

There are many places people find God. Sometimes it's when a person is at the end of their rope and reach rock bottom. Sometimes a person has an encounter while on a retreat or in the wilderness. Other times it's at church. And some grow closer to God gradually over the course of their lives as a cradle Catholic. But perhaps one of the most unusual places where one man found God was on the set of the reality TV program "Survivor."

Nick Fager used to be a segment producer on the show. And one season, what he saw from one contestant astounded him in how that man dealt with difficult people and a difficult environment, but also used his time on the show to not retreat inward or just think of himself, but how he had a powerful impact on the other contestants.

In sharing his story, Nick admits he is not a particularly religious man. He's spend a large part of his career working in reality TV, where God is a concept for the "Jesus freak" contestant as they were referred to in the industry. The last place he expected to be inspired divinely was on the job. But it was during his time on Survivor that he was witness to a series of events that radically changed his view on belief in a higher power.

During one season of the show, he was given the opportunity to produce a new twist for the show called Redemption Island, which altered the most basic rule of the game. When contestants were voted out by the tribe, they were no longer out of the competition. They went to the Redemption Island, where they would live in solitude, waiting for the next eliminated contestant to join them. Once there were two residents on Redemption Island, they would compete in a Duel, or a challenge combining physical and mental skills. The winner stayed alive on the Redemption Island, waiting for his or her chance to go back into the game with the other contestants. The loser went home.

In the conceptual meetings, they imagined Redemption Island as a vicious place. Ideally, contestants would be so bitter about being voted off that they would do anything to get back into the game for vengeance. They dreamed that the first exile would monopolize the food and shelter and leave the second resident out to dry in order to weaken his or her opponent in the Duel.

The first Survivor to be voted off was a woman named Francesca. She was a sweet-natured and smart woman, but she had been blindsided at the first Tribal Council. By the time she arrived on Redemption Island, she was upset, embarrassed and angry (along with being starving and freezing). She rationalized

and did all the self-preservation typical of those experiencing rejection, but by the time the second arrival came, she was still angry and bitter.

Matt was the second person voted out and the second resident of Redemption Island. He was a 22 year old devout Christian from Nashville, who had promoted his love of Christ too much for his fellow Survivors. His good nature was taken advantage of, and he was also blindsided.

Francesca did exactly what they hoped when Matt arrived on a cold and rainy night. She had built a small roof of palm fronds within the shelter to protect herself from the rain, but she didn't let Matt join her under it. She told him that she was still upset that he had been a part of the alliance that voted her off. Matt didn't fight the decision. He slept in the rain.

An unexpected thing happened though when Nick interviewed Matt the next morning, right before the first Duel. While he was extremely upset about being lied to by his "friends," he wasn't filled with anger or the need for revenge. He said that everything that had happened was for a reason and it was all part of God's plan. As much as Nick tried to get this out of him (for that doesn't make good TV), he wouldn't give Nick the sound bite he wanted, which was "I'll do anything to get

back into the game to get vengeance.” He said he’d keep fighting, and he hoped to get back into the game, but it wasn’t up to him.

Matt won the first Duel, the second and the third. He kept winning, but the motto remained the same. He was God’s servant. He was God’s servant, and the results of the duels were in God’s hands. He had a calm and relaxed energy in the Duels that deeply contrasted the obvious nervousness and exhaustion of his opponents. He stopped talking about getting voted out and simply concentrated on the next Duel. Not only that, but Matt convinced almost every contestant who was voted off after him to join him in his faith. Instead of a place of anger and vengeance, Redemption Island turned into a place of peace and love. The producers were a little surprised when they saw this happening. Every arrival was the same. The contestants arrived angry and embarrassed, but within hours, Matt had them reciting Bible verses. Even the notorious villain of the show, Russell Hantz, laid down his devious tricks and shared a meal and Bible study with Matt on the morning of the Duel. When the Duel was over, the losers repeatedly hugged Matt and thanked him on their way out of the game. In a lot of ways, it was the opposite of what they wanted for the TV show, but through their frustration as producers, they couldn’t help but notice that Matt was turning into a great story.

Matt won six Duels before he was let back into the real game, right when the two tribes merged into one. He went back to the tribe mates who blindsided him with a renewed sense of hope, not out for vengeance but not necessarily opposed to it either. Then came a shocker. Matt was taken back in by the same people who had blindsided him and was promised that he would be taken to the finals with them. Hesitantly, he believed them, and then they blindsided him again. He was the first person voted off after the merge, and he went straight back to Redemption Island after being away for all of three days.

He was completely overcome with emotion when he got back. The betrayal went against everything he believed in. He was embarrassed, depressed, and visibly broken, and remained so for the next few days. He didn't want to be in the game anymore, and yet he wouldn't quit because he didn't see quitting as God's will. He still firmly believed that he was there for a reason and everything that had happened was part of a plan, however perplexing the plan might be. After a few days, he regained his footing. He came to realize that he was actually better off on Redemption Island than in the real game. He was still in the competition, but he had a personal haven, free from deception and backstabbing, where he could show new arrivals how to leave behind their anger.

Gradually, Matt found strength again, and he kept winning. Bible study continued with each new arrival, and after every Duel the loser continued to hug Matt goodbye and thank him. He had given them a way to leave the game in peace, something that had never been possible on previous seasons of Survivor. Matt won another four Duels and returned to a state of satisfaction, even joy. Then on day 36 out of a possible 39, in the last Duel that decided who went back into the game to face the final five survivors, Matt lost.

It was an endurance challenge where each of the duelers had to balance a platform that held a vase with their foot. If their foot moved, and the vase dropped off the platform, they were out. Matt went into the duel with the usual peace and confidence that Nick had seen for most of the 29 days he was with him on Redemption Island. He was so at peace that at one point, while he balanced the vase, he looked over at Nick, behind the cameras, and gave a little nod and smile. This was the end of their time together, regardless of the outcome, and Nick found himself getting a bit sad. He hadn't given the producers any of the dramatic twists and turns that they wanted for TV. But Nick could not help but admire Matt for what he had done with Redemption Island. On a practical level, it simply made more sense. His belief that everything happened for a reason had allowed him to

unload his negative emotions onto the shoulders of a higher power and therefore regain his strength.

He smiled back at Matt as he balanced the vase, and a few minutes later his foot moved ever so slightly and the vase dropped. He was disappointed, but not entirely. Nick knew part of him didn't want to get back into the game, where he would undoubtedly fall victim once again to the backstabbing and deceit that he hated so much. Nick knew he was happy to exit on his own terms, with his dignity and beliefs. Nick maybe even suspected God had willed his foot to move.

Matt changed Nick too. Now in times of adversity he thinks about his experience with Matt on Redemption Island. What he tells himself is this: there are always going to be negative experiences in life, rejections and tragedies and disappointments. At some point, we all get voted off by our tribe mates, but in the aftermath of those experiences, we get the same opportunity as Matt. The chance to set the tone for our own redemption islands. We can make our island into a place of anger and bitterness by seeking blame or vengeance, or we can create an island of peace and acceptance by believing that it's all happening for a reason. In Matt's case, the results showed the latter works far better for surviving.

Admittedly I haven't seen a single episode of Survivor. But they obviously do something right to keep the ratings up. Part of that is the Lord of the Flies element I guess; surviving to get a winner, as people enjoy the in-fighting and manipulation needed to form an alliance and then burn someone later on. And while this might work to win a competition, it really isn't a winning mentality for life as a whole.

The problem is while we might not have to be on an island, in a sense life is a lot like Survivor. We use people to get what we want. We can think of ourselves before others. We can go from being sweet-natured or kind like Francesca to being angry, bitter, or doing what it takes to just get ahead. Some people just become changed little by little due to life circumstances, or believing that the paths to happiness are money, power, possessions or being in control. God though wants to do something about it.

Advent is a time for our Redemption Island. It is a time to grow closer to God. But we have to remember it's a two way street. God comes to us, no longer as an infant, but He meets us where we are at. He wants to burst into our lives, and help us win not a duel to get off of Redemption Island, but rather wants to transform us into a better person, and challenges us to do that for one another.

In our first reading from Isaiah, we hear the words: “In the desert prepare the way of the Lord. Make straight in the wasteland a highway for God. Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill shall be made low, the rugged land shall be made a plain, the rough country, a broad valley. Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all the people shall see it together.” The terrain in Israel to travel is rough; Isaiah has this vision of how much easier it would be if these things could happen. But they can. On the one hand, God opens up a watered way through the desert for them. So God acts. But the people need to act too. The flock journey with the shepherd. God journeys to us, but while He can make the crooked ways straight, we also need to do the same thing too if we are going to welcome him.

In “Survivor” a person ended up on Redemption Island a broken person, full of anger - at least that was the plan. The producers hoped that they’d use this anger to get back at the others and provide for some good TV in the process. Even Matt, when he ended up back there after being burned yet again, was hurting. But what he didn’t do was let that anger take over. Rather he realized that maybe God had a plan and a purpose for him. And so he found his strength again. He let God in.

That is what we need to do as we move towards Christmas. God is trying to get to us. But it’s worth asking, what is in the way? There are so many things that creep

into our lives that cause us to change. Like on “Survivor” people hurt us, especially in our families and with friends, and we can become bitter or resentful or want to cut them off. A sin of the flesh can become an addiction. We can stop praying or going to Mass because we are too busy. We can develop a habit of gossip or being condescending. It’s a long list. Daily, we need to make any effort to fill in the valleys and make the mountains low that are in our soul. We examine our conscience. We pray. We give of our time to volunteer. We are present to our family because they need us. In a soul, it’s so easy to build up obstacles to God as he’s trying to get in.

And with that, all of us too can be like Matt, or like John the Baptist. John’s lifestyle and preaching inspire people to follow him and respond by being baptized. As we grow closer to God, our relationship with God becomes evident by how we treat others. All Matt had to do was to pray with someone, talk to them for a little bit about his faith, and it began to change them one by one. How telling that everyone who met him even when they lost the final competition to him and the chance to win a million dollars and continue to be on TV was no longer upset, but hugged him goodbye. The gift of our time to others can truly do so much to help them, so let’s learn from John the Baptist and help transform one another by being there for them.

The goal of Redemption Island was to get back into a reality TV show game. But you could also call our earthly lives living on Redemption Island, because all of us need a redeemer. Like Francesca, life can change us and turn us into people we don't want to be. Thankfully, we don't have to win a game to get to heaven. We just have to welcome God, and respond to his love, something we can do better every day on our journey, because He's always with us. So let's prepare for that by welcoming our Redeemer on our altar, and like Matt, take the love that God gives us so that like Matt, we can live out the words of our first reading and give one another comfort. Matt didn't seem to mind too much about not winning. Perhaps in his desire to spread the faith he took to heart the words of John the Baptist and wanted to point the way to the one coming who will baptize with the Holy Spirit. May that fire of the Spirit fill our hearts with the love of God, and as we go forth from Mass tonight receiving God's love, be mindful that God has placed us all on Redemption Island because He wants us to learn how to change for the better, and to change one another for the better. Advent gives us a special time to think about how to do that. But that can only happen when, like John the Baptist, we remember He must increase, we must decrease. The paradox though is when that happens, our lives are so much better because Jesus is the sun that never sets, illuminating all the darkness, even that in our heart. So let's focus on Him like Matt and like

John, and let His light, His love remove our sins, our pains, our struggles so that we too can be a people of the light, mindful that He comes to us every day to get us to a place a lot more important than a game show, He comes to us with His love to help us get to heaven, and gives us the task of helping one another get there too. For the rest of our lives we'll be meeting people on our Redemption Island. We can only tell them about God if we have His love in our hearts, so may we strive to do both as together we journey forward to a place where there isn't just one winner, but the Lamb of God whose love is freely given to all.