

# ONE

# ENCOUNTER

So he came to a town of Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of land that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there. Jesus, tired from his journey, sat down there at the well. It was about noon.

—John 4:5–6

I thought I could be a nun. My junior year of high school I had an encounter with Jesus that left me with a great desire to serve him more. I went with a group of friends to a conference in Steubenville, Ohio, at Franciscan University. There were throngs of teenagers worshipping and praising God and the Holy Spirit descended upon us all. I was never the same again.

I came home from that conference with a desire to really follow God, to try to personally live in a way that was pleasing to him.

And then, the summer before my senior year I spent a month serving with the Missionaries of Charity, Mother Teresa's nuns, in the remote mountains of Kentucky. That whole summer I secretly hoped the sisters would tell me I was called to be one of them.

They did not.

Several years later, after my second year of college, I spent another summer with the sisters. This time we were in Harlem, New York, and this time I really meant it—I spent time in the order's chapel begging Jesus to show me his will for my life. I

loved him so much and was more than willing to give everything to serve his kingdom. It was the strangest thing—despite pouring my heart out to Jesus, despite begging him to take it all, I knew clearly my call was not to the religious life. I was mystified. Here I was, willing to give everything to God, and he didn't seem to want it.

I couldn't shake the feeling that God had his special few whom he picked for service, and the rest of us were off the hook—perhaps even unremarkable. Marriage, in my mind, would be a different kind of challenge from the life of a nun, harder in many ways (after twenty-seven years of marriage this now makes me laugh, though I'm not sure why) but less extraordinary. I wanted something extraordinary, and that didn't seem to be God's plan for my life.

Being married and having a family seemed quite normal, very ordinary. Would God really use my life as a wife and mother for anything grand? Based on the marriages I had seen in books, films, and real life, marriage was not how I would define *adventurous*. But I accepted God's answer, equal parts disappointed and relieved to not hear that call, because I realized I was in love. And I had tried.

I had gone to serve the sisters with a group of other college students from my neighborhood. Later that summer, after God had not called me to religious life despite my prayers in the chapel, Paul, another volunteer with the Missionaries of Charity, became my boyfriend. He and I dated for two years, almost all long-distance, because he had just finished law school that summer and then left to work in Mexico City, while I had college to finish. We got married a few months after my graduation.

Two years after that, we had our first child, Ethan, who was (of course) the most perfect, amazing being I had ever laid eyes on. Family life was a blessing—not what I would call a grand adventure but pretty awesome just the same.

After Ethan was born, to my great surprise, all I wanted to do was stay home and do right by that boy. Up until the day he was born, I assured my boss at the newspaper that I would be back. I lasted six weeks back in the office after returning from maternity leave before turning in my notice and heading home to care for my son.

Newborn babies have a way of taking up enough time to make it hard to notice what you're missing. I was engrossed in changing his diapers and feeding him and getting myself a quick shower with my five minutes to spare. The highlight of my day was gathering my wits about me enough to load him up in a stroller and take a walk with friends.

Twenty-one months after Ethan's birth, Paul and I had another boy, Elliott, and that threw me even further into the thick of it. Another twenty-one months later, we had another son, Charles. And twenty-one months after that—another boy, August! Wow! We were pros at this.

Some seasons you are so busy trying to survive, you really don't have time to dream of anything else. With four children under six, I felt blessed and heroic to make it through the day. I got in a nice groove with the caring and feeding of boys, and that was enough. Dreams of serving God as a nun were long gone, and other dreams were on hold in the joy and frenzy of each day.

After our fourth son in five years, we figured out how to postpone having another baby using natural family planning. I started meeting regularly with an instructor who helped me understand how to use NFP to not get pregnant. Each month Paul and I would consider whether we were ready to add another baby to the mix and used the skills we learned from NFP to say, "No, we are not ready right now."

This was very important for my mental health. Life felt really hard by now—really good but very challenging. I remember one day trying to pull out of the driveway; by the time we made it to the street, every single person in the car was crying: the baby, the

toddler, the two preschoolers, and me. I was just barely making it through each good but super challenging day. It was a relief to have a baby turn one without finding out I was pregnant again a few weeks later. When our fourth son turned three and no new babies were on the way, I began to enjoy some adventures outside of just keeping my four boys alive.

For two years, I did a little volunteer work. It wasn't a lot, but it felt good to reconcile who I was now with who I used to be before this intense season. Volunteering got me thinking again about my hopes and dreams and what I might one day accomplish. One day, as I was driving down the highway in our Suburban, Elton John's "Tiny Dancer" came on the radio and brought me back, in that magical way music does. Someone else was alive under the spit-up stains and mom jeans, and it was strange to remember her. Somehow this song transported me to my years as a college student, sitting in a café reading the *New York Times* and getting ready for my next class. It reminded me of a season when I could sit still long enough to drink in the world around me and think about what I had to offer that world.

Now my days were filled with keeping small children safe, fed, and happy, tidying up our home and switching over the laundry. There was no time to drink in the world around me, just a frantic effort to keep up with it. And yet it was strange: the girl I once was, the one I remembered when I heard that song, was still there—and she was amazed by how fulfilling my current life actually was. It wasn't what I had imagined would bring me joy, and yet it did.

As Augie turned five, we decided to try for "one last baby." I wasn't ready to be done raising young kids, and I felt like someone was missing from our lives. When Henry joined our family, I thought it would be really easy, like normal life with a new little mascot.

That's not how it went. Henry was born in the exact middle of summertime in Georgia, which isn't for wimps. And by now

I had boys ages five, seven, nine, and ten. Life was nuts. I was so exhausted after I gave birth to Henry that the sight of my tired eyeballs freaked out my friend Mollie, who was due to give birth a few weeks later. She admitted to me a few years later that “What happened to her, and how can I avoid that?” was her reaction upon seeing me.

Somehow giving birth after a five-year break was not as easy as I thought it would be. There was a new baby to care for along with four older brothers who had routines and commitments and lots of places to go. It was really tough for a while, and then we adjusted and life felt more manageable.

Five boys felt like a nice number, an embarrassment of riches, really. And then, three years later, God sent us one last child—a baby girl, Isabel. What a blessing! But it was during this time that I experienced a bit of a “reset”—going from the freedom I was starting to enjoy as my oldest boys got bigger back into survival mode with two younger children. I was back to trying to make it through the day and stay sane. There would be time for adventure and fun down the road. That’s not where I was right then.

We made it through, putting one foot in front of the other, trusting in God’s grace and his promises, and believing that even when I felt like I was drowning I always seemed to have one tip of one nostril just barely above water.

I’ll take it. It was a long season of survival, but I don’t remember feeling too distraught about what I was missing out on. The outside world moved too fast for me, and I was happy, at this point of motherhood, to keep my own little world in order. That was plenty. And I was totally cool with that. Until I wasn’t.

When Isabel was four, we went to see the Disney hit *Moana* for some kind of a party; I sat away from Isabel, who was with a few other little girls, and it gave me the feeling of being at the movie by myself.

Moana, as I'm sure you know, is a voyager princess who saves her people by boarding a boat, leaving their small island, and heading out into the vast unknown. She is alone on her craft (with the requisite Disney animal sidekicks) and free to explore the ocean and her heart and desire for adventure and escape. She felt trapped on her own island, restless for some unknown reason, with a vision to leave and find all the answers her people desperately needed. We discover later that her wanderlust is at the core of who she is and who her people were before they stopped leaving their small island to explore the world around them.

They were voyagers. Adventure was built into their DNA.

I sat there in the dark theater fighting back sobs. Not tiny little tears but ugly sobs that would have caused a scene. I felt jealousy and a little angry. Also, I felt trapped. Who knew a Disney princess movie could stir up such angst! While Isabel enjoyed the music and dialogue, her mother sat one row behind her having a complete breakdown. An emotional meltdown. An existential crisis.

For days afterward, I thought about this movie, wrestling with feelings that seemed to come out of nowhere. *I really do love my life*, I thought, *so why am I jealous of a cartoon character who gets to ride a boat across the ocean?*

Eventually I began to connect the dots. I loved my life, but I was also in an intense season. Even though I no longer had multiple babies in diapers, no more constant feedings like before, I had six children who had a lot of needs. One preschooler, a kindergartner, and four big boys who had homework and practice schedules and so many activities for me to keep track of. I was constantly in motion but also had very limited mobility. I wasn't free to hop into any vehicle—car, boat, or even a small raft—unless I checked it out with multiple parties. I couldn't just “go” anywhere, and the stark contrast between seeing someone

living her dreams and the life I was living felt like switching the filter from vivid color to black and white.

Life can be a grind, and I was in the thick of it. I just hadn't really noticed up until that moment.

I wasn't unhappy in life. That was the crazy part. I found great fulfillment in doing things like laundry and caring for and feeding my children. These were the duties I had to take care of right now, and I was still happy with my decision after having Ethan to give up my job at the local newspaper—and my dreams of being an award-winning reporter—to stay home with my family.

But in the days after watching *Moana*, I was emotional, agitated, and confused. Before that day in the theater, I hadn't been fantasizing about running away. Don't get me wrong, I'd had fantasies of escaping. Once, years before, my friend Susie and I, both postpartum with multiple babies in close succession, had made a mostly joking plan to get an apartment together where our husbands could (occasionally) visit us. Both of us, just barely staying afloat in life, needed a break. We made it through, but it was nice to think, here and there, about running away.

That's not where I was anymore, though. Even when life felt intense, I was more or less at peace. I didn't want to escape. I was trucking along just fine.

But the movie made me realize that I felt like my life was on hold. I really loved what I had going on, but now I knew there had to be more—whatever that more might be. I entered a waiting season, though waiting for what I couldn't be sure. I continued doing the things that needed doing but in a new awareness that there was more to life than laundry and carpoos. My life was on some kind of pause, and even though I was happy with "today," I was aware that I was also anxiously waiting for "tomorrow."

Each of us has a deep thirst for something more that helps us push past a willingness to be mediocre. It's a desire to do

something great with our lives. The challenge is figuring out what that great thing is.

Before watching *Moana*, I had started to make peace with the idea that the “great thing” I was hoping for in my life would be happening down the road; I was learning to be at peace in the here and now. I would hear the inspiring words of Jeremiah 29:11, a promise that God has great plans for each one of his people, and assume it would need to wait until I had a little more mobility and fewer basketball games to attend. A little more money and fewer small children to chase. A little more adventure, fewer obligations.

Years before all this, when my older kids were small, I had come across an incredibly inspiring quote from St. John Paul II from his address at World Youth Day in 2000: “It is Jesus in fact that you seek when you dream of happiness; he is waiting for you when nothing else you find satisfies you; he is the beauty to which you are so attracted; it is he who provokes you with that thirst for fullness that will not let you settle for compromise; it is he who urges you to shed the masks of a false life; it is he who reads in your hearts your most genuine choices, the choices that others try to stifle.”<sup>1</sup> It hits at the heart of this deep desire for adventure and greatness, the very core of our being that yearns for something “more”—even when we can’t articulate what that is.

That restless feeling within us is placed there by Jesus, according to the Holy Father. Because of him, we are inspired by tales of adventure, of living life with reckless abandon and feeling free to be who we are and not trapped by the confines of this world, this life!

But when I first read the quote, I thought it meant that Jesus gave me a thirst for meaningful adventure. When I first read that quote, I thought about all the things I was going to do—for God!—when the season was right. I focused on all the talents God had given me, all the desires I had deep within me, and

formulated a plan for using those abilities for God's glory. Traveling, for Jesus! Speaking at retreats, for Jesus! Writing books, writing a newspaper column, cohosting a talk show—all for him.

And you know what? A lot of people say you can do all that now—whatever you dream of doing, you can and should be doing that very thing right now. Regardless of what your family life looks like, you need to go after your dreams using your God-given abilities. That, they say, is where real happiness will come from: doing what your heart tells you you should and living freely. Why wait?

When I first read that quote from St. John Paul II, I planned all the meaningful adventures I would have while still focusing on family life. Family life and adventure could go together, but not at the same time. Family life was an adventure to be sure. But deep within me I knew there was more, later. Now? After crying over *Moana*? I could not deny the feeling of wanting more, now. Did I need to wait to have that? Would my longing be resolved when I went after my dreams? If I decided to wait, would that restlessness be satiated when I was finally at a place in my life where I could follow my personal dreams (the non-stay-at-home-mama dreams) to start living a life that felt a bit bigger than where I was right this minute?

But we must learn to see that longing for what it is. The deep adventure Jesus has in mind for us is so much richer than a single amazing trip, a new business, or setting out on a new career path. It's not about waiting until the children are bigger so you can go have some fun already. I'm all about having fun, but focusing only on fun sells us incredibly short.

This deep adventure is bigger than following your heart and going after your dreams and finding your "true purpose." Do you see how many times I used the word *your* in that sentence? When I put myself in the center of the universe, I'm going to have a limited view of what's possible, one that's way smaller than my reality can be. Also, I'm going to end up really bored.

But more on that later.

Let me back up a little bit, to a time when I thought I was starting to experience the “more,” the “greatness,” the beginning of my “real” life. It’s a tale of adventure and blessings and living the life I had imagined one day I might live.

Two years before *Moana*, I was invited with other writers on a trip to El Salvador to observe the work of an international charity and the charity’s impact on the people it served. It was indeed life changing. We spent the week traveling to different parts of the area surrounding Santa Ana, visiting neighborhoods crowded onto the side of hills and homes nestled deep within a forest. One day, about twenty of the volunteers and workers traveled down a mountain in the back of a truck. As we made turns down the winding, washed-out dirt road, everyone had to lean to the same side of the truck to ensure it didn’t tip over. South American foliage shaded us. Off in the distance was a volcano.

It was mind-blowing. It was glorious. It was way better than regular life.

Each night, we writers would return to base camp and write about the lives we saw being changed that day because of this charitable organization, and my writing helped spread the news about the work the organization did. It allowed more people to get sponsored through the charity, which meant more lives would be changed.

And then, just like that, the trip ended and I was back at home. It was early summer; all six of my kids were home from school. I was back to the hot and muggy Georgia summer, daily swim team carpool, and cleaning the house and mountains of laundry.

One morning soon after my return, while leaning over in front of the washing machine, turning a boy’s dirty basketball sock right side out, I cried out to God in complaint. *This*, I declared in my heart, *this is not the best use of my gifts*.