

# introduction

“In lieu of flowers . . .” is the somewhat expected sentence that rounds out an obituary and honors the life being mourned. They are the words you rarely ponder, that is, until they become ones you have to write. For me, it was writing Catherine’s obituary that made me ponder those words.

My six-year-old daughter, Catherine, was one of the first graders lost in the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary. I cringe as I write the words. This event set into motion a journey I could never have fathomed and a healing I could never have predicted.

Maybe you are reading this thinking, *Nope, healing in a world-shattering moment, such as the death of a child, especially one as public as was Sandy Hook Elementary, is just not possible.* World-shattering moments take so many forms: The mama sitting frozen, unmoving, as well-meaning friends flurry around, cleaning up after the reception that followed the funeral. The man sitting in his car, unwilling to go into the house and tell his wife about the visit to the doctor’s office. The lost soul crawling alone into the bed where they were once loved. In the throes of grief and loss, the thoughts are similar, regardless of the town, the time, or the topography. “World shattering” comes in with a fury, sends us tumbling into our own personal crevasse, and leaves us wondering, *How did I get here?* and, *Will my life ever feel normal again?*

## LIVING IN TURBULENT TIMES

The series of events on and following December 14, 2012, changed my life forever and took me through some dark and turbulent waters. And yet I also received the graces I needed to walk through that suffocating darkness and encounter the light of goodness on the other side. What my life would be today had I not lost Catherine is something I ponder at times. Would I have ever learned the hard lesson of choosing to trust when life becomes turbulent? It is not a lesson I wanted to learn—I would give anything to have my daughter back, to see the young woman that fiercely determined and abundantly gentle little girl could have been. However, this is not reality. I can sit right there in that place of want and disappointment that it will never happen, or I can trust there is more. I choose the latter. And so can you.

Life will have turbulence for all of us. “In the world you will have trouble,” Jesus promised (Jn 16:33). It’s a truth you and I have lived: there are troubles and there are trials. These trials and troubles birth ripples that continue well after their initial crash into the pond. I know this, and you probably know this too. So often we are blindsided by our trials and loss, our pain and grief. “You *will* have trouble.” Count on it.

However, trouble is not the only thing we can count upon. We have to keep reading to the end of the verse. Here it is: “In the world you will have trouble, but take courage, *I have conquered the world*” (Jn 16:33; emphasis added).

And here we have it: We will have trouble and we can stand in confidence that the battle is already fought and won. We can be sure of the promise of that peaceable kingdom that God is continually working to bring about, both here and in eternity. It is this promise that makes me wonder why, when the unthinkable touches our lives, we automatically doubt our ability to

recover. We accept the failure before we even give ourselves a fighting chance.

People often say to me that they never could have recovered from a loss as tragic and devastating as what I experienced. I understand where they are coming from. Before losing Catherine, I might have said the same thing to someone sharing their own unspeakable sorrow, their life-altering moment, their *it*. On a purely human level, it is impossible to imagine being able to heal from the devastation of kneeling on the frozen earth beside your baby's grave. However, recovery and healing are not only possible but also *promised* for those who offer their sufferings back to the One who suffered for us.

Not everyone takes that path of healing, it is true. For some, the pain and hurt run so deep, they cannot bear to find a way out. For them, self-protection becomes the priority and staying in the safe zone a necessity; life is reduced to staying as far from the guardrail as possible, to avoid any possibility of crashing through it again. And I get it, I really do. It is all so overwhelming and painful; it is all just dark and deafening, and the thought of finding a way out seems so insurmountable that hands clench and arms fly up in the air in defeat.

If this sounds like you—shutting down and turning away from God, clenching your fists in a futile effort to fend off the darkness, I beg you to keep reading. Discover for yourself that the yawning crevasse in front of you is only a small part of the story. In fact, it is really where the story begins. There is so much more. Yes, you will have trials, but you can also find healing, joy, and victory. At the end of that valley of the shadow, you can arrive at that peaceable kingdom. The promise of redemption is also unmistakable: “Consider it all joy, my brothers, when you encounter various trials, for you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. And let perseverance be perfect,

so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing” (Jas 1:2–4).

Yes, life will be brutal, hard, and dark at times. But if you trust, you too will find this kingdom of peace if you are willing to trust in the One who gave everything to restore our broken world. Because of that sacrifice, we can be confident that we have everything we need, for it is our heavenly Father’s promise, and our heavenly Father’s promises are never broken.

## AN INVITATION

As I write this, more than seven years have passed since Catherine died. In the time and space that mark my unthinkable *it*, I have seen my footing restored in the most unlikely of ways. I have felt God’s gentle hand cup my face and his almighty power move mountains. I have stumbled and fallen, questioned and doubted, praised and given thanks. It has been, at times, messy and raw and, at others, peaceful and still. Through it all, what I have come to understand is that in each season, my trust has grown and my heart has transformed into one that is beautifully raw and susceptible and fiercely strong and courageous.

So, in these moments I invite you, my friend, to come and sit with me in the unexpected places where graces are afforded, peace is found, and hearts are transformed. Where in friendship, embracing grief, authenticity, and vulnerability, hearts are healed with his soothing balm of love, and our footing can be restored in places and in ways we never could have fathomed.

My hope is that as we sit together, in some way our heavenly Father will speak to you, and that—just as I found hope in the simple and unexpected places—you will find your hope and trust renewed. Whatever your story may be, I pray you can cling to the entirety of the promise offered: you will find victory.

## CHAPTER 1

# *a kingdom destroyed: the first week*

I picked up the phone, dialed the number, and heard a well-trained voice on the other end of the line: “Thank you for calling Picture People. How may I help you?”

I was unable to speak. The words just wouldn’t come. I slid down the dining room wall and sat on the floor, chin resting on my knees.

“Hello?” the voice on the other end of the line broke the silence.

I wanted so desperately to explain why I was calling—the last thing I wanted was to have to call back and explain why we had missed our appointment. In the past twenty-four hours alone I had already grown tired of saying words I will utter for the rest of my life, words to convey to this person I did not know how,

in a split second, without any notice, my life had imploded and my family—the ones who had been the intended recipients of this picture—had spent the previous day desperately traversing the East Coast trying to get to me.

I desperately wanted to whisper, “Can you tell me this is not happening? And if you cannot, could you just make it all go away?” Maybe this total stranger had a magic wand and, with a wave, could change all of this so we could all make a mad scramble and arrive at our appointment on time.

I wanted to say, “My baby girl was at the school yesterday. She was one of the reasons for the news splattered across screens.” In a few hours that receptionist would read Catherine’s name among those of the victims, and if I said what I wanted to say, she would have probably gone home and said to her family that mine was supposed to have their picture taken. But she wouldn’t ever have a chance to know Catherine, tell her to smile or tilt her head, or see her light up the room with her giggle.

In the span of twenty-four hours, life had taken a sharp left turn, had barreled through the guardrails, and was now free-falling into a deep crevasse whose bottom was nowhere in sight. And so, I sat there on the floor, clutching the phone and refusing to get up until the Picture People receptionist could assure me it was all a big mistake. “Come on in, even if you’re a little late,” I wanted her to say to me. “The picture will be perfect.”

But that would have been a lie. It would never be “perfect” again.

## DECEMBER 14, 2012

It had all started out as every Friday did. We had our routine. It was just the three of us that week: my kids, Freddy and Catherine, and me. We had been occupied with all the busyness that pretty much defined life with a third and first grader. This week

had been marked by Catherine's monthly Girl Scout meeting on Thursday. She had excitedly donned her Daisy smock and sat crisscross in the friends' circle, barely able to contain her excitement about the craft staged on the table in the back of the room. They were going to be making snow globes, and she had her sights on the tiny plastic deer that would be tucked under the equally tiny flocked pine tree. When we got home after the meeting, she had proudly placed her snow globe on her desk—the perfect Christmas decoration, she told me while jingling her new boots with excitement. (She had squealed when she first saw that her new bootlaces had small jingle bells on the ends.)

Over breakfast that Friday morning, we talked about the day ahead, excitement building as they realized their dad, “Da,” would be home that night. Matt would be making his way across the Atlantic after a weeklong overseas business trip. I made my own mental notes about what I would need to get done even as I felt relieved we would finally all be in the same place. As my little ones chatted, I found myself closing my eyes and thanking God for the life and babies he had given me: beautiful children, a house with rockers on the porch, and a yellow lab lying watch. I was living the proverbial “perfect life.”

Even when things got a little messy, I loved our life. Like the night before, we had hustled our way home from Catherine's Girl Scout meeting and gathered at the kitchen island to roll out the dough for our annual gingerbread house. Flour flew as I held my breath, watching the kids maneuver the pizza cutter in what they assured me were straight lines. The banter and their laughter that went from giggle to belly laughing in a split second made for one of the crazy good nights where flour had flown its course and the gingerbread stayed in the oven far too long because I took my time tucking my babies into bed. And the thing is, I didn't worry about a burned gingerbread house. And that was a first. Years before I would have fretted and flopped around the kitchen

in an attempt to create the perfect golden hue of a gingerbread house. But on this night, the night before my baby girl died, I just settled into the sofa and called my parents.

My father answered, and he laughed as I told him about the pizza cutter and the flour and the rock-hard walls of the burned gingerbread house—hardly Facebook worthy, I told him, but for the first time in my life, I did not care. The gingerbread house would be perfectly overdone and lopsided—and I was fine with that. And with that, there was a pause where I could almost hear his smile form as he said three simple words: “Good for you.” It was as if I had just earned a badge for some life lesson I had just passed.

The next morning I bundled up my babies and sent them off, Catherine with her jingle bell boots and Freddy chomping at the bit to tell his friends that a pizza cutter does more than cut pizza. I sighed heavily, wondering what the teachers would think about the pizza cutter and knowing the weekend would be packed with all that screamed Christmas, which was now less than two weeks away. Top of my priority list: getting the perfect picture of my babies at Picture People. The. All. Important. Picture. It would be the Christmas gift I would wrap for my family, and I had lost sleep over it. I am ashamed to admit—I actually tossed and turned over a 5 x 7 picture. I actually wondered if the picture would be enough because I desperately wanted it to be enough. I wanted this to be the picture that would make someone visiting my family stop in their tracks and actually pick up the frame, captivated by just how beautiful my babies are. I actually struggled with what they should wear and whether they should match. I desperately wanted this gift to express the love and care intended to the recipients.

With the kids shuffling down the road and onto the bus, I now made my way through my morning ritual. As I had always done, I chatted with a phone receiver in the crook of my neck as I



made beds, swept floors, and scrubbed counters. When Caller ID interrupted the well-rehearsed dance, I switched over to accept the incoming call. I expected it to be the typical morning check-in from my friend. The panic in her voice instantly told me this was not just the regular “What are you doing today?” call. This was a “There is something and everything terribly wrong” call.

There was no hello, no idle chitchat. All she said was, “You should get to the school.” It was all she had to say. Something was terribly wrong.

In a frenzy, I pulled up my jeans and tugged a sweatshirt over my head. “Oh my God, help me,” I whispered. I had no idea what had happened, and I went from calm to choppy to scattered all at once and back again, managing only to repeat over and over, “Oh God, help me.” Every fiber of my being told me something, and everything, was terribly wrong. I grabbed my purse, backed out of the drive, and made my way to the school.

The children had been taught, in the event of an emergency, to gather at the firehouse that sat at the end of the school’s drive. They were proficient at making the short walk every single time there was a fire drill, only today was not a drill. The police cars, fire trucks, and ambulances, lined up like matchbox cars, assured me whatever had happened was furthest from a drill. Just past the firehouse, the drive had been blocked, forcing parents, caregivers, and onlookers to gather in the parking lot. Inside the firehouse, teachers pulled their classes in close. Among the makeshift clusters of students and teachers, I spotted Freddy and his third grade class. I made my way through a mass of trembling children and dropped to my knees when I got to him. Freddy, my strong one, normally squares his shoulders when things get scary, as if to let me know I don’t need to worry, that he is not affected.

Today was different. Today he looked petrified. As I bent down face-to-face with my son, his terrified blue eyes pooled

as his shaking voice spoke truth to my fears: “Mama, I can’t find her.” Before the words could close the space between us, I gathered him close and, his heart next to mine, time blurred.

## LIVING IN THE MOMENT OF *IT*

Isn’t that how it is for any of us who have traversed a path that leads through darkness and pain that is deep and raw? Is there not that unspeakable, inescapable moment that becomes an eternal part of your vocabulary, always cleaving life into “before” and “after”? It’s the event you are forced to say over and over again. It is the moment you wish had never occurred and whose memory will never fade because it is a part of your story. Whether you want to acknowledge it or not, *it*, whatever it might be, is the only way when you are telling your story to make “before” or “after” make sense.

*It* is the moment when life’s storm clouds that had been gathering in the distance converge with a force so great they clap a thunderous boom and deliver *its* initiating blow. In that instant, the shock and awe from *its* force bring your world to a grinding halt.

If you really stop and consider when your own *it* happened, you know that split second well—when something in your gut told you, “No, not at all is *it* all right.” It is the shift of the eye and hesitation before the doctor delivers the diagnosis or when, after a lifetime of loving, a lover inhales deeply to announce they are leaving, or when a child, now grown, looks into their elderly parent’s face and sighs deeply at the blank stare they see. For me, it was when I looked into those pooling blue eyes and heard a shaking voice say, “Mama, I can’t find her.”

And once it happens, you inhale deep and slow, not sure you remember what to do next because your lungs feel as if they