

Q&A: National parks a great place to meet God

MARIA SONNENBERG, FOR FLORIDA TODAY 9:24 a.m. EDT October 7, 2016



(Photo: PROVIDED PHOTO)

If you ever doubt the existence of a higher power, all you need do is visit one of America's national parks, because these magnificent places will definitely make you a believer in God's power.

Sarasota author Penny Musco in "Life Lessons from the National Parks: Meeting God in America's Most Glorious Places" discusses the presence of the Divine in these wild playgrounds. Her book, which began as a blog, was released this year in honor of the National Park Service's centennial.

America's 59 national parks are just the tip of the iceberg, for the National Park Service boasts 413 national monuments, historic sites, battlefields and others (For more on these, see [nps.gov/aboutus/upload/Site-Designations-08-24-16.pdf](https://www.nps.gov/aboutus/upload/Site-Designations-08-24-16.pdf)).

By the way, Florida has 11 National Parks sites, and most cost very little, if anything, to enjoy.

Musco will visit Cocoa Beach and Palm Libraries on Oct. 11 and 12 to deliver a free program on "Fascinating Stories from Our National Parks."

"Our parks have great scenery, but they also tell our national history, and there are many interesting stories connected to them," said the author, who will discuss such subjects as how George Takei, aka Sulu in "Star Trek," is connected to the national parks; in which national park is taking bathing a favorite activity and the Florida national park associated with Lincoln's assassination.

Musco, who has written for "Guideposts," "Family Circle" and other national publications, is a former artist-in-residence for the National Park Service.

How have the national parks affected you spiritually?

My husband and I are followers of Christ. In January 2009, we visited Everglades. During a walk on one of its trails, we came across a stand of gray and lifeless-looking trees. I thought they were dead, but a nearby sign set me straight. The trees are bald cypresses, and I learned that at the end of each year, during the winter, all their needles drop to the limestone underlying the Everglades, and the trees become dormant. The needles decay and eat away at the limestone, creating a hollow around each tree. This not only allows the trees' roots to grow deeper, but allows water to collect to provide for the bald cypresses over the dry season.

And I thought, that's just like life. Sometimes we go through dry seasons in our life, when we feel dormant, and sometimes even dead emotionally and spiritually, when things look bleak and our prayers go unanswered. But Scripture assures us that God is providing for us even during those dry seasons, just as He does the bald cypress, even when we don't feel it. The very things we think are eating away at our foundation become the things God uses to bring new growth. We may be dormant, but God never is.

And I realized that God is all around in the national parks, not just in the great scenery, which is perhaps what most people think of, but also in the little details and stories within the parks and we can learn about His attributes and His truth through them.

How many parks have you visited? Which are in your bucket list?

I've visited around 100 different park sites. All the rest are on my bucket list. This past summer, we went on what I called a "Civil War and Civil Rights" tour of the Deep South, taking in several park sites. We went to Vicksburg and Shiloh National Military Parks in Mississippi and southern Tennessee, respectively; the Selma-to-Montgomery National Historic Trail in Alabama; and the Tuskegee Airmen National Historic Site and Tuskegee Institute National Historic Site, two different park sites, but near each other in Tuskegee, Alabama.

Your favorite park?

That's like asking a mother who her favorite child is. That said, the Grand Canyon is incredible. We first viewed it from the air, which is amazing enough, but seeing it in person is even more so. We spent a lot of time there just sitting in rocking chairs and staring at it.

Do you think the parks are in danger of being loved to death?

2015 set a record for the number of visitors to our national parks, so yes, humans are definitely having an impact. There's always going to be that friction between preservation and accessibility. Money for upkeep is always a problem. These places are some of our country's greatest treasures, and we have to treat them well, teach our children to love and respect them and do what we can environmentally, or they won't be around for future generations to enjoy.