

*Zephaniah 3: 14-20*

*Luke 3: 7-18*

Have you heard about the guy out in the wilderness talking about crazy things? No, I'm not referring to John the Baptist, but actually Will Smith in a new National Geographic Show on Disney+, called *Welcome to Earth*.

I've always loved Will Smith, from his time on *Fresh Prince of Bel Air* to starring as an action hero in *I Am Legend*, *Men in Black*, and *I, Robot*. I even got to see him and his family in real life on Kauai when they used to have a place out there. And I've always been a fan of traveling to far flung places. So when I heard about this new show, I was super excited... and then I find out in the opening minute that this guy has never swam in a lake, climbed a mountain or even slept in a tent... and he gets his own TV show?! And then, of course the first mountain he gets to climb is an active volcano, full of unquenchable fire, and he gets to rappel down into it to set some sensors. As they descend inside the caldera, his guide asks him, "So you've never done this before?" The action hero, who's done everything imaginable on screen, replies, "Not for real."

His guide makes him a promise: "I almost guarantee you're gonna survive." A few minutes later you find out that this same guide, who has climbed the tallest peaks on every continent, is completely blind. And that's when I realized this show might be a little different than others. They not only see the cauldron of lava... but they listen to it. And it sounds like an ocean of motion, of melting, molten rock.

His guide points out that you can hear things your eyes cannot see, such as anything behind you. We learn that the loudest noise ever recorded came from a volcano. You can feel sound waves in your body, or what the guide calls the "silent roar".

Does it take an extraordinary person to show us extraordinary places and experience extraordinary things? Perhaps to get the number of views, yes.

Whether it's Will Smith, Bear Grylls or Steve Irwin – who wouldn't want their own show where they could travel around the world and go on amazing adventures, try incredible food, and have a camera in their face the entire time? OK, so maybe not the last part.

Isn't it amazing what can be captured on video these days? Like many of you, I'm old enough to remember a time before the iPhone or YouTube, when going viral meant the video cassette tape you mailed into *America's*

*Home Videos* was the talk of the neighborhood. A lot of these videos capture funny moments, amazing trick shots, or something just incredible if not downright miraculous. And every once in a while, there will be heroic moments caught on camera.

Has anyone seen the video of the baby falling from a multistory building, only to be caught just before they hit the ground by a passerby? Or someone getting pulled from a wreck just before the car bursts into flames? I imagine everyone has seen a video or heard a story like this, where someone saves the day.

Then just like on the show when they invite the family to talk about the video, or on the local news later that night, the producers interview the people in the film. Almost invariably, the person rescued or the parents of the baby are just so amazed and thankful – for them, what happened was a miracle: their baby was saved. And then the camera turns to the passerby now hero, to get their thoughts – and just as likely as the person saved thinks it was a miracle, the person doing the saving is most likely thinking,

*“I’m just doing my job.”*

*“I was at the right place at the right time.”*

*“I did what anyone would have done.”*

Thankfully we live in a world where the hero who rescues the baby is still publicly praised, but the CEO who fires 900 people at once via Zoom is publicly shamed... but at the end of the day, who gets paid? We don’t pay our heroes beyond the number of views on YouTube. More likely than not, the hero becomes homeless and the CEO keeps all his dough.

We’re all in need of a hero – a Will Smith, a Neo – a prophet if you will, to give us assurance that everything will be okay – that we’re almost guaranteed to survive.

Zephaniah is full of encouragement and assurances that the Lord will provide:

*“You shall fear disaster no more.”*

*“He will rejoice over you.”*

*“He will renew you in his love.”*

*“I will bring you home.”*

I think the crowds gathered to hear John were also looking for assurance.

Yet John is a Baptist – the Baptist – and questions this assurance: “Do not simply rely on Abraham as an ancestor to save you. Your heritage does not give you claim to the throne of God. The Kingdom of God cannot be inherited”.

That is not enough. “You are but an impostor and you will be found out. For there is an axe at the base of each tree. You will get cut down unless you bear fruit”. And perhaps John wasn’t just thinking of just fruit trees, but also olive trees. There are olive trees over 3,000 years old, meaning they were around before the time of Jesus. But if they aren’t bearing fruit, it doesn’t matter how old they are... the axe is ready to grind.

So the people, no longer assured they are saved, cry out, “What should we do?” (Since we cannot rely on our birthright or ancestry.) John replies: It’s quite simple, really. If you have enough to share, share. Two coats, give one away... If you have extra food, give that as well. And not to just your friends or neighbors. But to ANYONE. Anyone who is in need.

And to those who are seen agents of the state, minions of the empire oppressing the people, if anyone is not worth saving, it’s them – for the tax collectors – simply take what is owed in taxes and not anything more, and for the soldiers, do not use your position of power to extort further gain, but be satisfied with your wages.

This is what it means to bear fruit.

Easier said than done with humans who always want more, more, more – who are never satisfied.

If there is a place for everyone in the Kingdom of God, then we need to be actively making space for others. When there is no room in the inn, there is still a manger. When there is no more food from the table, there are still the crumbs. In a world where shares of stock measure how well the economy is doing, we stock up on sharing what we have with those in need to see how well they – and we – are doing. This is the message of the voice crying out in the wilderness.

A mentor once told me that joy is the deep-seeded confidence that God is in control. God’s got this. When we share with others and provide what they need, they experience the joy, the deep-seeded faith, that God still sees them for we see them.

You see, miracles are deeply personal. You don’t go around giving out cloaks and food to just anyone – these are special gifts. And while they may not mean much to the person giving them, they are just following the prophet’s instructions – they are a miracle to those in need of a coat so they don’t freeze to death, or a meal so they don’t starve to death. What may seem ordinary to the person giving is a miracle to the person receiving.

One person’s good deed is another’s Godsend.

You see, if it doesn’t happen to you, then it’s merely a story, a video you watched before scrolling onto the next dopamine rush. We hear and see miraculous things all the time, whether it’s on the news or TikTok. What is rare is when we ourselves experience a miracle. Yet every day we have the opportunity to do something

ordinary. To share what extra we have. To not leverage our power for more than we need. And in this way, via our ordinary actions, we might participate in something miraculous for someone else.

We don't have to be a celebrity like Will Smith.

We don't have to travel to exotic places.

I haven't finished the episode yet, but I can almost guarantee Will Smith survives the volcano. As long as we have eyes to see and ears to hear, we have the opportunity to finish the story, to do something ordinary... that God might do something miraculous through our ordinary actions.

There is someone in your family who needs a hug.

There is someone in your group of friends who needs a call or a text, or to hear just thinking about you.

There is someone in your community who could use a helping hand.

All we have is now. And those in our midst. As the prophet Zephaniah reminds us, God is in our midst.

The Spirit of Jesus calls us to love God and love our neighbor.

To be more aware of our surroundings.

To share what we have, and not take more than we need.

Welcome to Earth – where ordinary miracles happen every day.

Welcome to the Kingdom of God, where everyone receives what they need by sharing what they have.

Alleluia, Amen.