

CHAPTER 7

The sermon

Bob had done a remarkable job of developing his nonprofit organization to protect ecological preserves. A huge stack of mail had accumulated while I had been visiting him and his EPI rangers in Colombia. I was digging through it. Bob had hinted that there might be another newsmagazine waiting for me, and sure enough, there it was. On the cover was a picture of Jesús standing in front of his cathedral in Mexico City. How Bob managed to get himself and then Jesús onto the cover of a national news rag like this is a mystery to me.

The story told of his startup ministry, his televangelist program, and his uncanny resemblance to popular renditions of Jesus of Nazareth.

Displayed in the cathedral's cavernous interior were several holy relics. One of particular interest was a tattered and faded blue rain jacket encased in glass. The story behind the jacket was going to be part of the sermon for his broadcast debut in the United States.

I put the magazine down and fumbled for my TV guide. Holy shit. It had already started. I tuned in to close-ups of young men and women singing time-honored choir music. The camera panned back revealing Jesús standing at the podium. His long jet-black hair coupled with a tall athletic frame contrasted

sharply with the bizarre appearances that I have come to associate with most televangelists.

In a deep, compassionate voice that never fails to send a chill down my spine, he began, "The sermon for today is entitled 'The blue raincoat.' It is a true story. I know this with certainty because it deals with my own experiences.

"It begins with a camping trip in the mountains of northern Mexico. Accompanying me on the adventure was my six-year-old daughter, Carlita. It was early spring. Her uncle was also to accompany us but had declined at the last moment with other obligations.

"I had taken a similar trip to this place with my wife and daughter just two years earlier. An unexpected blizzard had materialized. We were ill prepared for such weather and were forced to move back down the mountain to safety. I had carried Carlita in my arms. My wife, Isabel had been following in our footsteps. At some point, I had realized that she was no longer behind me. By this time, Carlita had begun to shiver uncontrollably in the early throes of hypothermia; I had to continue down. Upon reaching safety, I alerted the authorities that Isabel was missing."

I detected a change in the tenor of Jesús' voice—restrained rage with an edge of grief. His sermon continued.

"The blizzard raged for two days. My wife, lost in the mountains, was never found.

"This camping trip was to be in her memory. Carlita had managed almost every step of the way. I carried her only the last mile or so. We set up camp and snuggled together reading books in our warm tent as night fell. Although the weather forecast was favorable, I was prepared for any kind of weather this time.

"Since her mother's death, Carlita had suffered from a sleep abnormality called night terrors.¹ Awakened by her screams, I would often find her cowering in a corner, staring into space, terrified by something only she could see. This could go on for hours. There is no way to comfort a child experiencing a night terror because she is not awake and there is no way to awaken her. She must face the nightmare alone. I was helpless, and could

¹ <http://www.nightterrors.org/>

only wait until she closed her eyes again. Her physician had assured me that night terrors are most common when a young child is under stress as my Carlita had been. The child has no recollection of the nightmare the following morning and they say no harm is done.

"Tired from our long hike, we were soon fast asleep. I awoke a few hours before sunrise to the sound of a driving rain. I found to my horror that Carlita was not in the tent with me. I ran outside. It was a freezing rain; ice covered everything. Desperate, I searched for her and when I found nothing, I ran down the mountain for help. The local authorities rallied as fast as humanly possible and fanned out into the pouring rain and darkness. I was too exhausted to go back.

"Hours later, word arrived that she had been found—alive and well. I ran to her as they brought her down the mountainside wrapped in a faded blue raincoat; the sun was just rising. I cannot to describe to you....

Jesús paused, his voice gone. A few uncomfortable moments passed as he stood there in silence, struggling to regain his composure. Finally, he took drink of water and finished, "... my joy, as she put her arms around my neck."

"After the excitement of the rescue had diminished, I approached the farmer who had brought her down the mountain. He had found Carlita fast asleep under an old blue raincoat.

"I turned and saw the coat lying on a bench. I could not believe my eyes. It had belonged to my wife. She had been wearing it the last time I saw her alive."

Jesús paused, drew a breath, and continued, "Carlita had no recollection of what happened that night. I am confident that she had experienced a night terror and had simply walked out of the tent while asleep. How did this jacket, which I had not seen in two years, come to rest on top of my daughter?"

"That was the day I met God."

I had to look away to get a tissue. I had no idea he had a daughter. During the commercial break I logged into the Internet and looked up some biographical data. My God... Carlita had died of complications while being treated for leukemia when she was seven years old, just one year after being rescued from the mountain.

The sermon continued with a touch of fire and brimstone. "Eight million children will not live past their first birthday this year. More than two billion people live in total abject poverty. Half of all childhood deaths are the result of malnutrition, each and every one of them held by a loving parent until the last moment.² Watching your child die is a nightmare without comparison. What is God thinking as he looks at what is left of his green paradise? How does God view the extinction of one creature after another at the hands of his own children? God is not pleased. We have wrecked the Garden of Eden. Armageddon isn't coming, Armageddon is here."

The taped show continued for an hour. I don't normally make a habit of watching televangelist programming, but that was the most moving hour of it I have ever experienced. I hadn't seen Jesús in quite a while, and had a sudden urge to chat with him. I sat down in front of the computer and dialed him up. Much to my surprise, his image came up immediately.

"Greetings, Sarann," he said with a warm smile on his face. "It is good to see you again."

"Thank you," I replied, taken aback by my sudden success at contacting him. "Am I interrupting anything?"

"Of course," he said, the smile remaining. "However, I can always make time for you. What is on your mind?" He waved off somebody in the background. I could hear chairs shuffling, people talking, the sound of a door shutting, and, finally, silence.

"Did I just break up a meeting of some kind?" I said, feeling a little guilty.

"Indeed you did. Priorities are priorities. Please speak your mind."

I cleared my throat. "Well, I just finished watching your pre-recorded television sermon, and I have to tell you that I am deeply impressed."

"Thank you," he said. "I can only hope that others were equally impressed."

"Could I ask you some personal questions?"

"Please do," he replied, shifting his position slightly.

² http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/entrez/query.fcgi?holding=npg&cmd=Retrieve&db=PubMed&list_uids=11100616&dopt=Abstract

"Do you suspect that a large number of your viewers assumed that it was the hand of God that saved your daughter?"

"There is no evidence that God interferes in the lives of humans," he said. "Carlita found the jacket."

"Is that what your television audience thinks?" I asked.

He continued, "The idea that through the act of praying, God will help one football team defeat another, or even save a dying child, is irrational and degrading. What criteria would God use to intervene in such a random manner?"

It looked like Jesús wasn't going to answer that question. I moved on.

"It seems to me, Jesús, that if God does not interact with us, then isn't that essentially the same as saying that he does not exist?"

He smiled, "Sarann, we bestow honor and praise on people who demonstrate greatness. Although these people do not directly intervene in our lives, saving us from pain and suffering, we honor them for their greatness and for the joy that their greatness brings into our lives. There has never been and never will be a mortal that can compare to the greatness of God. Look around you at the splendors of this Earth. Isn't all life worth praising?"

I thought about this for a few moments, then asked, "Does the concept of Satan play a role in your religion?"

"The day you hold your dying daughter in your arms is the day you will meet Satan," he replied flatly.

"I'm sorry," I said and then clumsily changed the subject.

"I noticed that your ministry accepts three major credit cards and has a website. Are the charitable contributions coming in?"

"They are. I think this ministry has struck a nerve. People are responding generously. I may be able to wean my Church of your financial support soon. This will free up resources to do your other work."

"In your sermon you talked about God's children destroying the Earth on a never ending quest for status and wealth. Is that really how you see it?"

"Not exactly. I am in agreement with your point of view. People are not evil, greedy entities. Cutting down forests to build our homes or to make cooking fires is what we are supposed to

do. There are just too many of us doing it. When a termite eats the foundation of your house, it isn't evil. It is just doing what it was made to do—eat wood. However, many people respond better if they perceive a struggle as good against evil."

"There are those who would call that just so much pop psychology hogwash," I said.

"Call it what you will. It was your head of state who coined the phrase 'Axis of Evil.' One of his predecessors borrowed the phrase 'Evil Empire' to describe the former Soviet Union. That word was carefully chosen in both instances. Explain to me why polls indicated that 80 percent of your fellow citizens approved of the attack on Iraq although they had no nuclear weapons program and had nothing to do with the Twin Towers disaster."

I know better than to argue with Jesús. "OK, you may have a point," I acquiesced.

Jesús continued, "Most children were brought into this world by accident; the result of carnal lust. My goal is the same as Bob's, to assist in the holding action that will slow the destruction of the planet's ecosystems while your contraceptive allows the people of the world to choose their family size with certainty."

"One more thing before I go," I said as I caught him looking at his watch. "I understand that your fan mail is primarily from women. Rumor has it that you have received a few marriage proposals. Do you ever plan to remarry?"

"I don't know, Sarann. I still grieve for my loved ones. I am not convinced that the pain will ever go away."

I thanked him for his time and signed off. Sometimes, I empathize too strongly with others. My sleep was troubled that night.

