

A Long Time Coming

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By Sara Hiller

Scripture Hebrews 11:1-3, 13-16

Today I have hope. But it was a long time coming. I was born and raised Roman Catholic which included (Photos) baptism, 1st communion, Catholic school grades 6-12. So yes I learned a lot about God's story and religion. My mom was probably the most influential person when it comes to my early introduction to faith. I have a letter she wrote for me in eighth grade. It shows the faith she shared with me. (Photo of MOM)(Read letter) I had many great examples of faith. My Grandfather and Poppop were quiet rocks who lived what they believed. My parish priest Father Tallon who I thought was a little crazy but he was really on fire with faith.

In my late teens I moved away from my faith. My academic studies introduced me to many schools of thought and philosophies. The more I learned the further away I went from my faith. Some of that pulling away had to do with the rules of the religion I was raised in. But truly, I wasn't ready to accept the unexplainable and unprovable parts of God's story. I was a young woman with wings to stretch and spread. It was a time that I didn't think about or understand the importance of God in my life.

I find it sort of funny during those years I believed I was choosing my destiny. That my actions would determine the outcomes in my life. Who needs God when you have all that youthful energy, ego and ambition? But if I am honest with myself there was a lot of hurt, disappointment and sadness in those years. A lot of yearning for lasting happiness. But I persisted in my ways. I wish I had heard Beth Moore's explanation about God's Rules being like guardrails. It would have saved me quite a bit of heartache. Thank you Jill Condon for leading our group to choose that study.

Throughout those years, unknown to me God was always knocking on my door. Continually popping up, poking me, and prodding me. Reminding me of his presence and the relationship I had left behind. A few examples of this are: my college friends who kept inviting me to go to church with them. My friend Jackie who went from no religious experience to a deep and mature faith in her twenties. My travels which led me to cathedrals and humble churches in Europe. My years working with people who openly shared their faith in words and actions. And throughout those years of my life the numerous trips to churches for weddings, baptisms and funerals. I hadn't lost God because each time I visited him, he was patiently waiting for me to strike up a conversation.

The real start of my journey began when I was expecting Bryce (PHOTO) my first child. We were living in the East Falls just west of center city. My soon to be husband wanted to go to church on Sundays. Wow, I hadn't done that in years. So we tried out the local

Presbyterian Church. Much to my surprise a young female minister was preaching. I liked what she said and it resonated with me in that moment. We eventually joined the church. They were warm and welcoming and supportive. My first experience with a non-Roman Catholic Church. The glaring difference to me was the level of acceptance and the mission to serve others. These were qualities that I felt had been missing from my childhood experiences.

So fast forward about 3 years and we moved to our current home. There I am pregnant again at home with a 7 month old and a 2 year old (PHOTO), in a new community, very busy and perpetually tired (I really could have used some God in my life at that time) but like all things with God, his timing is not for us to understand. We occasionally attended our niece's church. All the while I would drive past Woodside watching the construction of the Vineyard and thinking "Big Capital Campaign Fund!" The irony is God was building that for me and my family. When I finally looked for a church near our house I ended up at Woodside. After hearing Doug's first sermon I was ready to come back and hear more. I remember the first Mother's Day testimonial I heard was Susan Sirotta's.

Eventually I got involved in some activities. The first was VBS, I volunteered so Bryce who was 4 could attend. Then I tried out an evening growth group, but it didn't fit my schedule. Doug just keep talking and talking about how important growth groups were "Life changing." But then Linda Marr and Karen Houser started a group on Thursday mornings for moms with young children and "FREE BABYSTTING!" I thought God must want me to go because it was exactly what I needed. It also filled my desire to find some companionship and plain and simple "adult conversation." Thank you Linda and Karen, your desire to reach out and bring together the newer moms in the church worked. You put me in touch with people who are still friends today. (PHOTO) The women in that group have been an inspiration to me over and over. They have shared of themselves with the group and with the church as a whole. I read books that I would have never chosen myself, I asked myself questions about my relationship with God.

I decided to be committed to attending Sunday service and my growth group and made it a priority to show up. Listening to and learning the stories of the women in my growth group was so important. They are truly "sisters loved by Christ." All of us sharing our difficulties, bumps, joys, projects and craziness of our lives. Supporting and encouraging each other.

I could see my relationship was missing something. But what? I could see that there was something just out of my reach that others had. Then, Susan S. brought a booklet called "The Hope of Easter" to our group. It opened with a woman's story. She pinpointed my exact situation. She described it as a 12inch gap between the heart and the mind. And went on to explain that only a leap of faith and total trust would bridge that gap. This defined the problem.

Now I had to close that gap. I did that when I read "Discerning the Voice of God" by Priscilla Shirer. A few chapters into the book she warns IF YOU GO FORWARD then prepare to be held accountable for the truths and teaching she was sharing. I put the book down and

thought about the impact of what she said. Then I walked away and thought about it some more. This was a pretty heavy statement and I wanted to be sure of my commitment. That was my call to trust in God, "the missing ingredient." And in giving that trust it led to the faith I have now. "Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see." Hebrews 11:1. I talk to my kids about believing in things they can't see. Like my love for them. How are they sure I love them? I tell them it is in the many little things which show my love. The same is true with God. I now recognize his grace working in my life. I hope this is discussion that will go with them throughout their lives.

It has taken practice to put this trust in God into my life. Paul's letter to the Philippians explains how I accomplished this. "Do not be anxious about anything but in everything by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." Phil 4:6-7. I read this passage many times during a stressful season in my life. My husband Chuck was searching for a new job. His work environment had become toxic and it was affecting all of us. I remember praying at 2am for God to resolve this terrible situation. I would pray until I fell asleep. Finally allowing God to have the problem.

I have come to love reading the bible which still surprises me. I love the stories and the people. I am excited to share this with my kids and our church's children with the hope of inspiring kids to see them as role models. I know that this is important and will one day affect their walks with Jesus. God instructed us to share in this very way through Moses in the book of Deuteronomy "Fix these words of mine in your hearts and minds; tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Teach them to your children, talking about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates, so that your days and the days of your children may be many in the land that the Lord swore to give to your forefathers." I feel like all those people whose stories I have read give me encouragement. If they could do it so can I.

As for my prayer life, at first I only prayed about big things, sick people, the needs of others, THEN my personal problems. I have finally realized that ALL things in my life need prayer. My to do list for tomorrow, the house renovation project, not getting lost on our way somewhere, what to volunteer my time for, how to talk to my children, why my dog runs away and please God just help me fall asleep it is 3am and I am going to be so tired tomorrow. I have learned that when I really put my trust in him the answers come and things work out peacefully and with certainty. Leaving the scary, the uncertainty and the nerves in the backseat has changed my life.

I am happy to say that God prepared me for my breast cancer diagnosis. He gave me the strength to stay calm and not let the situation rule my life. Understanding that God's timing is perfect helped me to be patient and see my decisions become clear choices. And through this all to have joy in my life. God had the situation in hand. The right doctors, tests and treatment. I just had to say yes. But even bigger and harder was saying yes to friends and the community of Woodside who took care of me in so many ways. Truly Jesus was

ministering through you. It is true that serious health situations affect your faith. For me I live with scars that are a constant reminder that each day is a gift from God.

I could never have conceived how intertwined I am with God now. My wish is for all of you to find that same connection you lives. It was a long time coming, but now I have hope.