



Chapter 10 Faithful

Isaiah 35:1-6 CEB

*The desert and the dry land will be glad;
the wilderness will rejoice and blossom like the crocus.
They will burst into bloom,
and rejoice with joy and singing.
They will receive the glory of Lebanon,
the splendor of Carmel and Sharon.
They will see the Lord's glory,
the splendor of our God.
Strengthen the weak hands,
and support the unsteady knees.
Say to those who are panicking:
"Be strong! Don't fear!
Here's your God,
coming with vengeance;
with divine retribution
God will come to save you."
Then the eyes of the blind will be opened,
and the ears of the deaf will be cleared.
Then the lame will leap like the deer,
and the tongue of the speechless will sing.
Waters will spring up in the desert,
and streams in the wilderness.*

Cokesbury Kids started the big research project that transformed our thinking about families and their spiritual formation needs in 2019. I was in the early days of my pregnancy and the world hadn't been ravaged by COVID-19 just yet. It's now November 2022 and I have a two-and-a-half-year-old to remind me every day how much life has changed.

And my, oh my, how life has changed.

At home, parents became parent/teacher/pastor/soccer coach combos all while trying to work full-time from home. Or they had to leave the workforce altogether so they didn't have six full-time roles. Or they worked in a job that couldn't be done from home and asked their parents (their kids' grandparents) to move in and care for the children. All of this led to mass burnout, employee resignations, tons of moves back home, and more political division.

In church work, we had to stop gathering, which disrupted everything for everyone. It made attendance at worship and other programming unpredictable. The volunteers who supported our ministries stepped away when we tested online Sunday school, and many never came back. Families who came once a month pre-COVID now primarily attend online worship services, and we never see them. All the things we knew were already changing changed overnight. Ministry was headed toward a big shift, and the pandemic made it happen faster than we could have predicted.

The world looks so different. And sometimes I have a hard time finding reasons to be hopeful about our future. Maybe you relate to this. I am exhausted. I was in survival mode for at least a year, and then the bounce back to "normal" made it even harder—especially after trying to reopen our ministry the way it was before COVID, only for it to flop. Now it feels like I am working in a constant state of change. I try out something new every month, just throwing things at the wall, hoping something sticks, hoping something resonates with our families and draws support from our congregation.

If being faithful means having hope in our shared future, then I need some help finding my faith.

In recovery, there is a phrase I have found helpful whenever I am looking toward something new or hard for me: "I am willing to be." Maybe I am willing to be open to making amends. Or I am willing to be open to God's will for my life. It's the space between where I am being scared and closed off, and where I am making tough amends or trusting in God's desires for my life. It's a brave place of growth. I think that's what makes it faith—you take a step away from what you know towards the unknown, trusting that God will use it all for good.

Our kids are faithful, bravely believing in a good and glorious future all the time. It's the adults ("it's me, hi, I'm the problem, it's me," as Taylor Swift says) who struggle with faith. In fact, at my first church job, I gave a children's sermon that showed me this is an adult issue. The pastor was giving a sermon that addressed the question, "Is God real?" I had about twenty children join me in front of the congregation. I asked them, "Is God real?" and they all looked at me like I was crazy. They all gave a confident, resounding, "Yes." I asked them how they knew God was real and one child said, "I just know that God is there. I feel him." That simple. I spent two years in seminary trying to figure that answer out. They just have faith.

When I am struggling to have faith, to hope for a good and just future, here is what I do:

- **Breathe.** I recenter into the moment. I try to let go of whatever chaos I've been trying to wrestle into submission and give it over to God. Sometimes that chaos is me.
- **Read Scripture.** Here are a few I love to read when things get hard:
 - Psalm 23
 - Psalm 46
 - Isaiah 2:1-5
 - Isaiah 35:1-6
 - Isaiah 40:1-8
 - Jeremiah 29:10-14
 - Luke 1:46-55
 - Romans 15:13
- **Play with Rowan.** I let myself get immersed in his version of our world. We talk about trains, baby Jesus, his friends, and poop. His wonder is infectious. His wonder helps me stay in the present. It helps me take it all one day at a time.
- **Reach out to a friend.** I have a much easier time believing things will be okay when I tell someone the truth about how I'm feeling and I am embraced in my struggle. This is what churches—the ecclesial body—are supposed to be: a supportive group of people with whom we can freely share our lives. In Acts, the early church went so far as sharing houses, food, and money. I hope you can rely on your church to hold this space for you. If that is not where you feel comfortable getting support, any ole friend will do.
- **Say thank you.** Send a card, write a list, say it out loud, etc. Gratitude is a natural antidepressant (see Chapter 5).
- **Volunteer, march in a protest, and send emails to politicians.** I believe that being a believer means being the hands and feet of Jesus. I believe it means working to make the world better for all living beings. If I start to feel helpless, I get to work.

I am not saying faith should be easy. Feeling hopeful about the future is hard when you have experienced hardship, pain, trauma, neglect, loss, and grief. Feeling hopeful about the future is hard with predictions of economic collapse, devastating temperatures and weather, and mass shootings happening daily. It's really hard to be a human. I pray and work so every child is able to hold on to the innocence that allows them to totally believe in goodness, and I know that we will not make it out of this life unscathed. Jesus didn't, and he is the Son of God, and God, and the best example of faith that humanity has ever had.

But Jesus gave us a vision for the future. He shared these ideas with us through parables, miracles, and teachings. Jesus loved everyone and showed that love through action. He healed people so they could return to their families. He listened to and fed people. He made sure no one was left out. He blessed people and their lives. Jesus gave us examples of what God's kingdom looks like every chance he could. And when I start to get overwhelmed by how far away we are from the vision Jesus gave to his followers, I do what I can with what I have. That's how I show up in faith. That's how our kids learn how to be faithful.

Many of us wonder how we share our Christian faith with the next generation when many of them won't walk through our doors. I know this question has weighed on me. But Jesus didn't sit inside a building waiting for people to come to him. He got up, went out, and lived among his people. He demonstrated faithful living in his everyday life. And that's what teaches our children. Study after study tells us that kids do what we do. If we want kids who practice faith by showing God's love and making a difference in our world, then do it. Do it by loving them, respecting them, and honoring the person God created them to be right now. That's how we make a future we can have faith in.