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Scuba diving

## **Faith and Values: Underwater sermon proves memorable and moving**

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**S**ometimes the best sermons are the ones held not under a man-made roof but the ones held far away from technology — and with few, if any, words. Such is the nature of the scuba diver's underwater sermon.

With scuba diving, there are no distractions. I cannot check my emails. There are no cellphones, iPads, iPods, iPhones — nothing man-made or electronic except the rare “beep” of my dive computer if I happen to ascend too quickly. One does not dress to impress, but instead to stay warm.

It is a tranquil, meditative escape from the world of man and the hustle and bustle of deadlines and appointments. Most importantly, it is truly a religious experience. Somehow, dropping into the depths brings one closer to the wonder and the power of creation.

Whether you believe in the Book of Genesis and Adam and Eve of the Bible or ascribe to the Big Bang theory of creation or to Charles Darwin's “On the Origin of Species,” there undoubtedly had to have been some almighty force that set it all in motion.

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The dive spot was at one of the island's southernmost tips.

When we arrived, several cars were already there and about six European (pick a country) divers were all suited up — some in hoodies and full-body wetsuits — with cameras and other contraptions, getting ready to head in.

For a moment, I thought we might bag it and go elsewhere, to another dive spot — a different sanctuary, one that no one else had chosen. However, my husband, Gary, in his typical competitive fashion, said: “Let’s go! Let’s hurry up and beat them in.”

Sure enough, we did (good old American efficiency — and, more importantly, less gear) and we were very glad we did. When we first dropped down to the reef line, slowly and quietly immersing ourselves in underwater silence and reverence, we first were amazed as we saw hundreds of schoolmaster snapper (about 2 feet long, yellow tails and tapered heads). Sometimes a diver might see a school of two or three dozen at a time, but never like this. They just kept coming and coming from the right and pooling together in massive groups.

And as we looked above the pooling schools of hundreds of schoolmaster parishioners, the proverbial stained glass windows of Genesis above came to life featuring dozens of black durgon, sergeant majors, blue tang and purple wrasse, while just below in the reef were scores of grouper and other fish (trunkfish, trumpetfish, butterflyfish, angelfish, squirrelfish) colorfully sprinkled about.

Then, as we floated in amazement, taking in the feast of activity, below us appeared a 6- to 7-foot free-swimming green moray eel, just cruising through the reef, gracefully like choral notes going up and down, playfully in and out of the coral.

We quietly watched the large eel, so full of joy and exuberance, frolic and cruise for a good five minutes before it swam off.

Farther up to the left, the other divers arrived with cameras and lots and lots of movement. Yikes! Not what we wanted at all to invade this peaceful sanctuary. Fortunately, they opted to go the other way, so Gary and I were able to tool along in our very calm, still manner of hardly moving or breathing. With the current pushing us along as if on a drift dive, we hardly moved, in a meditative flow.

And so we moved along the reef wall about 50 feet down, already feeling a sense of renewal. We floated over lots of colorful blue, purple and yellow corals. We spotted a few lionfish and a brown spotted eel, then watched some horse-eyed jacks and several large grouper.

Suddenly, I saw an enormous creature more than 50 feet away coming directly toward me along the reef wall. I shouted “OMG!” (not so reverently, I must admit) underwater, and I looked wide-eyed over at Gary, who was hovering just slightly above me alongside the reef wall.

He wondered what I was hollering about — and then he followed my eyes back to in front of us: It was a huge leatherback turtle! And it kept coming right at me — I mean *right* at me!

I held my breath for what seemed like eternity and kept waiting for it to go around me, but once it was about 2 feet in front of me, it just stopped, turned its head slightly sideways to get a better gander at exactly what was in its path and just eyeballed me. I eyeballed the turtle back, making a clear connection with a large, nonhuman life-form — a Mexican standoff with a 1,000-pound prehistoric creature.

So guess who gave in? I slowly dropped down several feet and, after making wide-eyed contact with Gary next to me, the gentle but mammoth creature slowly swam over me.

With my heart in my stomach, I watched all 4 to 5 feet of him pass overhead, checking out his massive underbody armor. And then we watched him turn and slowly swim away from the reef, back out to open sea.

This was definitely an “E.T.” moment.

Gary and I just stared at each other in amazement, and then continued along on what clearly had been an exceptional underwater experience. We turned to head back toward the shallows — nothing else possibly could be in the cards, since we already had been dealt a winning hand — when I heard a loud grunt from Gary.

He signaled to me to look right toward the shallows — and there swimming just past us, slightly higher up on the reef, was a southern stingray with a hitchhiker on top, just cruising by.

We came back to the hundreds of schoolmasters, watching in amazement again but sadly knowing it was time to head to shore. And then, coming into the shallows just before we surfaced, we saw a 6-inch sea worm — fat, flat and green with a frilly white border all around its edges — slowly chugging along across a piece of coral and then dropping off over the edge.

It was a perfect ending, illustrating the juxtaposed beauty of nature’s micro versus that of the leatherback macro.

When we got to shore, the other divers were gone. I paused for a moment and, in silent prayer and with immense gratitude, embraced the magnitude of this underwater sermon and gave my heartfelt thanks to the Creator.

“And God created great whales, and every living creature that moveth, which the waters brought forth abundantly, after their kind, and every winged fowl after his kind: And God saw that (it was) good.” — King James Bible, Genesis 1:21

“There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed into a few forms or into one; and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved.” — Charles Darwin, “On the Origin of Species”