One of my prized possessions growing up was a baseball. But it wasn’t just any baseball. It was a baseball that I got at a real baseball game. But it wasn’t just a baseball I got from a baseball game. This baseball also was signed by the San Diego Chicken.

If you know the San Diego Chicken, then you know his importance place in the history of our country. OK, that may be overstating it a bit, but he was pretty cool. The Chicken started in 1974 at the San Diego Padres baseball stadium. He was one of the first sports mascots, and he would travel around to different ballparks with his zany antics and comedy routine. In 1982, the Chicken crossed the road to Louisville to visit their new minor league team, the Louisville Redbirds. It’s never safe for a chicken to come to the home of KFC, but he did, and he was hilarious. I was at that game with my mom and grandfather.

I was lucky enough to get a foul ball from one of the bullpen pitchers, and after the game I stood in line for an hour to have it signed by the San Diego Chicken. Seems only appropriate to ask the Chicken to sign a “fowl” ball, right? From that moment on, the San Diego Chicken baseball became one of my favorite things in the world.

That lasted for a few months, until I wanted to play catch with a neighborhood kid. Problem was, we didn’t have a ball. “YOU don’t have any baseballs?” he pleaded. Well, I did have one. But it was signed by the San Diego Chicken! In the end, the desire to play catch won out over my Chicken worship, and from that point on, the ball was in play. The signature gradually faded, and at some point I lost the baseball, probably up on a roof or in a dog-guarded yard. That ball went from the pedestal to the playground to…who knows where.

I’m sure you can relate, right? Growing up, you had a favorite stuffed animal, or a favorite baseball card, or a favorite blanket. You carried it with you, you slept with it, you guarded it like a dog guarding a lost baseball. You were devoted. But then, as you got older, grew up, it wasn’t cool to have a favorite doll, so you moved onto bigger and better things, or at least things that did a better job of holding your attention, and that once-revered item was cast aside, relegated to the pile of things that you used to care about.

I’d like to say today that we do the same thing with God. At some point in our lives we were excited about our relationship with God, we couldn’t get enough of Sunday School or youth group or Vacation Bible School. We prayed regularly and made sure we had something each Sunday for the offering. But then, as time passed, the relationship softened, the passion dulled, God was just…there. It’s not that you kicked God to the curb, but God got pushed aside for bigger, better, shinier things, things that had more allure and promised more of a payout and were actually real. And God went from the pedestal to…who knows where. Of course, God is still there if we REALLY need God, but God is not our favorite thing anymore. We’re no longer devoted.

In hindsight, I think that’s something like what happened to me before sabbatical. It’s not that I gave up on God or stopped believing; in fact, it’s a bit of the opposite. God didn’t grow distant from me; instead, God grew too familiar. God lost that other-worldly quality, that mystery and majesty that makes God…God. At some point, I stopped worshipping God and starting working with God. God got demoted from Creator to co-worker.
In Old Testament times, households would often have their own sets of gods, little carved images that would sit on a table as reminders of these little-G gods’ presence. At some point, I became so familiar with God, the Big-G turned into a little-g. God became so familiar to me that I started taking God for granted. I domesticated God. My Lord’s Prayer became, “My buddy, who’s just hanging around, what’s up?”

In some ways, I blame my job for this. I study God, I teach about God, I help others understand God. At some point, I began to believe I must know God pretty well. Take God out of the box, show God off, put God back in the box. I believe God expands or contracts to fit our level of reverence. The lower our reverence, the smaller our God. After 15 years doing this work, my God had gotten pretty small. I had respect for God, but not reverence. Big difference.

How big is your God? Does God still have the ability to take your breath away? Does God still command your attention, compel your response? Do you look forward to worship, to prayer, to time with God? Or is God just…there? Our little household god, sitting on the shelf, waiting for us to actually need God, to actually pay attention. I wonder if our God is too small.

The one overarching thing I was reminded of while on sabbatical is just how big God is. God is so much bigger, so much grander, so much more majestic than I ever gave God credit for. During a string of blog posts I kept alternating between the phrases “awesome majesty” and “majestic awesomeness” because I ran out of adjectives to describe the God I was encountering.

I first experienced this when I stepped out of the airplane at the basecamp of Denali, the tallest mountain in North America. We were about 8500 feet up, and surrounded by these 18,000 and 20,000-foot peaks that absolutely dwarfed us. And as I stepped onto the crunchy snow and looked up, I heard God say, as God said to Job, “‘Who is this that obscures my plans with words without knowledge? Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me. Where were you when I laid the earth’s foundation? Tell me, if you understand.’ And at that moment, I realized that I didn’t understand, that I had seriously underestimated who God is.

Standing at the basecamp of Denali, looking out over the Pacific Ocean, taking in the view from the top of the Empire State Building, standing among the ruins of Clonmacnoise monastery and Stonehenge. The source of all this majesty and awesomeness is God, pure and simple. Only God. God did this and so much more. I think I know God, I think I understand God, I think I can explain God to others. Then I see the mountains, the oceans, the diversity of my brothers and sisters, the wondrousness of the Cliffs of Moher and the Eiffel Tower. It was as if God was saying to me what God said to Moses. “I AM.” And my only response was, “You sure are!” I had forgotten that.

The irony of my sabbatical was that it was designed to bring me closer to God, but instead it caused me to step back from God, to get a better view, to take in the bigger picture. And I learned that I don’t know God, not really, not even close. I know my version of God, but that is such a miniscule mis-representation. But I also learned that what I think I know doesn’t matter. What matters is that God knows me. The God who made all those things knows me. And you.

And, as I came to understand, that knowledge compels a response. If we truly believe that God is that big and loves us that much, then we are compelled to respond, not out of duty and obligation but out of gratitude, out of a sense of privilege for being called “child of God.” The same God who made all this also made and loves us. Us! We are compelled to respond.

That response takes many forms, some of which can be lived out through the church – worship, generosity, service. But other forms of response go deeper within us. They are not as much behaviors as they are perspectives or worldviews. The ancient Christian writers would call
them disciplines. The one discipline I learned I need to practice is that of paying attention. To put it a bit more bluntly, it’s the discipline of shutting up when God is trying to speak. That may be harder for preachers than for anyone. But several times on this trip I was so awestruck by what I was seeing that I literally speechless. My family will tell you only God has the power to do that! My experience of God in those places was so palpable that all I could do was take it in. There were no words. God was there, tangibly, palpably there, in a way I had not experienced for a long time. I had lost that God and replaced God with a smaller, cheaper version.

Now that I’m on the other side of sabbatical, I’m still wrestling with this revelation, because I’m back in the setting where I thought I knew God, and I feel the old forces tugging at me, tempting me to go back to my small, domesticated God. So much easier to explain, so much easier to control. I can’t walk out of my house and see a mountain, or drive a few minutes to the beach. There are no sights of majestic awesomeness to render me speechless. At times I feel like I left God in those other places in order to return to Kentucky.

Have you ever felt that way? You take a trip or attend an event or have a mountain top experience, and you just want to stay there, to linger in God’s presence, to be reminded over and over again of God’s bigness. But you can’t stay there, so you reluctantly return to the carpool and the drop-off lane and the grocery store line and the stoplights. And you grow nostalgic and melancholy, because when you were at that other place, you really felt like God was present with you. God was SO big!

But is God only there? Does God only reveal Godself in the grandest of places, the loftiest plateaus, the most expansive terrains? Or is God also in the most mundane of places, the lowest plateaus, the most paved-over terrains? If God can be experienced in the grandeur of the Palace of Versailles, can God also be found in Versailles? If God is tangibly present in the mountains of Alaska, is God also present in Mount Sterling? If God hovers over the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, does God also hover over Tates Creek? If I’m expanding my understanding of my lack of understanding about God, then I have to admit that God is in all these places, not just the ones where I open myself up to experiencing God. If my experiences of God only happen in awe-inspiring places, if I can only experience God by getting away, then the issue may not be with God’s presence; the issue may be my lack of vision to see God right where I am. Maybe my God is too small.

If we can work on the discipline of paying attention, I pray that our eyes will be opened to seeing God everywhere, to find God in the most familiar of places, and then to respond to God’s presence with our gratitude. Yes, God is in all the places I experienced this summer. And God is in Versailles. And on Tates Creek Road. And in the grocery store. And in the garden. And in the traffic jam.

At some point over the last 15 years, I lost God, at least capital-G God. But by being able to step away, I was reminded that the God I had fabricated in my mind wasn’t the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, the great I AM. I found that God in all the places I traveled, but much to my surprise, when I got back home, I found that God was here, too. Right here with us. And God’s not my co-worker or my companion; God is my Creator, my Savior, the source of all good things in my life. I feel like I should have seen that all along, but I wasn’t paying attention. I am now.