

What St. Joseph and snakes taught me about fatherhood



This will be the last column I write about the RV road trip our family took to Arizona and Utah this summer. I promise. I just have one more story that I want to tell, and then we'll move on.

When we started planning this trip a few years ago, one of the must-see, non-negotiable destinations was the Loretto Chapel in Santa Fe, New Mexico – home of the famous staircase of St. Joseph. As the legend goes, only after the chapel was completed in the late 1870s did the sisters who lived nearby and worshipped there realize that there was no way to access the choir loft. One day, in an answer to the sisters' prayers, a man riding a donkey and carrying a toolbox came to the chapel seeking work. Months later, the staircase was built, and the carpenter was never seen again. The community was stunned by the design and construction of the spiral staircase. No nails were used, and there were no visible means of support. Even today, experts are baffled by its design.

While it was the main attraction we had planned on our New Mexico detour, it wasn't the only one. For months, our three sons were begging us to make time to stop at the American International Rattlesnake Museum in nearby Albuquerque. Yep, snakes. The museum bills itself as containing the largest and most diverse collection of live rattlesnakes in the world. Yippee! But as I wrote in my last column, our 1,800-mile trip to our first camping destination didn't exactly go as planned, and there was no time to visit the miraculous staircase or the rattlesnake museum. I promised my wife that we'd make sure we saw St. Joseph's staircase on the way back, and I promised the

kids that we'd do our best, if time allowed, to see the snakes.

Throughout our vacation, I had to keep reminding myself that this was their vacation, too – maybe even more so than it was ours. See, my wife and I have already formed our memories from childhood. Now, I thought, it's our job as parents to help our children carve out their own memories. Sometimes, that involves us doing things we don't necessarily want to do.

Case in point: My oldest son, Grant, who's 16, is obsessed with snakes and reptiles. For Christmas this year, his grandmother got him a snake hook (look it up) that he could take with him on vacation. He carried it on all of our hikes, turning over rocks and rustling through bushes looking for rattlesnakes. A week or so into our trip, he wasn't having any luck, and he explained to me that snakes are most active at night. They don't see their prey like other animals, he told me; they sense their heat, so when it's cooler outside, it's easier to hunt. He asked if we could go into the desert at night to look for snakes. As for me, I'm a normal person who hates snakes – like God intended. So, should anyone ever question my love for my son, stash this next paragraph away somewhere.

A few nights later, we piled into the van and drove to the middle of nowhere Utah to look for rattlesnakes. We parked off of the road, and with flashlights in hand, we found a little dirt trail that wound its way into the desert. Grant, with his snake hook, was leading the way. I brought up the rear, making sure nobody got left behind and praying Hail Marys as we slowly walked along the path. We didn't see any rattlesnakes then (thanks be to God), but if the kids remember the night that Dad took them out into the desert for a snake hunt, then me nearly being scared to death will have been worth it.

It made for an extremely long day on the road – 16 hours altogether – but on our way home, we did stop at the Loretto

Chapel, and we saw the stairs of St. Joseph. It was a highlight of the trip for my wife and me. However, the two-hour side trip to Santa Fe left almost no time to make it to the rattlesnake museum, which would be closing around the time we could get there. Outside of the chapel, I broke the news to our sons, who were angry and despondent.



Courtesy Scott Warden

We had to drive back through Albuquerque to get home, and as we were driving, I was thinking about St. Joseph, the sacrifices he made for his family and the memories I'm certain he made with Jesus. And so we set the GPS for the rattlesnake museum. We'd have five minutes to spare, if traffic cooperated. Maybe they'd let us in. We made it there in time, just barely. The owners greeted us, and we told them the story of our long journey to get there. "We're still finishing up some things that need to get done," they said, "so stay as long as you want."

It's a memory that we'll never forget. My sons had never been happier. And truly, snakes notwithstanding, neither had I.

Scott Warden is managing editor of Our Sunday Visitor.