

My story of faith began very early. I don't even remember how old I was, but I vaguely remember asking Jesus into my heart during bedtime prayers as a child. I then tried to bribe my younger sister with beanie babies into also asking Jesus into her heart, so clearly God still had a lot of work to do.

I grew up with Christian parents, going to church at least twice a week, praying before every meal, and celebrating Jesus at Easter and Christmas (Santa was NOT real in our household). The church we attended all of my growing up years was a relatively well-known (at times controversial), conservative, Reformed Baptist church where the Bible was taken seriously and God was taken seriously. While I grew up with a pretty narrow, sheltered understanding of what it means to follow Jesus, I also grew up knowing that I was loved—by God and by those around me—and that Jesus had died for my sins and to give me new life. I am so thankful for that foundation.

While I had asked Jesus into my heart at a very young age, it wasn't until late elementary school where I first really sought God for myself. I was home alone after dark at an age when that was still new and felt like a big deal. I remember being suddenly gripped with fear, convinced that my whole family (mom, dad, sister) had died in a car crash on their way home. I'm not sure why that idea lodged so viscerally in me, but I know that that moment of fear, panic, and aloneness, caused me to call out to God. I could no longer rely on my parent's faith—if that was gone, I needed to know God myself. In that moment, God flooded me with his peace-giving presence and my faith became personal.

Through middle and high school, I grew a lot in my personal relationship with God and was very active in church. I read through the Bible numerous times, I went on prayer and fasting retreats, I went on missions trips, I was on the youth group leadership team. I had great mentors and friends who dug deep and helped me grow in my faith. For the most part, God was very present and real to me. To anyone looking from the outside, I was a "good" Christian.

However, in early high school, another fear had gripped me. I was plagued by doubts. Was any of it real? Was God even real? This was a very distressing time for me because on one hand, I loved God and had built my whole life around following him. But there was this persistent, nagging voice of doubt in the back of my mind. I prayed and prayed and prayed for deliverance. One night in particular, I remember praying and crying myself to sleep. And when I woke up, miraculously, the doubts were gone. God was fully real and present again. Once again, he had given me the peace of his presence.

In college at Iowa State, I was part of a college ministry where God was doing amazing things. People coming to know Christ, lives being changed, powerful worship and teaching, deep relationships. After having grown up surrounded by Christians, it was exciting to see the joy and transformation in people who were discovering Jesus for the first time. Being surrounded by so many new Christians revealed self-righteousness I had carried in supposedly "knowing the right answers." The new Christians surrounding me were passionate about God, and yet didn't know the doctrines and theological distinctives that I had been taught were so important. This environment challenged me to open my mind to different viewpoints and experiences with God.

After college, I moved back to the Twin Cities and began working as a graphic designer at the church I had grown up in. Omar and I got married, life was going great—but my world was about to erupt. At the church where I had grown up, and where I now worked, the seriousness and strictness of the theology drew some people who were equally strict in lifestyle, including several pastors. In my last couple years of high school, one of these pastors took over the youth departments at the church. I left for college before things really got bad, but I saw the beginning of the changes and heard the stories after I left—my beloved mentor got “transferred” to an administrative role, there were no more games in youth group, dress codes for girls were distributed, and you certainly couldn’t tell anyone if you read Harry Potter. People protested this legalism, but they were quickly silenced and dismissed with black and white theological arguments. By the time I came back after college, tensions among the staff, elders, and pastors about the level of legalism had reached a tipping point. After many clandestine meetings and failed mediations, the pastor agreed to resign. But not without non-disclosure agreements and farewell parties that painted a very different picture of the situation. Naturally, people had questions and somehow I became a spokesperson for what had happened—drawing attacks from this pastor’s loyal followers and causing me to relive painful memories over and over. This was emotionally and spiritually draining. I felt abandoned by the pastors I had trusted and angry at the unnamed hurt and spiritual abuse I had witnessed. It felt like God’s presence had disappeared again.

This time, the journey back was not in a miraculous overnight answer to prayer. It came through years of counseling and taking a break from church involvement. Taking a break from thinking and doing to just sit silently and wait before God. Allowing myself freedom from the burden of being a “good Christian.” Those years felt like a tearing down of the neat and tidy ideas I had built about God and about myself. Slowly, glimpses of God’s presence started re-appearing. The last couple years have felt like the beginning of a rebuilding. Third Way has been an important part of this rebuilding and I am thankful for the love for each other and trust in God that makes this a safe place to wrestle and search.

As I’ve reflected on my faith story, I see God’s faithfulness and loving patience. God has never left me, even though at times it has felt that way. Instead, I believe that each time in my life that God has felt distant, he was calling me to a deeper knowledge of who he is. Too often, I think I have it together, that I have things under control, that I’m doing fine on my own. And often, on the outside, it looks like that is true. I look like a “good Christian.” But the truth is that I desperately need God. The truth is that there is so much outside of my control and there is so much I don’t understand. God’s peace has always met me in my lowest spiritual valleys and his gentle love carries me forward.

I will close my story with the way Paul described the purpose of human life to the scholars and philosophers in Athens in Acts 17:27—that we would seek God, and perhaps feel our way towards him and find him. Yet, God is actually not far from each one of us.