

it's
OKAY
about **IT**

LESSONS from
a REMARKABLE FIVE-YEAR-OLD
about
LIVING LIFE WIDE OPEN



LAUREN CASPER

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YEAR-OLD ABOUT LIVING LIFE WIDE OPEN

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*For my little family—John, Mareto, and Arsema.
“We stick together.”*

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Introduction

“IT’S OKAY ABOUT IT”

My son came into my life when I first dreamed of becoming a mommy. He was the wish and the hope I held in my heart for many years as I waited. Then one day a phone call came, followed by an email and a handful of attached pictures. The silent prayers now had a name and a face. Mareto. My beautiful, brown-eyed, brown-skinned boy with wide eyes and enormous hands and feet.

I came into Mareto’s life on a warm and sunny January morning, in a redbrick courtyard in the bustling city of Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. My husband, John, and I walked through strong iron gates, crossed the brick courtyard, and knelt down in front of a tiny three-month-old boy in a green Bumbo seat. I carefully lifted him out, drew him to my chest, and we became mother and son.

Our path to Mareto was messy and hard, filled with

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uncertainty, frustration, and tears, but the important thing was that it led us to him. In the moment when I first wrapped my arms around him, everything changed. It was the moment our dreams came true and we became a family . . . and it was beautiful. I knew that Mareto would change my life and make it better, but I had no idea just how much I would learn from him and with him as we worked through the challenges of this world together.

Now that we've brought him home, the journey is still bumpy at times. Real life is simply that way. We like to be in control, but so often things happen that are beyond our control. Every day can feel like a complicated board game without instructions. But Mareto, with eyes that twinkle and widen with curiosity and delight, reminds me that good exists and life is beautiful.

A few days after we met Mareto, we had the honor of sitting with his birth mom to answer her questions and ask our own. One particular question had been at the forefront of my mind, and when the moment was right, I asked her, "Does the name *Mareto* have any special meaning?" She simply smiled at me and said, "Peace."

I think about this often, the way God brought it all together with such purpose. I think about it especially whenever certain things pop out of Mareto's mouth.

Life with Mareto can be like playing the telephone game sometimes. He blurts out little phrases that have their origin in something he saw or heard, but by the time they make their way through his mind and back out of his mouth,

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they've transformed. At first they may sound silly, but when I stop to think about them, I see the amazing truths God is teaching me through my son's expressions. Sometimes life's most poignant lessons are learned in the least expected places, and sometimes the peace of God that overcomes our circumstances starts in the mouth of a child.

So when Mareto throws one of his phrases into an ordinary moment, I have learned to press pause and take a deeper look into my own heart to find extraordinary truth. For instance, when life feels overwhelming or confusing, it often shows up on my face; and because Mareto is such an intuitive little boy, he can immediately tell that I'm struggling. In those moments he sits next to me, pats my knee, or takes my face in his little hands and says, "It's okay about it." He doesn't usually know what "it" is for me, but he knows whatever it is . . . it's okay.

It's true. Maybe whatever I'm dealing with isn't okay in the moment, but eventually it will be okay—because we live in a world that can be a bit upside down, but we know love wins at the end of every day and God is still on the throne.

My grandmother passed away last fall, and Mareto found me crying at the foot of the stairway in our home. He sat beside me, put his hand on my back, and bent his face so that his nose was almost touching mine.

"You feel sad?" he asked me.

"Yes," I told him. "Mommy's grandma went to heaven, and that makes me feel sad because I miss her."

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His sweet and genuine response to me was, “Aww. It’s okay about it. You can go to heaven to see her.”

He’s right. He might not have understood fully what he was saying. Maybe he thought I could go visit her in heaven anytime I wanted. But the truth still remains: Though it didn’t feel okay in the moment that my grandmother had died, it really was okay about it, because one day I will get to see her again. Within a few seconds and a couple of innocent sentences, Mareto comforted me with faith and hope and an eternal perspective.

So it is with many of Mareto’s insights about life. A simple sentence or two will bring me back around to what is most important. His words point my gaze toward heaven and encourage me to live and love bigger and better than before.

God knows each of us intimately, and he knows how we tend to interpret our world. Mareto experiences the world in a unique way and shares it with those around him. I believe God knew when he determined that Mareto and I would go together just how much I needed a little boy whose name is *Peace* to remind me, “It’s okay about it.”



one

“WATCH OUT FOR DIESEL 10!”

I know I’m biased, but Mareto is far too adorable for people not to notice. His head is covered in tight black curls that remind me of springs, and his cheeks are soft and squishy and always ready to smile. When we go out in public, strangers often try to talk to him.

We might be making our way down a grocery store aisle when it happens: A sweet older woman smiles and says, “Hello, young man!” Mareto looks up, pleased that someone is speaking to him, and blurts out, “Watch out for Diesel 10!”

I laugh as the stranger glances at me in confusion, and I awkwardly mention something about five-year-olds and Thomas the Tank Engine. She smiles, still confused, and walks away. Mareto has already retreated back into his own mind, but even so, he remains ready to warn the next person who might try to engage him in conversation.

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This was Mareto's standard greeting for well over a year. We had different ways of explaining it to strangers, friends, and acquaintances. Sometimes we'd just keep walking. Other times we'd say how much he loves Thomas the Tank Engine movies, and occasionally we'd stop to explain that our son has autism and often struggles with the "right way" to engage with new people.

One day it hit me that in his own special way, Mareto was doing what most of us wish we could do. Many people—myself included—say that they're sick of shallow talk, and they would much rather get into things that matter when they talk to people. I think what they're really saying is that they want to talk about the things they care about, the things that make them . . . them. Yet they continue having the same surface-level conversations we all have every day, probably because it can feel rather awkward to actually dive into topics we're passionate about.

FEAR KEEPS US
FROM FORMING
RELATIONSHIPS.

It's scary to let people really see us right off the bat. We keep our barriers intact until we feel safe and have tested the waters to determine whether or not this is the crowd with whom we can be ourselves. Fear keeps us from forming relationships.

For me—and I imagine for most people—it's the fear of judgment that causes me to hold back and talk about things I don't really care about. It's just easier. After all, we're each unique,

"WATCH OUT FOR DIESEL 10!"

created with varying interests and gifts, so the things that make me excited might seem silly to others. But that doesn't mean we should hide those parts of ourselves.

For example, I love movies, and I always have. I love vintage Hollywood and current blockbusters. Give me Judy Garland and a bucket of popcorn, and I'll consider it a great day. Same goes for Sandra Bullock and a bag of Sour Patch Kids. Talking about movies, my favorite TV shows, and actors is fun for me because I'm interested in those things. But most of the time I wait to get to know people before I ever bring up the topic on my own.

Last summer I went out to dinner with a group of my girlfriends. These friends were fairly new to me, because we'd moved to a new city and had only recently started attending their church. On the drive to the restaurant one of my new friends brought up an actress, and I lit up. Suddenly we were chatting about movies and actors with our heads close together. Our other friends laughed and mentioned how out of touch with that topic they were, but they also smiled as we talked because it was fun to see our enthusiasm.

Do you see my point? To every other person in that van, what my friend and I were discussing was shallow and meaningless. But to us it wasn't. We shared a similar interest, and we cared about our topic—silly as it was to other people. Soon we moved on from movies to donuts, and we began bonding over another shared love. Next thing we knew, we realized we had both grown up in California and had even more in common than we first realized.

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Before, I had been afraid that perhaps my new friends would judge me as superficial or “worldly” if they knew how much I loved movies. A little voice in my head had whispered that it wouldn't look good for a pastor's wife to care about any of that. But that little voice was lying and talking to my insecurities.

My friend's simple comment about an actress she liked caused my guard to go down and opened the door for us to connect more quickly. I now consider her one of my dearest friends, and I love that I'm as comfortable chatting with her about movies as I am discussing more serious things, such as both our sons' developmental delays.

The path to connection with others can start with expressing joys we have in common, but it can also go the route of sharing heavier issues we feel deeply about. The funny thing is the way we sometimes avoid both types of conversation—which reflects the way we hide from each other.

Case in point: I may love movies, but I'm also passionate about bigger things, such as orphan care and prevention, global hunger and access to clean water, history and politics, education reform, and disability awareness and acceptance. But I tend not to lead off with those topics for fear of being viewed as “too intense.” They are heavy, massive issues that I worry will make people uncomfortable, so I keep them to myself unless someone else leads the conversation in that direction.

One place where this changes completely, though, is the

"WATCH OUT FOR DIESEL 10!"

Created for Care Retreat. Every year, in February and March, I make the seven-hour drive from my home in Virginia to a luxurious lakeside resort in Georgia. Together with eleven of my dearest friends, we spend four days working as hard as we can putting on retreats designed to create an environment of rest, refreshment, education, and encouragement for nine hundred foster and adoptive mothers annually.

Women come to Georgia from all over the United States and even Canada. Some missionary moms even fly in from the countries where they serve. Some are young mothers in waiting, and some are empty nesters who foster. Our educational, social, spiritual, and financial backgrounds are all over the map, but we all have one thing in common: our experience in foster care and adoption. Something truly special happens at these retreats. Invisible walls crumble to the ground, and strangers become sisters.

The first year I attended Created for Care, I came home and tried to explain it to my husband, John. It was my first time going away to something like this, and we both had worried that the money and time sacrificed wouldn't be worth it. But it was and then some. The word I kept returning to as I talked to John on the ride home from the airport was *relief*. I felt so much relief—relief and acceptance.

John looked confused by my description, so I tried to explain why I had such an overwhelming sense of relief. It was because I didn't have to hold back in my conversations. I was among friends, even though I'd never met the women at the retreat before. When we talked in the halls and corners

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and by the fire or over our meals, we didn't have to preface anything with a long explanation of "adoption-ese." We all already knew what a home study entailed, why the wait was so hard, what "cocooning" meant, and what a trauma anniversary was.

Having a shared language and experiences, we could skip over the first eight steps of new friendship and had the freedom to simply talk about the things we cared about and what mattered to us. The result was instant connection and acceptance. Not having to put forth extra effort either to explain myself or to hold back and keep things to myself could only be described in that one word: *relief*. I hadn't realized how hard it had actually been to not go there with the people in my life. I didn't realize how tired it had made me to constantly hold back in relationships.

Christ's example in Scripture shows us a relationship model that is very different, though. When I read through the New Testament, I see story after story of Jesus wasting no time to connect with people's hearts. The beautiful thing is, not only does he get straight to their hearts, but also he does it differently with each person—knowing that we are unique. What opens up the woman at the well is different from what opens up his relationship with Zacchaeus.

As I watch each story play out, I see Jesus drawing people out with simple questions or statements. There was no theology or fancy explanation—just an acknowledgment of who they were, or a question about who they wanted to be. The result was an individual coming to life.

"WATCH OUT FOR DIESEL 10!"

When Jesus met the Samaritan woman at the well, he asked her for a drink. It might seem insignificant to us, but that question opened up her world. She knew it was unusual for Jews to speak with Samaritans, and her interest was immediately piqued. When she asked him about it, he responded, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water" (John 4:10). Just like that, Jesus went from zero to sixty, from asking for a drink of water to sharing the gospel with a woman he had met only moments ago. It wasn't coincidence; he knew which words would open her heart to him.

The story didn't stop there, of course. He went on to ask her about her husband, which again prompted her to share more of her story. In turn, Jesus told her all about her life and the good news. She left marveling at this exchange and wondering if he was the Christ—all because Jesus saw her and asked for a drink of water.

As Jesus was passing through Jericho on another day, he stopped at the base of a tree. A short man named Zacchaeus was perched in the branches, hoping to get a glimpse of Jesus. Jesus looked up into the tree and told Zacchaeus to come down because he was eating at his home tonight. Instead of a glimpse, Zacchaeus got dinner with the Christ! As the townspeople muttered about Jesus dining with a sinner (Zacchaeus was a tax collector), Zacchaeus repented and Jesus proclaimed, "Today salvation has come to this house,

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since he also is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost” (Luke 19:9–10).

Zacchaeus developed a relationship with Jesus all because of a request to dine together. Can you imagine if Jesus had stood at the base of the tree and the two had exchanged greetings before awkwardly conversing about trees and the view and the weather? There would have been no relationship.

Thankfully, Jesus is the ultimate example of getting to the heart of the matter and skipping over things that don't. His purpose is clear, and it is, I believe, also what we all crave: relationship. We were made to connect to one another, and we crave meaningful relationships; but we let our insecurities build a wall between us and others.

It's scary to put ourselves out there, to ask questions or invite others to our homes and into our lives. It's hard to take the time to share what makes us tick, why we live the way we do, or how our past has changed us. It's scary to share who we are, because we can only hope the world loves us and accepts us.

But it's beautiful when we swallow our fear and open ourselves up to finding friends who don't judge, with whom we can share understanding and love.

This is part of what makes the Created for Care Retreats so special. You can tell another mom that you let your child eat a snack thirty minutes before dinner, and she won't judge you. Instead, she will assume your child has known starvation, and a snack is a way to reassure that little heart that in

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your home there will always be enough food. You can bring up the fact that you haven't gotten a sitter in eight months, and instead of assuming you put your children above your marriage, other moms will understand that your child likely has extreme separation or connecting issues. They can understand how you are going through a season of building foundations that weren't established at the beginning of your child's little life.

It's also beautiful to discover a friend who loves the same television show, music, or sport as you do. That person who lights up whenever you talk about football together becomes a safe place, and you progress from discussing college brackets to problems at school or struggles with finding the right church. In the same way, because I found common ground talking movies with my friend, it led to conversations about our shared home state, cultural differences, and later, even race issues in our country. Isn't it incredible how it all starts with a simple connection and then moves into a deeper relationship?

When Mareto greets people with his loud, "Watch out for Diesel 10!" he is sharing what makes him light up! He reminds me of my own desire to connect with others around the things that make me tick. Maybe Mareto is actually the one who knows the "right way" to introduce himself to others. Mareto doesn't have the barriers that urge me to test the waters first, so nothing holds him back from letting people into his world right away.

I want to live like that.



two

“CHRISTMAS IS RUINED!”

I sat on the couch, holding my breath, watching Mareto play with a pile of squishy rubber blocks. It was a warm summer morning, and Mareto was quiet and focused as he placed one block on top of another. I was silent, afraid to move and ruin his process. A little stream of drool began running from the corner of his mouth, a sign that he was really working hard to concentrate.

He reached over to the pile and grabbed another block to place on top of the first two. When he carefully set down that third block to form a small tower, I burst into cheers of joy and excitement as he looked up at me with pride in his eyes. I clapped enthusiastically while tears streamed down my face.

My husband and I had spent three mornings a week for almost a year sitting in a room covered with mats and

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watching the occupational therapist play with our son. As they played, she explained all the steps that our brains take to do something as basic as stacking three blocks.

On this day, Mareto was finally taking those steps.

What we once would have considered effortless and unimpressive was actually the result of hard work, many mistakes, and a great amount of energy. I thought about how much we take for granted, and I realized what a gift it is to feel this level of joy over my child stacking blocks. Then I laughed out loud when Mareto began working on a new tower—this one five blocks high.

Sometimes life can be an absolute mess for a while before things start to come together the way we had hoped. When it doesn't go the way we expected, we have to shift our mind-set to create a new definition of success. Mareto may desperately want a large rectangular block to sit steadily on top of the tiny square block, but no matter how many times he tries, the block will keep toppling over and the tower just won't rise.

Life is exactly like that. Sometimes we have to step back, re-examine, and try again . . . this time reaching for a new block. Maybe it's not the block we originally wanted to use, and we need to apply a different vision to the project. Maybe things are taking longer than we expected, don't look as pretty as we had hoped, or are more difficult than we anticipated. Life doesn't always look the way we want it to.

When this happens, Mareto shows his frustration by loudly lamenting, “Christmas is ruined!” I don't know where

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he got this phrase, and while it is an overly dramatic way to express disappointment, it's also strangely familiar. More times than I care to admit, I've looked at failures in one season of life and felt that my entire story was ruined.

Becoming Mareto's mommy looked nothing like I thought it would. I spent years desperately trying to make a large rectangular block balance steadily on my tiny square block. Everyone else had large rectangles, and I tried to build a tower that looked like theirs.

Month after month became a "try again" month as John and I hoped for a baby. Month after month, then year after year, my failure to conceive was spotlighted by other people's successes. As friends announced pregnancies, I cried in the bathroom. Christmas cards joined their torn envelopes in the trash can, because the smiling faces of happy new parents told a story that reminded me of all I was missing. My Christmases felt ruined.

Friends innocently made jokes about not drinking the water at church because a baby boom seemed to be happening. As if it were that easy. I listened to women talk about their family plans and how many children they wanted, spaced perfectly apart by three years. They didn't know what a luxury it was to believe they held that kind of control over their lives.

It was supposed to be simple, right? It was easy for everyone else, so what was wrong with me?

When the doctors finally told us that it wasn't possible for us to have children, I was completely devastated. My

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heart was broken as my dreams of motherhood fell and shattered at my feet. I silently lashed out at God, at friends, and at myself. I felt like an utter failure.

Thankfully we have a gentle, patient, and gracious God who led me out of my grief. He began to show me that he had never intended for my tower to be built with rectangles. Instead, he had given me a completely different pile of blocks.

When John and I started the adoption journey, it looked a bit like Mareto stacking his blocks: pure concentration and determination. It wasn't always pretty. Many nights we stayed up late poring over paperwork. The timing never worked out the way I hoped, and the waiting was excruciating.

Sometimes when I looked to the left and the right and saw my friends making plans, I wished my journey looked like theirs. Their rounded bellies held their babies safe and secure as they talked about nurseries and names. I cried into my pillow in the dark, hoping our child wasn't hurting or hungry. I breathlessly counted down to court dates as my friends talked about routes to the hospital and birth plans. Everything seemed so effortless for them.

I held onto the assumption that once their babies were born and once Mareto came home we would all be on level playing fields again. We would all be parents caring for babies, and my tower would finally look like everyone else's.

I was wrong.

At first I thought that the trials during Mareto's initial

months home were common to the adoption experience. Then I began to notice that not only were we not on the same path as my friends with biological children, but my friends who had adopted children were living a completely different experience from us.

I felt alone, frustrated, and baffled by the differences in our family. Why couldn't Mareto sit through church with me like all the other babies? When the congregation sang or applauded, why did he cover his ears and cry hysterically? Why did Mareto panic when we tried to get a babysitter to watch him? All the other kids were learning words. Why didn't my son call me "Mama" too? Mothers shared milestones on Facebook, and I cried behind my computer screen.

Then, when Mareto was about eighteen months old, he stopped progressing entirely. He had been sleeping through the night for about six months, but suddenly he wouldn't sleep at all. Night after night we took turns rocking him, but he would scream for hours until finally collapsing around six a.m. He refused all food except plain oatmeal, and the few words he had learned around one year old disappeared as he stopped talking altogether.

Mareto's doctor ran all kinds of tests. I was convinced he had caught some rare bug, and if we could just find it and treat it, the issues would be resolved. I didn't know much about autism, so I had no idea that Mareto was exhibiting several classic signs of regressive autism.

Our quest for answers eventually led us to a speech evaluation, where, after two hours of testing, we learned that

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Mareto’s speech was delayed (which we already knew) and that he would need speech therapy a couple of times a week. Then we were informed that Mareto also showed several red flags for ASD, so they recommended he be evaluated for that as well.

Neither one of us had heard the term *ASD* before, so I asked what it meant.

“Oh!” said one of the therapists. “Autism spectrum disorder.”

The air left my lungs, and I whirled my head around to see John’s reaction. Red patches were rising on his neck and face. He was holding back tears. I was too.

We walked out of the room with our son just moments later and made our way to the car. We sat there in silence and shock. This wasn’t what we’d expected, wasn’t how we’d planned to build our tower. How would this fit into the narrative I had prewritten for us of a meaningful, successful life?

I’m learning that life is often like that. What we see as setbacks or standstills are actually turning points in our story. We see failure, but God sees progress and gently nudges us to keep walking, or crawling, forward—to pick ourselves up and try again and again and again.

WHAT WE SEE
AS SETBACKS OR
STANDSTILLS ARE
ACTUALLY TURNING
POINTS IN OUR STORY.

IT'S OKAY ABOUT IT

We tend to define success in quantitative terms. We want to be able to measure it in order to feel that we have accomplished something. It could be easy to look at Mareto finally stacking his blocks as the moment of success, but what about the months of hard work that preceded that moment? Just because we can't see results doesn't mean we aren't building a successful life one moment, one effort, one step at a time.

I'm learning that God often works that way in our lives—quietly behind the curtain, moving all the parts to create something beautiful and unexpected. But because I don't have his perspective, and I can't see the plan for building my unique life, I complain and worry. Because I can't see ahead to the end, I look to the left and the right and see everyone else's seemingly perfect lives. That's when I begin to feel that our story is falling apart . . . that our Christmas is ruined.

For years I watched families send out announcements, plan baby showers, and set up nurseries. And I thought our life's story was less valuable, less beautiful, and less successful. Sometimes I look around and see friends building houses and buying new cars and sending their children to fancy schools, and I think we're falling behind. I get on my computer to see children reaching milestones, and I glance down at the big brown hands still playing with blocks—and wonder if what we are doing matters . . . if our story is important too.

Expectations can set us up for disappointment and unrealistic ideas of what our journey should look like. If we

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aren't careful, we focus too much on a vision of the American Dream that says anyone who works hard enough can have their version of a perfect life. But the truth is, someone can work as hard as possible at something and never achieve it. There is heartbreak and brokenness hiding behind all that hard work.

Maybe your spouse left or died young, and you find yourself single and wondering how to move forward—how to build a life again. Maybe you're a stay-at-home mom wondering if you should have taken a different life path. Maybe you wonder if your friends with careers have more successful lives. Maybe your life doesn't look like what you dreamed of when you were seven or ten or eighteen years old.

Our paths in life can be frustrating and confusing, but we keep going no matter how messy things look. Our journey might be unpredictable, but we are building the tower and finding our way one block at a time.

So how do we redefine success? We start by taking an eraser to our expectations. My friend Beth says, “Expectations are premeditated resentments.”

I'm a planner by nature. I plan our vacations and schedules, and I even map out my trips to the grocery store. I'm more comfortable with a plan. So when life throws me for a loop, I get frustrated, resentful, and angry—or scared stiff—because I've set myself up for that reaction. It can be tempting to see failure instead of a different version of success.

I'm especially guilty of holding unrealistic expectations

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during the holiday season. Holidays are stressful for most people, and it all goes back to expectations. We place them on ourselves, and others place them on us too. We all want Christmas to look like a Hallmark card.

Sweet children in ruffled pajamas open gifts on the floor by the tree while the adults sip coffee by the fire, smiling at the sounds of ripping paper and delighted squeals. In the kitchen voices softly chat about family over chopped vegetables and simmering gravy. A football game plays in the living room while dads assemble toys. Then the culmination of the day: the Norman Rockwell image of a family sitting down to a feast. Joy and peace and love.

But Christmas usually looks a bit different from that. Mareto spent his first few years completely confused and overwhelmed by the holiday. He didn't understand what to do with the packages placed in his lap, and he kept trying to creep out of the living room to lie down with the dog. There were no quiet afternoon hours of baking and football, and there were more tears than squeals of laughter.

A couple of years ago on Christmas Day, Mareto finally just lost it. After trying to process the hype of the day, he gave up and gave in to an epic meltdown. John disappeared with Mareto for hours as he tried to calm our son, and finally, they wound up in bed under Mareto's weighted blanket with the iPad.

I crept upstairs as dinner was being put on the table and found them both in bed—sweating a little and looking weary. John gave me a tired smile in response when I whispered,

“CHRISTMAS IS RUINED!”

“How’s he doing?” A few minutes later we all made our way downstairs. Mareto lay with the dog while we all ate and enjoyed our dinner with only a few interruptions.

At the end of the day, after several more episodes of crisis management, we went to bed as we do most days—exhausted but happy. There was one big difference between this Christmas and the previous years: We went in with open hands and no expectations. We redefined success and found that Christmas, in fact, wasn’t ruined. It was just our own version of success.

Glennon Doyle Melton, of the popular blog *Momastery*, encourages her readers to throw out the idea of *carpe diem* (seize the day) and instead choose *carpe kairos* (seize the moment).¹ Since when did success mean a perfect day? What if we looked for the good moments in hard days and deemed that successful?

A life that is full of sharp left turns, mistakes, loss, and taking chances is beautiful in its own way. When we walk through different seasons of life we don’t always recognize the foundations we’re building. We don’t see that we are placing that first or second block on the table and that it might be six months, six years, or never that we see the third block of the tower. We forget that our story is a crucial piece of a bigger story.

I open my now-worn, leather-bound pages to Hebrews 11 and find relief:

By faith Abel offered . . .

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By faith Enoch was taken . . .

By faith Noah constructed . . .

By faith Abraham obeyed . . .

By faith Sarah received . . .

By faith Isaac and Jacob blessed . . .

By faith Moses left . . .

And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect. (Hebrews 11:39–40)

When I think about these men and women held up as heroes in the Christian faith, I realize just how imperfect they and their stories were. Their lives often looked messy and unsuccessful. They may have come to the end of the day—to the end of all their days—and looked back, wondering if they had lived a successful life. And if they could have wondered, it only makes sense that we would as well.

We know the end of their stories. We know just how much they mattered, and that's why we can have the courage to keep trying, keep fighting, and keep following our path. We, too, have faith that our story matters.

Recently John had a Monday off work. We were excited to drop the kids off at school and then enjoy an hour or two of peaceful conversation at a local coffee shop. But as we pulled into Mareto's school, the empty parking lot told us his school was closed that day—a fact I had somehow forgotten.

“CHRISTMAS IS RUINED!”

Just like that, our plans for a “perfect” morning flew out the window.

As we drove our daughter to her very open school, I wondered what on earth we would do. John thought we could go to the coffee shop anyway and take Mareto with us, so that’s what we did . . . for four minutes.

We ordered our coffee and pastries, got Mareto a cookie, and handed him the iPad. Within minutes of sitting down, his eyes began darting around the restaurant as he rocked in his seat. Seconds later he was crawling under the table, and from those signs of anxiety and overstimulation, we knew it was time to grab our cups and to-go bags.

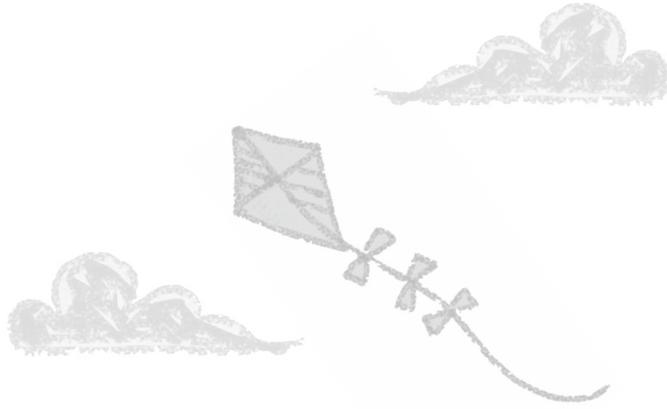
As we drove to the playground to finish our breakfast while Mareto played, John turned to me and said, without a hint of sarcasm, “That went really well!”

I couldn’t stop my laughter.

It was true. We were thrilled with how well Mareto had done. He had lasted four whole minutes at the table. We viewed the morning as a huge success, because we knew how far he’d come.

A successful life is measured in successful days, and successful days are measured in successful moments. Successful moments hide in places where we don’t think to look at first, but they are waiting there to be celebrated.

Christmas isn’t ruined after all. It just looks a little different this year.



three

“YOU’RE MAKING ME FEELINGS”

School can be hard for Mareto. I pick him up every day at three p.m., and some days the conversation during the car ride home goes like this:

“Did you have a good day, buddy?” I’ll ask.

“Yes,” Mareto says distractedly, as he looks at the toys left in his seat that morning at drop off.

I try again. “What did you do at school?”

“Nothing.” This time his response is a little frustrated.

“Who did you play with today?” Maybe this question will bring up a fun memory.

“Mommy, can you give me some privacy? You’re making me feelings.” Mareto’s voice is wobbly, and he’s on the verge of tears.

“YOU’RE MAKING ME FEELINGS”

Now I know it wasn’t a good day, and he’s feeling sad and frustrated and maybe even a little angry about it. I want him to let me in, but he wants privacy and I respect his need for me to stop questioning. We get home and snuggle on the couch—he wants me close by and longs for comfort, but he doesn’t want to talk about it.

Mareto feels things on a grand scale. It goes beyond what is typical for most children his age, and because his feelings overwhelm him, he’s had to learn how to respond to them. At moments I will kneel in front of him to see the emotions playing out across his face, and I feel as though I’m looking into one of those magnifying mirrors in the makeup section of the department store. I feel all those same emotions; I’ve just gotten really good at hiding or downplaying them.

Our culture tends to recoil from tears and negative emotions. I remember an older woman sharing a story with me years ago. She had been married for a long time before her husband passed away, and she missed him terribly. Every year on their wedding anniversary, she had dinner at home and sat alone thinking about the man with whom she had shared a life. It was a sad tradition, but one that she needed. She loved thinking about the life and family they had built together through the years, even though the memories caused her pain because of how much she missed her husband.

One year a well-meaning friend invited her out to dinner on the night of her anniversary. My friend explained why she couldn’t go out that evening and was met with opposition:

“Oh, don’t sit at home feeling sad! Come be with friends and have fun.” My friend wisely refused, but she was met with further confusion and even judgment from the woman who simply wanted to protect her from grief.

We’ve gotten ourselves a bit confused, I think. We’re tempted to view negative emotions as the enemy, and in doing so we ignore our emotions altogether instead of responding to them in a healthy manner. Instead of accepting that we will at times feel sad or angry, we pretend we never feel that way and cover it up with a night out or an extra bowl of ice cream.

A couple of years ago at Christmas, Mareto got a Buzz Lightyear action figure from his aunt and uncle. Of all the toys he opened that Christmas, he was the most excited about Buzz. With the push of a button Buzz’s wings would pop open from his back, and off Mareto would go—running through the house making flying sounds. Another less exciting feature of the Buzz toy was that his wings would pop off entirely from time to time, and it took a bit of strength to get them back on. Mareto found this extremely frustrating.

One day we watched from the kitchen as Buzz’s wings popped off yet again. Mareto let out a growl and, through gritted teeth, yelled, “I get *mad* sometimes!” as he threw Buzz to the ground. Our reaction was mixed: We were thrilled that Mareto had voiced his feelings but not so thrilled that he threw his toy. So I added an item to my list of things to work on with Mareto: responding well to emotions.

That week I wheeled out the chalkboard (also a

“YOU’RE MAKING ME FEELINGS”

Christmas gift) and drew four faces. One was happy, one was excited, one was angry, and one was sad. I wrote the corresponding emotion above each face and had Mareto point them all out. Then we talked about a time when he felt each emotion (excitement at Christmas, happy at the park, sad when Daddy went to work, angry when Buzz’s wings popped off). For as long as he was engaged in the conversation, we talked about how to react to each feeling.

I got to sadness and explained that it’s okay to be sad. When I asked him what he does when he feels sad, Mareto answered, “I really cry.” I told him that crying is good, that it’s okay to sit and cry, and that I would love to comfort him whenever he felt sad. I went on to tell him that a good thing to do when he feels sad is to come get me so I can hold him until he feels better.

Sometimes I don’t follow my own advice very well. I catch myself saying, “It’s okay, don’t cry!” and I remember that I have told Mareto it’s okay to cry. When I feel sadness and tears welling up in my heart and eyes, I take deep breaths and try to swallow them away. I don’t want to cry and feel sad, but stuffing my emotions under a fake smile has never worked well for me.

I was twenty-three years old when I had my second miscarriage. It came just ten months after the first, and I wasn’t ready for it. You are never ready to lose a child. I had just gotten off a roller coaster of emotions and was still worn thin from grieving our first loss. I didn’t want to go through it all over again. I was scared.

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It was a gorgeous July morning, and I sat on my bed looking out at the puffy clouds against a blue sky. The day didn't match my feelings, and I tried to pray through my tears. I remember the void, the raw pain of my heart. I remember feeling the weight of grief, and instead of letting myself give in to the tears filling my eyes, I turned off the valve to my emotions.

I started going through the motions of life as if nothing had happened. When pregnancy announcements or baby shower invitations came in the mail, I refused to cry. I also never smiled over them but simply threw them in the trash. I built a wall of stone around my heart to protect myself from pain, but it also kept out the love and joy and grace that God wanted to shower over me. I was miserable and numb.

Instead of accepting comfort by reaching out, I bottled up everything inside and let anger, bitterness, and resentment grow. Of course, I didn't know that my behavior and denial were self-destructive. I really believed I was protecting my heart.

Then John and I learned that I couldn't carry a child. By my twenty-fourth birthday, everything I thought I ever wanted was broken. There was a crack in the wall I had built, and new pain made its way inside. Soon the walls came crumbling down. I was tired of faking it and tired of pretending life didn't hurt. And in my exhaustion I quit fighting against my grief.

Once the people I loved saw how much I was hurting, they surrounded me with friendship and comfort. I let myself cry

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and feel sad, because something I loved had been taken from me. The loss of my two unborn babies and the dream of carrying a child inside of me were sad, and there was no fixing it. Once I let myself cry and feel grief, I was able to accept—not get over—our losses, then get up and carry on.

Sometimes Mareto asks me to sing him the “sad song.” When he was a couple years old, we downloaded a *Daniel Tiger’s Neighborhood* app to our iPad because he loved the show so much. One of the games is about emotions, and each one gets its own song. The song about sadness tells children that it’s okay to cry and be sad, but also it encourages them that eventually the sad feelings will leave and they’ll feel better again.

Mareto loves that song in particular, and I do too.

In a simple little chorus we find acceptance, validation, and hope. Feeling sad is normal; no one can go through life only feeling joy or excitement. But hope and twinges of joy can exist amid our grief when we believe that someday we won’t hurt as much.

Scripture points to the importance and value of all our emotions as a response to life. There’s an entire book of the Bible titled Lamentations. A lamentation is defined as weeping, or a passionate expression of grief or sorrow—not your polite sniffle into a tissue. To lament something is to outwardly express the full agony felt in your heart, because there are moments in life when no other response is appropriate.

Ecclesiastes 3:4 tells us there is “a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance.” This

tells me that weeping and mourning are just as important as laughing and dancing. To watch Mareto laugh and dance is to come alive—because when Mareto laughs, he laughs so hard he gives himself the hiccups. It's hilarious and refreshing to see a little boy experience joy with his whole body.

Once we figure out that our emotions aren't something to avoid or hide away from the world, we find freedom. We open the door to relationships, because others will see our sorrow and join us, or find our joy contagious. Emotions are an invitation to let others in.

EMOTIONS ARE
AN INVITATION TO
LET OTHERS IN.

I love the Pixar movie *Inside Out*, and I have to confess that I cried several times throughout the film. It's the story of what goes on inside the head of a little girl named Riley. The movie starts with newborn Riley's first memory—the moment she opens her eyes and sees two loving parents smiling over her. We, the viewers, are then zoomed into her mind, where the main character, Joy, emerges from darkness.

Joy is Riley's first and primary emotion for most of her childhood years. She does, of course, have other emotions, and they make up the rest of the cast. When Riley is still a toddler, Joy introduces us to the other four main emotions in the "headquarters" of Riley's mind.

"That's Fear. He's really good at keeping Riley safe.

“YOU’RE MAKING ME FEELINGS”

“This is Disgust. She basically keeps Riley from being poisoned. Physically and socially.

“That’s Anger. He cares very deeply about things being fair.

“And you’ve met Sadness. She . . . well, she . . . I’m not actually sure what she does.”

Joy can find a positive purpose for absolutely every emotion, except sadness. She cannot figure out why Riley would ever need to or should feel sad, so she spends a lot of time trying to keep Sadness away from Riley’s memories and the command center. She just can’t figure her out.

But after a move from Minnesota to San Francisco turns Riley’s world upside-down, Sadness wants to touch—and according to Joy, ruin—many of Riley’s memories. Things begin to fall apart, and Joy and Sadness become unlikely companions in a mission to rescue Riley.

Toward the end of the story Joy and Sadness are separated. Joy pulls out a memory of Riley after a hockey game, and she remembers Sadness telling her how terrible Riley felt in that moment because she had missed what would have been the winning shot of the game. Then Joy watches the memory continue and sees Riley’s parents and teammates surrounding and comforting her, and Joy has an epiphany.

“Sadness . . . Mom and Dad . . . the team. They came to help . . . because of Sadness.”

Sharing our emotions, including sadness, brings people together. Sadness serves a vital purpose for our health and well-being because it’s an honest reaction to the

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disappointing, hard, hurtful, and tragic things we experience. To present any other emotion is a lie.

Last week was Christmas, and we spent the week at my parents' house. Mareto loves going to visit his Grandma, Pap, and their dog, Toby. When the day came for us to return home, Mareto was so disappointed that our amazing vacation had come to an end. The corners of his mouth drooped, and his voice became quiet as he said good-bye to his grandparents.

As the car turned out of the neighborhood and my waving parents disappeared from view, big tears poured down Mareto's cheeks. Through his tears he wailed, "That makes me sad!"

I turned around to comfort him but stopped myself just before uttering the words, "Don't cry. It's okay."

Why shouldn't he cry? He just had a wonderful week with his grandparents, whom he used to see nearly every week when we lived only fifteen minutes away. Now it's a four-hour drive, and we don't get to see them as often. That's sad, and hard.

I reached my hand back to hold his, told him it was okay to cry, and said I was so sorry he felt sad. He cried for a little while, told me several times that he just wanted to go back to Grandma and Pap's house, and eventually he felt better.

But what if he had faked it? What if he had pretended everything was fine when he was crying on the inside? I would have assumed he was okay, and Mareto wouldn't have received the comfort he needed to feel better. Now Mareto

“YOU’RE MAKING ME FEELINGS”

knows he can tell me when he’s sad. He knows that crying is a good and appropriate reaction to hard things.

Temple Grandin, one of the world’s most incredible autism advocates, explains why having healthy and appropriate responses to our emotions is so important:

Boys who cry can work for Google. Boys who trash computers cannot. I once was at a science conference, and I saw a NASA scientist who had just found out that his project was canceled—a project he’d worked on for years. He was maybe sixty-five years old, and you know what? He was crying. And I thought, *Good for him*. That’s why he was able to reach retirement age working in a job he loved.¹

It’s not wrong to be sad, but for some reason we act as though it is. Perhaps if we own and value our own emotions, it will create a domino effect and others will feel safe being open with theirs as well.

Since Mareto is so open and pure with his emotions, I’ve realized the importance of owning mine. He’s taught me that it really is okay to be sad or lonely or angry. Sometimes we just need to lean into our feelings and, in doing so, share a piece of ourselves with those we love.



four

“THE HILL IS VERY TIRED”

It was early summer, and I had an itch to go hiking. My husband is always ready to spend the day in the woods, and he couldn't pack the bags and load us all into the car fast enough. There's a state park about forty-five minutes from our home, so while John drove I looked over the various trails on the park map. My goal was to find a short trail that wouldn't be too tough for the kids, and I found one that looked promising.

We entered the state park and began searching for the trailhead, but it was quickly evident that the map I held in my hands didn't match the actual layout of the park. So we ditched our plan and drove until we found a sign that promised a short hike of just a few miles. We unloaded the kids and our backpacks and started walking.

After about five minutes, we came upon a young couple on their way back. They warned us that the hike was pretty

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steep in places and was about three and a half miles total. They looked at our children as they mentioned these facts, surely thinking that we were slightly crazy for bringing two preschoolers on a hike.

But we pressed on, telling ourselves that we could turn around anytime we wanted to. The kids were having a blast getting dirty, collecting rocks and sticks, and inspecting bugs. The climb got steeper, and we kept going—until suddenly, Mareto halted at my side and let out a sigh.

“What’s up, buddy?” I asked.

“The hill is very tired,” was his weary response.

I followed his gaze to see that he was staring at the trail ahead and the mountain looming in front of us. I asked if he needed a break, but he just shook his head, grabbed a stick, and kept walking. So we all followed suit.

And we just kept walking, stopping occasionally for short breaks. Mareto sometimes tripped and fell, but he always got back up and kept moving. He never begged to go home, and he never gave up. A few times he reached out for our hands, and once he asked for a piggyback ride. But it wasn’t long before he was ready to hike on his own again, to grab patches of moss or to stop and look at a spiderweb.

It was a beautiful and rewarding day. We were all exhausted on the ride home and devoured our dinner that evening. Later that night, after the kids were tucked into bed, John and I marveled at the strength our children had exhibited. We had no idea they were capable of hiking three and a half miles, half of which went up a fairly steep hill.

They'd surprised us, and it reminded me how we sometimes surprise ourselves too.

Mareto had just celebrated his first birthday when we decided to start the adoption process for our second child. It was a simple decision that looked nothing like the months of consideration, prayer, and discussion leading up to our first adoption. One night, I finished rocking Mareto to sleep and laid him in his crib before joining John on the couch. I gave him a sideways glance and said, "I want another baby. I want to adopt again." Then I held my breath and waited.

"Me too. Let's do it!"

It was that easy. The next day we sat down to discuss agencies and emailed our social worker. That was September 2011. We worked as tirelessly for our second child as we had for Mareto. We stayed up late filling out paperwork and completing parenting education classes. I brainstormed new ways to raise funds for each upcoming payment, and as we wondered about who our next little one would be, our hearts grew with love for a still unknown child.

In March 2012, though, amid the throes of this second adoption process, we started noticing significant changes in Mareto. The more obvious signs of autism were beginning to pop up, but we didn't yet recognize them for what they were. We pressed forward with the adoption as we lined up appointments and tests for our son, maintaining a generally positive attitude throughout the spring and summer. We thought we'd find Mareto the help he needed, and things would go back to "normal."

"THE HILL IS VERY TIRED"

On Friday, June 9, I logged onto Facebook after laying Mareto down for his afternoon nap. I mindlessly scrolled through my newsfeed when a status from a fellow adoptive mother caught my eye.

"We have a new baby girl, twenty days old, in Ethiopia, with missing digits and webbed digits, who is in great need of a family right away. If anyone knows of families who have a completed home study and might be interested, please direct them our way."

Something stirred inside of me. My heart began to pound, and I found myself emailing for more information. I texted John, who was at lunch with a friend, and told him to come home as soon as possible. I tried to slow my emotions, knowing that John might not feel the same way about this baby girl whose name we didn't know and whose face we hadn't yet seen. But I couldn't slow down. My heart just knew. She was meant to be ours.

By the time John came home I had already received her file from the adoption agency working to place her. We looked through her information and then scrolled through the twenty-plus pictures on my computer. I looked at John with pleading in my eyes; I would have jumped on a plane that evening if left to my own devices. But, ever the voice of reason, John suggested we take the weekend to discuss, think, and pray. So that's what we did.

By the end of Sunday it was abundantly clear that this stunning, tiny, three-week-old baby girl named Arsema was our daughter. So Monday morning we officially accepted

her referral and gathered our paperwork for the Ethiopian government. We gave Mareto her picture and told him that the baby was his new sister and that she would be home soon. He couldn't speak yet, but his enormous smile told us he understood.

A month later we received a court date of July 30 and booked our flights to Ethiopia. In the midst of all the flurry, we continued securing appointments for Mareto. I spoke with a speech therapy office, who could get us in the day before our plane was to take off—so we took the slot and began packing our suitcases.

The day we walked into Mareto's speech evaluation, we were completely unaware of what the future held. After about two hours, we walked out with the words *autism spectrum disorder* still ringing in our ears. On the car ride home I tried to make sense of what it might mean for our family if Mareto did in fact have autism. As I overanalyzed every moment of the evaluation, John placed a calming hand on my knee and told me to slow down. We would take this day by day . . . but today we needed to finish packing.

By the next afternoon we were on our way to Ethiopia. When I began to worry about Mareto, John once again reminded me that we were going to take life day by day. And that day, we were going to focus on the little girl we were about to meet. So I set my concerns and fear aside and began to think about Arsema. It made for a beautiful week of falling more deeply in love with our new daughter.

When our plane landed back in the States, my heart was

"THE HILL IS VERY TIRED"

full of concern for the daughter I had been forced to leave in Ethiopia while we waited for visa approval from the US Embassy. But since there was nothing we could do about that, our day-to-day once again turned to finding out what was going on inside of Mareto.

We had a new appointment lined up for September 5, and on that day our wonderful little Mareto was officially diagnosed with autism. Three weeks later he celebrated his second birthday, and two days after that, I boarded another plane bound for Ethiopia. It was time to bring our little girl home.

The three weeks between Mareto's diagnosis and bringing Arsema home from Ethiopia were filled with a lot of self-doubt. When we'd first learned about a little girl waiting for a family in a country on the other side of the world, we had no idea that Mareto was three months away from being diagnosed with a lifelong condition that would drastically change our daily life. Would we have made the same choice if we knew? Today the what-if seems unbearable. What if I had known what the future held and therefore held back? We wouldn't have a beautiful, spunky, incredible little girl brightening our lives every single day. No, that alternate ending is too painful to consider for long.

The truth is, at the beginning of this climb, I didn't think I could do it. I was tired and worried that the journey was too difficult and steep, and that I wasn't strong enough to make it. Amid the three weeks between learning Mareto had autism and bringing Arsema home, I cried on my sister's

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living room floor. I told her and my mom that I was so afraid I couldn't parent well. I didn't want to let down Mareto or Arsema, and I wasn't sure I would be enough for them. The future seemed so hard, and I was tired just thinking about it.

It was a painfully honest moment for me—one I think most of us have had at some point in life.

Maybe it's the weight of a ministry that wasn't supposed to be hard. Maybe your church family, whom you love and have dedicated your days to serving, has turned on you and hurt your family. As you walk through the doors of that church each Sunday, maybe you think to yourself, *This is too hard. I don't know if I can do this. I'm tired.*

Perhaps you've just entered your second trimester and your husband left for a twelve-month deployment. It's your first baby, and you always thought you'd get to experience those first days, weeks, and months together. Now you're trying to figure out who can drive you to the hospital or help you in the middle of the night when you're exhausted and afraid. So you sit on the couch in a puddle of tears, missing your husband and thinking, *I'm so tired, and this is so hard. Can I do it?*

Or maybe you are like my beautiful, brave friend Sarah. She gave birth to an adorable little boy named Micah a couple months before Mareto came home. The boys spent their first two years of life as best buddies before we moved away. We started our second adoption process around the same time Sarah announced she was pregnant with their second baby. That July she would learn the sex of the baby at

"THE HILL IS VERY TIRED"

her twenty-week ultrasound, and I secretly hoped it would be a girl so Arsema would have a special friend just like Mareto had Micah.

The day of Sarah's appointment came, and we learned she was expecting a little girl to be named Evie. We also learned Evie wouldn't be with us for long, as she had several conditions incompatible with life outside the womb. All of us who love Sarah and her family were devastated. Over the next sixteen weeks, before Evie was born, I spent many moments on Sarah's couch talking about the fear, exhaustion, and dread she felt. It seemed completely unbearable to carry a child and deliver her into the world only to say good-bye.

But day by day, Sarah woke up and lived life. Then one day Evie came and graced us with her precious presence for four incredible hours before going home to heaven. It was excruciating. Sarah has to live the rest of her days without her daughter, and it hurts. It's hard and some days utterly exhausting, but Sarah is doing it.

We can do more than we think we can.

Life surprises us, and the future looms ahead of us like a giant mountain. It seems insurmountable, and we don't think we have the strength to climb it. We get tired and discouraged.

But we can all take a lesson from Mareto on that trail last summer. We can sigh, express our feelings about the situation, and then take another step. Day by day we keep walking. We will fall down sometimes. Some days will be

messy, and we'll go to bed feeling bruised and beaten up by life. Other days we'll need help. Just as Mareto took our hands for support when he was tired or stumbling, we can reach out to the people who can steady us.

But, most importantly, we need to reach out to our Father, our one true Source of help.

I've found that when I am at my most discouraged and frightened it is because I've forgotten where my power comes from. It's then that I remember a simple verse I memorized long ago: "I can do all things through him who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13).

WHATEVER GOD
HAS CALLED US
TO DO, HE IS ABLE
TO EMPOWER
US TO DO IT.

Whatever God has called us to do, he is able to empower us to do it. We have access to his strength and power if we would just reach out and ask for it.

Maybe I'm not strong enough to parent eight children or work a seventy-hour-a-week job, but that's okay because God hasn't asked that of me. He has asked me to be Mareto and Arsema's mom. And that morning on my sister's living room floor, with our future as a special-needs family looming in front of me, it all seemed more than I had the ability to handle.

Then I got up off the floor and took the first step. I took another step and another. And the day-by-day journey turned

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into months and years, and today I look back and see what a sweet life God is making for us, all because we trusted him.

I see that what I once feared has become my greatest treasure, and I can't imagine life without the two children I hold today. Arsema is Mareto's best friend and greatest cheerleader. She's brought joy and light into every single day. Mareto blossomed when his sister came home, and learning about how he experiences the world has only made us all better people.

Sometimes God takes us on an exhausting, uphill path. We stumble and fall and think we can't do it, but when we get up and take our Father's hand, we find that together we can do more than we ever thought possible.

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