

The Narrow Gate

In the past few weeks of Bible study, I've read a good bit about the entrance to heaven being a narrow gate. I struggled with the notion, tossing and turning over my own worthiness of entering God's Kingdom. Was I really obeying God's Commandments as he intended them to be followed? What about all the times I slipped? It seemed as though I'd never meet God's standards. I'd never fit through that narrow gate.

A recent excursion to the Maryland Zoo on Free Zoo Day made it easier for me to envision the entrance to heaven. I'd learned about the event through a post my cousin Nancy made on Facebook. It was one of the last days of summer break for me, and I thought Free Zoo Day would be a great way to spend some time with the boys and my mom before I found myself back in the classroom.

Since I didn't discover that the zoo was free until late in the day, we got there an hour before it closed only to find the closest place to park was about a one mile (mostly uphill) walk to the zoo's gates. But, we were determined to get there, especially because I wanted to catch a glimpse of my favorite animal, the polar bear. (Collin's favorite animal, the squirrel, could be seen in our back yard, and Frank is only after our cats). A little huffing and puffing as I lugged my heavily pregnant body through the city summer heat would be worth the while.

When we finally reached the zoo entrance, it felt like surmounting a mountain summit. Fortunately, I'd remembered my stroller because the area seemed a little congested. We stepped right into the park, eased past a small crowd and found a spot of glass through which we gazed upon three prairie dogs who ducked into and out of their holes. As the drone of a thousand voices engulfed me, I kind of wished I could join them.

But just as Dorothy was determined to see the Wizard, I insisted we move forward to drink in the glorious sight of that species which is *Ursus maritimus*. The tram was usually located right next to the prairie dogs, but signage indicated that it had been moved behind said diggers, so we followed the directional arrows to the loading point.



Photo from the Maryland Zoo in Baltimore (www.marylandzoo.org)

As we moved closer to the tram, the crowd seemed to thicken. Collin wanted to get out, but I told him there were too many people and he needed to stay in the stroller. The wait for the tram was half an hour, and the zoo closed in forty-five minutes. Besides, there were elderly and disabled people who needed the tram more than we

did. So we chose to walk.

The densely wooded path was six-to-eight feet wide and roped off to the right of the tram area. It was mostly downhill, but it was tight quarters. There were mere inches between us and those in front of us and behind us, who were also headed to the exhibits. There were also people to our left who were returning from the exhibits and presumably headed for the exits. No one looked happy.

Perhaps everyone's apprehension was due to the claustrophobic feel of the place, even though we were outdoors. It may have been because of the heat or because it was late in the day. Or maybe it was because every third group of people had a stroller, and with all the sudden stops, there were some mild Achilles' heel and ankle lacerations and contusions in the works. The line was long and slow. The quarters were tight. And we all just wanted to see our favorite exotic animals.

Fifteen minutes later, we emerged from the trees into the sunlight. And there on the right were the polar bears. Collin burst from the stroller. I didn't even try to scold him. I just took his hand and we dashed up to the ramp towards the water tank where Magnet and Anoki, the Maryland Zoo's polar bears would swim with the grace of their fellow Baltimore aqua-athlete, Michael Phelps. My mom and Frank followed as closely behind us as they could with my intrusive double stroller.

A crowd of fifteen had gathered around the water tank. They pointed at and took pictures with their cell phones of ... a beach ball. There was no bear.

A larger crowd, double the size had pressed itself up against the glass of the enclosure further up the ramp. They shouted as they maneuvered their phones overhead so that they could capture a glimpse, a moment, a pixilated molecule of the animal I adored.

Collin and I squeezed in as close as my belly and innate need for personal space would allow. A flash of white fur hind legs and rump jutted out in our direction from the far fence line.

There. We'd seen it. A real polar bear - or the back of it, anyway. And at that, we departed, returning to the mass exodus in queue. In just thirty minutes, we'd be back to our car and headed to Sweet 27 for cupcakes that would make us forget our struggle.

So, how was my experience at the zoo like that of the narrow gate?

1. We received a free invitation to this place.
2. So did everyone else.
3. We showed up after a long and arduous journey - and still needed to wait.
4. We had to learn to coexist with the others who would be joining us.
5. It was worth the struggle.

Father Willie, our pastor, explained that the narrow gate doesn't mean that heaven is a small, exclusive place reserved for saints. We all are invited. We all are sinners.

We all can be forgiven. God invites all of us to join His kingdom. Getting there just might be a challenging journey. If we stay the course, with our eyes and hearts focused on our destination, we will find a way through the narrow gate.