

I Forgot—Church Is Hard

emilycolson.com/2016/02/05/i-forgot-church-is-hard/

February 5, 2016

God has a plan for His church, and no matter how challenging, His plan includes us.



One night at church, I lost 190 pounds. Fortunately, I found all of it in the toddler room. There was my hulk of a son, hunched over the Brio train table, next to a little child who looked like a garden gnome beside Max. A kindly volunteer was standing over my son, looking a little baffled and holding a Brio bridge that had clearly been ripped off the table King Kong style. “I’ll take that,” I said, knowing full well that my son works quickly when redesigning a train track, and that the nails protruding from the bottom of the bridge were really no match for my 25 year old.

I tucked the bridge under my arm, and Max was off again, tearing down the hall toward the sanctuary. I chased after him, hoping not to lose him this time, praying his anxiety and bulk would not flatten anyone who might stray into his path. This night just wasn’t working—church was different. The lights in the lobby were dimmed. The service had a slower pace. New people had come in droves filling the sanctuary to its limit. There was even a live goat. No, we don’t do animal sacrifices at our church, at least not any more. “Billy” was part of the play being acted out for our Christmas Eve service.

I tried to make Max laugh by pointing to the life-sized camel strutting through the lobby, with two pairs of khaki pants visible from beneath. But Max ran into the stairwell, dropped to the floor like a stuntman, and pressed his fingers over his ears and eyes to block out the world. Every muscle ached as I chased after him. “You should have worn a pedometer, Emily,” someone smiled, “just to see how many steps you’ve taken tonight.” I laughed and called back, “I’m not sure it can count that high.”

After an hour of our autism marathon, we could see the music team moving onto the stage. The service was coming

to a close. The Hallelujah Chorus began playing in my head, and certainly in Max's head too. Max threw open the doors of the sanctuary and ran toward his usual spot, the raised platform beside the sound booth. He climbed the four steps and stood above the congregation, the way he does at the end of every service on Sunday mornings. I could almost see his anxiety fall away. The words appeared on the screen behind the music team, and the congregation began to sing Silent Night.

I stood several steps below Max, and closed my eyes. All I needed was a minute to rest. To remember that God is God, that Jesus came. That even when I miss the service, run ragged through the church trying to calm Max, God is still who He says he is.

And then I remembered something else—church is hard. The thought struck me. Just making these slight variations in our church, minor deviations from a normal Sunday morning service, is like starting all over again. I began to think about everything Max has worked to overcome on Sunday mornings—the sights and sounds and smells, the lights that make a “humming sound” as he says. Max is a greeter, he stacks chairs and vacuums the floor, he sits at the welcome center during the service where he reads Scripture and fills out the sermon worksheet just like everyone else. It all looks so easy now, but these are hard-fought victories. A few years ago Gary and Marsha stepped in to help. They don't come to church to serve Max; they come to church to serve God with Max. And when our congregation sings at the end of the service, the three of them come into the sanctuary together like the Mod Squad. Max stands on this very spot beside the sound booth, leaping into the air and praising God with the kind of unbridled joy that makes everyone glad they showed up.

I kept my eyes closed as I stood on the step just below my 190-pound son. Suddenly I heard Max's voice booming from behind me. I cringed for a moment, squeezing my eyes tightly shut, bracing myself for more of the unpredictability of autism. And then I heard singing. It was Max, his sweet voice strong and sure, and blending with all the other voices in the church as one,

“Glories stream from heaven afar

Heavenly hosts sing Alleluia!

Christ the Savior is born

Christ the Savior is born

By Emily Colson

