kids this time, to study Comparative Religion, another less-than-practical course of study. I thought the academic path was about the only path outside the church for those of us interested in religion and spirituality. My wife did not want to be back in Jerusalem. We tried to make the most of it. But after another year and a half, as my school debt grew, staying any longer lost its appeal. And I had a hard time keeping up with all the modern Hebrew I was required to take along with a full course load.

Then, to my surprise, I was offered a job teaching Bible at a Christian high school back home. The war with Lebanon broke out about the same time. I was on the border with Lebanon when it started and could hear the rockets falling all over Galilee from my hotel. So we moved back to Michigan, feeling homeless, but suddenly loving the safety of America and a steady paycheck. The path was winding.

Teaching high school kids was really good for me, probably because my life was not all about me. I needed to calm down a little bit. It was like I had a sort of spiritual PTSD. It felt like I was slowly falling down a hill, from ledge to ledge, deeper into a canyon that I didn't know was there and that seemed to have no bottom. It was as if something started unraveling, and it just kept going and did not stop. The humiliation of the camel bite had given me a good initial shove. I tried very hard to make it stop. I spent time trying to

be some Protestant version of Thomas Merton, irregularly keeping the divine hours. I prayed to Saint Francis and the Virgin Mary. *Why Be Catholic?*, by Richard Rohr, sat on the back of the toilet. Then I wanted to be an Orthodox Christian and wondered if I could kiss an icon. I thought that maybe if my faith was as old as possible it would be more genuine and real. I also read the Dalai Lama, Ken Wilber, and Annie Dillard. Show me the way! I quietly groaned.

I couldn't go back to my old beliefs and my old faith, but that's about all I knew. For a long time I was stuck knowing what I wasn't, but not knowing what I was or was becoming. I didn't know how to move forward. There were all kinds of blocks and obstacles in the way, many of which were specific beliefs about God and the spiritual life that no longer rang true. If there was such a thing as a new faith, on the other side of so much unraveling, I had no idea what it looked like. It could not be figured out, just lived through.

I didn't leave Christianity or announce my uncertainties to the world. I just carried them around with me. I think they needed time to work on me. I was the editor of the *NIV First Century Study Bible*, a project I loved that gave me a place to work through all the amazing stuff I'd learned in Israel. Then without warning, Rob Bell stepped down from Mars Hill and a few months later they asked me to apply for his job. I was now a megachurch pastor.

I did a lot of good religious stuff, none of which I regret. In some ways, I did the best I could with the life I was born into. After all, I was raised in the belly of the evangelical church, had the very best religious teachers and mod-

els that my tradition could produce. My dad was a pastor, so was my grandpa. My dad was also Jerry Falwell's righthand man when I was kid. I went to Falwell's college. I studied in the Holy Land. I'd been to the top of Sinai and walked where Jesus walked. I worked for one of the fastest-growing churches in America. But it still fell apart.

Most of the falling apart happened in the middle of trying to be religious and in the midst of just living life: raising kids, doing a little self-assessment, and trying to muster the courage to keep going. I was bitten, so to speak, by more than one camel. And after being bitten a few times I started saying more directly, "Wait a minute, this is not working." Certain ideas, theologies, images, and beliefs kept dying, which brought some grief and uncertainty, as well as some anticipation and excitement. Even some of what I thought to be the most important, non-negotiable dimensions of faith no longer seemed necessary.

As a few of the blocks and obstacles cleared, the river of my own spirituality ran more freely, an unexpected gift. But the beliefs and ideas that collapsed were replaced by something more like "hints and guesses," to borrow a line from T. S. Eliot. These hints and guesses were not like the religious certainties I'd grown up with, nor the certainty of some new belief system that I could just exchange for the old one.

Hints and guesses—from my experience, is all we need when our spiritual mountaineering fails to work.

A SHORT NOTE TO HERESY HUNTERS

If you're reading this book as a heresy hunter, if you are wondering if I'm a Bible-believing Christian, let me make it easier. I am a heretic and an apostate, and so are my spiritual heroes, like Jesus and Saint Francis. A heretic is one who holds an opinion, which is what the word actually means. I hope one day to hold an opinion, maybe two or three, born out of my own experience of life and of God. And for the record, Jesus wasn't a Bible-believing Christian either. Jesus was killed for holding too many opinions that were dangerously inclusive, unorthodox, and nonbiblical. Jesus was a heretic, before we tamed him and named him Jesus Christ.

If you're wondering if I'm on the slippery slope, let me assure you, I'm at the very bottom. And from this vantage point, way down here, I'm wondering what's next. I'm looking around, and I see a lot of good company. I'm actually not alone. Many others have slid down this slope with me. It's been a pretty wild and exciting ride. We've died a certain kind of death and our ideas have died a certain kind of death. All of which has created some pretty fertile soil. I see new shoots coming up in this soil. I see new life taking root. I see green where I expected to see ash. How did we all end up in this valley, in this blooming desert, in this place of possibility and freedom? It's a gift, a gift of our times, and of a new spirit of existential authenticity and courage.

So, my friends, to those Christians who are deeply uncomfortable with what is happening in the name of Jesus, to those who have doubts, to those teetering on the edge,

BITTEN BY A CAMEL

to those who have left, to those who are spiritually curious: let's find out if there is any food for the soul in the ashes. Let's find out together just how much Christianity and spirituality are evolving. Let's face the reality that our understanding of God is shifting. Let's celebrate the richness of our shared human experience. Let's not play games of worthiness anymore. Let's clear out the blocks to God, even if the word "God" no longer makes sense. Let's clear out the blocks to a fully human, spiritually vibrant, and wildly loving life. Let's embrace the upheaval of our age and trust that the Great Spirit is stirring over the waters of chaos once again. Let's stand on Mount Sinai and embrace the silence of the universe. And let's abandon anything unhelpful.

Let's allow the camel to bite us. In fact, let's stick our arm right in his mouth. Let's touch the teeth marks with our fingers, acknowledging the places we've been wounded but not destroyed. It's not a time for easy explanations or quick fixes. In fact, let's be honest about the places we've been bitten that don't yet make sense. They might just be the things we need to wake us up.

As Saint Francis said on his deathbed:

"Let us begin again,
for up till now
we have done nothing."