

Chapter  
**I Was Made for The Messy In-Between**

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There are so many aspects of life that do not fit into neat, little, black and white boxes. The world is full of gray. Topics like race, socioeconomics, gender, and politics are full of nuance and shades of gray. There are also emotions like grief, doubt, and disbelief that show up in shades of gray. Every person has a story, and every story has its gray. There is a “messy in-between” in life—between black and white; between good and bad, right and wrong,

joy and sorrow, left and right. So much of life happens in between and not on opposite ends.

I have always been caught in that tension—the uncomfortable, middle, “both/and” space. I am a half-black, half-white. I’m a child from a blended family. I was brought up in a sea of all white faces. From the pews at church to the desks in the school to the chairs in my own dining room, I was almost always the only black face. Worshipping with, learning alongside, and living with people who looked nothing like me left me very familiar with not fitting into a box. There were so many pieces of my identity that were both this and that, but I felt it most when it came to matters of race.

In my church, at my school, even in my own family, I didn't look like everybody else and it served as a constant reminder of “You belong...kind of.” While I was both black and white, I was constantly aware that I would never be black enough and certainly never white enough to fit into either of those neat, little boxes. Those boxes walled me in and excluded me at the same time. No label seemed to fit quite right. Even the children’s nursery song said, “Red and yellow, black and white, they are precious in His sight,”

and left me wondering where I fit in the kingdom of God. I was split between two worlds, unseen by both.

Growing up, I rarely saw people who looked like me in leadership, in the pulpit or teaching my classes. There was a noticeable lack of representation, and I was certain that critical decisions were being made without the input of people like that looked like me. I was sure that the world was being shaped in ways that perpetuated those pre-made, ill-fitting boxes instead of making more space in thoughtful, nuanced ways. At times, I desperately wondered if anyone else saw the world through my eyes.

In high school, I began to question if God and the people around me could hold all of my questions and doubts about life. Desperate for answers, I began to study scripture for myself and ask difficult, open-ended questions. I wanted my faith to be my own. I wanted a faith that wasn't afraid to wonder. I wanted to know for myself who God was, and the scripted, easy answers weren't cutting it anymore. I began to read perspectives that were diverse and often contradictory to how I had been raised, and during that time of searching, I found that I was comfortable with the depth and mysteries that accompany faith in God. More importantly, I found a God

who wasn't shaken by my questions. I found a God who walked with me in difficult seasons when answers were unclear. I found a God who didn't run from what was hard or messy. I found a God I could trust. I also began to realize that in a similar way, I could handle doubt, mess, and pain, and I felt a calling to hold that space for others.

At the time that this book is being written, I am the Vice President of Diversity and Inclusive Development at Multnomah University. I am also a wife, pastor, business owner, friend, author, and nonprofit leader. Throughout my life, God has given me opportunity after opportunity to lean into the tough spaces of other people's lives and my own. I work to make more space for more people at even more tables and in more rooms and advocacy has become one of my greatest joys. However, while equity and inclusion are deep passions of mine that are highly important, there is far more to the depths of life than I could have anticipated when I started this journey of advocacy. It was actually through the lens of motherhood that my understanding of advocating in these gray spaces became clear.

In 2009, I married my hilarious, kindhearted husband, Eric, and in 2012, we became pregnant with our

first child, Olivia. We were so ecstatic to become parents. I had always wanted to be a mother, and, suddenly, that dream was coming true. I was high risk but, most of my pregnancy was uneventful until our 26-week appointment. When I was six-months pregnant, we were informed that Olivia had unexpectedly passed away and I needed to induce labor and deliverer her.

In an instant, my life changed. The days after our Olivia's death were a blur. Gone were the days of joyfully dreaming of and planning a future with Olivia. Now, we were trying to cling to God and comprehend the reality of who He was: A loving Father *and* the one who had allowed the greatest pain of our lives. He may not have caused this pain, but He allowed it. My faith was tested and tried. During that season of extreme loss and pain, I was searching for the will of God more than ever. I needed His comfort and His answers. I questioned everything and had to do so from a platform of leadership in my church and the community.

As anyone would, we wanted to turn to our community as we tried to navigate this time. We had just experienced the worst kind of pain and loss, and, unfortunately, so much of what people had to say was

shallow platitudes that fought against the realities of our grief. Too often, people would try to provide a silver lining. There were so many well-intentioned sympathies like, "You can always try again," or "It's not as bad as (fill in the blank)," which crushed us as we tried to navigate our tragedy. People were so uncomfortable with our pain and they grasped at straws to make that suffering make sense.

As we were walking through that time, we experienced the reality that most people do not know how to react to pain or hold space for grief. Most people don't know how to exist in the mess of not having answers. I craved transparency. I needed intimacy. I wasn't asking for answers from the people around me. I needed to know that people could handle my pain without flinching or shying away. I didn't want platitudes or people telling me that "It gets better." I didn't need explanations in cold, theological terms that God was in control. He *was* in control, but that wasn't what I needed to hear in those moments. After Olivia's passing, I vowed to never give platitudes or "silver linings" to people in the depths of their pain.

Our recovery was slow and painful, but in the midst of it, Eric and I experienced the joy of welcoming our second daughter, Eliana Grace, into the world in 2013.

Later, in 2015, we became pregnant again with twins, Addison and Atalie. However, in another devastating turn of events, our daughter, Atalie, passed away shortly after she was born due to a genetic anomaly. Eric and I were forced to walk that familiar path again. Again, we were hit with something we could neither control nor explain. Again, we walked into something that had no easy answers or condolences. Again, a mess of questions and grief and pain was thrust upon us.

Amid our grief, God revealed His heart for what we were going through. I found that I could relate to God the Father in a way that, before the loss of Olivia and Atalie, I couldn't have expected. Our experience with our girls gave us a peek into an aspect of God's heart that many don't experience—the grief over the death of a child. God Himself watched His son die. He identified with us in our pain. Even though God didn't take that suffering away, even though He had allowed this cup to come to us, He was *with* us. He was good even in the midst of incredible loss.

In scripture, I found myself clinging to the life of Job. I connected to him in his extreme devastation. The Lord revealed to me that Job's story is one of ongoing

struggles that didn't just end when God gave him more children, wealth, and possessions. Job had to walk the rest of his life grateful for God's restoring gifts while also remembering the pain of losing everything. He would never forget the betrayal of his close friends and would forever be scarred by the ordeal he endured. He would live in the tension of his great blessing and great loss. Many read Job's story as being neatly tied up with a bow, because he seems to get a happy ending. Many might read my life story in the same way. But I read between the lines of Job's story, knowing that Job would have had to master the art of dependence on God long after his life looked like it had been put back together to those on the outside.

In our tragedy, Eric and I tried to focus on the fact that everything we have and everything we are is a gift from God. Proverbs 3:9-10 reminded us that we should, "Honor the Lord with [our] wealth and with the first fruits of all [our] produce; then [our] barns will be filled with plenty, and [our] vats will be bursting with wine." For us, our literal first fruits—our children—were what we gave. In their wake, we hold two truths in tension: God has blessed us, and God has allowed pain. We can attest that when we honored God instead of cursing him in our time of

devastation, He filled us with more than we could have ever imagined. Like Job, He didn't restore exactly what we lost, *and* He has been so generous with us. While Job did not get back the people and things he originally lost, his relationship with God flourished in the season of testing, and he was honored for his obedience in adversity.

Each year we celebrate Olivia's life on Eliana's birthday since their birthdays were just over a year apart. We also celebrate Atalie's life at Addison's birthday each year. We want to commemorate the bitter and the sweet. We never want to forget what we have or how far we have come. Our pain and grief will never go away, no matter how amazing life is. We have become comfortable in the uncomfortable. We are committed to calling out and recognizing sorrow and blessing, sometimes in the same breath.

Eric and I have two beautiful daughters in our care. While God did give us new children (not replacement children), we never offer those gifts as standards or expectations for how someone else should navigate their grief. Grief and hardships are so personal, and I would never tell someone "It's all going to be okay, so don't be sad". Navigating that in-between space is part of the

journey that each of us goes on in our spiritual development.

We often wrongly think that, in the devastation of life, people are looking for simple answers. What I've found is that, oftentimes, people are actually looking for presence. They need the presence of those that love them and they need to feel the presence of God in their dark place. People need to hear "I'm with you. I'm shaken, too, I don't have any answers but I will sit with you for as long as it takes." I learned that lesson the hard way when we lost our two daughters when, at times, I didn't receive those graces. It was during that season that I learned what type of leader, friend, person, and mother that I wanted to be—one who could teach people by example the value of sitting in the crisis with others because that is a picture of Christ and what He did for me. Before I was cleaned up, before there was a redemption story, He said, "It's okay to not be okay. I'm here."

In my various personal and professional roles, I have countless opportunities to interact with people in the gray areas of their lives. Oftentimes, being present looks like empathy—sitting with people and holding things that are very complex while attempting to understand their

perspectives. When I sit with students or members of our church or my daughters, there isn't always an answer. Sometimes there are no words. Sometimes no solutions come to mind. But I have learned that every person has a story worth hearing and my God-given ability to be present in the gray spaces has equipped me to have the difficult conversations about our differences, inequity, grief, and hardship that people deal with every day. It has prepared me to lead from a place of grace.

I am devoted to cultivating space for people to truly question, struggle, and explore their faith and experience all of the emotions that come with that. Due to my time spent in that space, I trust God to show up and reveal Himself all circumstances. I no longer question if God is good because I have seen it—He is good in all things, even when those things don't make sense to me. My faith was solidified in that uncomfortable space, and I believe that the same can be done for others, especially when they have someone to come beside them and lend their empathetic presence.

As I reflect on my testimony, I am reminded of all of the ways God has brought me through. I am grateful for the ways He has had patience with me and walked with me in

burdensome and complicated times. I am astonished by how far I have come in my confidence in myself because of my confidence in the love that I have for Jesus. I recognize in a thousand tiny ways that I am not who I was. I thank God for the ways He has transformed me over the years when I felt isolated, disconnected, hopeless, and confused. I was forged for more in the refining fire of pain, and, when everything was burned away, I walked away with the knowledge that I am worth more and able to experience so much more joy than I could have imagined.

I live in the strange comfort of knowing that God created me for the spaces that make no sense. I was made to embrace the nuance. I was born to bridge two worlds. I was shaped by the opposites and the in-between, and I was formed in the mystery of how something horrible can produce something beautiful. There is a messy in-between in life, and I was made to exist in that space. By existing in that space, I cultivate space for others to exist there also. There is space for people who don't feel like they have a box to fit in, for whose grief is too much to bear, and for people who are in the margins. I am confident that there is space for them in Christ, because, in Him, there is space for me.

