

Many years ago, I got the incredible opportunity to take a gap year between high school and college. Using some connections through my school, I ended up in a little village in Northern Thailand surrounded by dense jungle on one side and flat rice fields on the others. I lived in a monastery, got my meals in alms bowls with the monks, shaved my head and eyebrows, the whole nine yards. I learned the language, did my best to adopt the customs, and learned how to apologize when I messed up, which was good because I messed up often. Now, I was old enough to venture into the world alone, but I didn't know my kneecap from my earlobe, and I certainly didn't understand what it meant to be abroad, bumbling along and surviving off the kindness of some very patient people. I made lots of mistakes, and there were a few things I did that I really should've known better.

Like when the harvest came, the entire village lined up at the edge of the nearest rice field. Somebody supplied me with a short-handled sickle and placed me in line not quite shoulder-to-shoulder with the folks on either side. At some unseen signal, everybody bent over and began cutting rice stalks by the fistful. They taught me how to avoid cutting myself by holding the sickle at an angle against the slick stems and nodded sympathetically when I made the universal sign for "oh, my aching back." We moved slowly deeper into the field with piles of cut stalks behind and tall amber stalks in front. Grasshoppers leapt ahead of us in a rolling wave. The woman next to me snagged one of 'em in midair and popped it straight into her mouth. She saw my face, which must've been somewhere between horror, disgust, and fascination, grabbed another mid-leap, and offered it to me. I hesitated just long enough that she understood this might be unusual for me, so she held up a finger to say "Oh, I get it. Hold on." She removed the legs and wings, and then beaming, offered it to me again. Well, I couldn't not take it. My momma raised me right. You eat whatever a stranger cooks for ya. That's just good manners. It wasn't that bad. I mean, it wasn't that good either, but I didn't want to be rude. My personal chef laughed, showed me how to time it just right to catch my own, and beamed when I got one on the first try.

But after maybe half an hour of harvesting rice and catching grasshoppers my brain switched perspectives. I went from doing the thing to being aware of doing the thing. Where I was focused on the sickle in my hand and the rice ahead, I zoomed out to where I could observe myself doing all this. With that mental step back, I could appreciate how cool it was that I got to do this. So, I took a mental photograph, the same one you're getting to see now, and began to think of things differently. Instead of being in the moment, I began to think of this as a box to check off. After that day, I could always say I'd eaten a live grasshopper and harvested rice by hand. I'd collected a new story to tell.

And it's that shift that I'm ashamed of. Because instead of living in the community and really becoming a part of it, I embraced what I could get out of it, collecting another story to tell later on rather than living with those people that were so kind. The story became more important than the people. And once that happened, I stood up straight, stretched my back and said, "welp, that was fun," handed my sickle off to the grasshopper chef next to me, and walked away. I wish I'd understood what a gift, what an invitation that harvest was, but I didn't. In the moment, I somehow twisted the whole thing around. I was grateful they'd invited me into this experience. I was grateful that they wanted me to understand how they live. I was grateful they wanted to give me this story to tell. I was even grateful for the mid-harvest snack. What I didn't understand is that they weren't trying to give me an experience; they wanted me to help with the harvest. And I treated their very real lives like my own personal theme park, hopping off one exciting ride and looking for the next.

I'm not proud of it. I wish I'd done that differently. I wish I'd stayed hunched over until the fields were done. I wish I'd forced down a few more grasshoppers. I wish I'd sweat and toiled and hurt my back with them

until the job was done. But I didn't. I approached the day less like a community member and more like an anthropologist obsessed with how fascinating it all was. I really am ashamed of that moment and that mindset. But I think I kinda needed it. Because I've also been in situations where I felt like the woman preparing the grasshopper for the amateur anthropologist. I've felt what it's like to realize someone views you as an experience to collect. I know that disappointment, and I never want to feel that again, and I sure don't want to make anyone else feel that again, either. We're not tourists in each other's lives. We're woven together, beautifully and tragically, but always inextricably connected.

Now, we're just over halfway through Jesus' ministry when John says Jesus says, "what should I say, Father save me from this hour?" You can hear Jesus scoffing at the idea. What a ridiculous thing to say. He'd never ask God to ease up. That's absurd. Except for Matthew, Mark, and Luke -- at the very end of their stories -- Jesus steps aside at Gethsemane and prays for God to "take this cup from me." Spare me from what's in store. Take this cup from me. No scoffing there at all. He's real and human, and he's worried. All the other Gospels tell that part of the story while John says it's ridiculous. To be fair to John, he has a very clear agenda. John tells us that he wrote his version "so that you might believe." And if you follow where John is different, you'll find a trend that paints Jesus as unflappable. For John, Jesus is perfection perfected, and John needs him to be. I think John needs Jesus to be beyond doubt, even to scoff at doubt, because John needs Jesus to be unimpeachable. See, if Jesus is unimpeachable, then arguments against him lose their power. If you can't argue against Jesus, then you might believe. John needs Jesus to be utterly perfect because he thinks that perfection is necessary for belief. The point of everything John writes always comes back to "so that you might believe."

The problem for me is that what John finds compelling isn't what I find compelling. I think John's made an error in assuming that doubt is an imperfection. For me, that moment in Matthew, Mark, and Luke when Jesus asks God to "take this cup from me," that's crucial. Jesus will do what has to be done in spite of his doubt. If he must, he must. And for someone like me, that's compelling. My gripe with John's perfected perfection goes deeper. See, sometimes what he thinks leads to belief does the opposite. The Jesus he describes is so lofty and so perfect that he's distant. But in the Incarnation back at Christmas, the divine became human, lives our lives, feels our feels, even doubts our doubts. Through all that, God becomes accessible. God is among us, that's what Emmanuel means. But God isn't just among us. God's with us. Jesus knows what it's like to be fully human. And being fully human means that in some chamber of his devout heart, somewhere in there is a seed of doubt. I kinda need Jesus to have that. I need to know he's not playing dress up. I need to know he endured dark nights of the soul, wrestled the better angels and worse demons of our nature, and decided to do what needed to be done anyway. And that's an Emmanuel I can connect to. If he lacks doubt and the seeds of human shortcoming, he's just an observer. Not only is that loftiness hard to connect to, it's a little off-putting. Don't come here like you're on safari, tut at our failings, and leave us behind. Get in here with us, get some dirt under your fingernails, question if any of this matters, and then we can talk.

And I can tell ya, that Jesus, the one with bruises he can't remember where they came from and morning breath and the desire to do what's right with a mostly consistent will to follow-up, I want to follow that Jesus. Somehow, knowing that Jesus makes everything he does all the more impressive. Walking on water, water into wine, wine into blood, blood into mercy, it's predictable if he's the golden child tossing miracles along his path like so many flower petals. But if he's real in all the ways we are, miracles shift from the showiness of a deity to the incredible beauty of someone like us rising to glory. I'm proud one of us made it. I'm inspired to do better. And I'm much more likely to believe. And John misses that.

John's detached Jesus is a lot like me cosplaying as an anthropologist. It's the divine taking notes, stroking his beard, thinking of what fascinating oddities he can share about his adventures. I'm ashamed of doing that in the rice field. I can't embrace a Jesus that would do the same to us. I much prefer the Jesus that's

willing to do what needs doing in spite of all the reasons not to. Now, that doesn't mean I need Jesus to eat grasshoppers and harvest rice. But it does mean that if he did, he'd do it fully. He wouldn't lay down his sickle and walk away. He'd eat what was given to him. He'd work to the end. He'd throw out his back and hunch and maybe even grumble, but he'd stay with the people, become that body, compel just by being his accessible self. Jesus worked, he served, he doubted. And because he did, we might believe.