

4

Covenant

Mommy Always Comes Back after Nap and Snack

When Matthew was younger, he went through a period of not wanting to go to preschool. He'd get weepy when Scott or I dropped him off and would hug the parental leg like a barnacle stuck to a rock. "I don't want to go! I want to stay with you!" he'd say with tears in his voice, and every time it would rip my heart out by the roots.

"But you'll have fun!" I'd say. "There are so many nice kids here! You can play outside on the playground!" I'd become a one-woman PR campaign for the preschool, desperately touting its extracurricular activities and robust social life.

But when a preschooler is in that kind of a missing-Mommy mind-set, you could promise him a personal audience with the Cat in the Hat, and the wails would continue unabated.

I had to come up with a mantra. "Mommy will pick you up after nap and snack," I'd say. I'd repeat that at multiple times of the day, hoping to make the comforting words stick in his head. "Mommy always comes after nap and snack," I'd tell him as the car neared the preschool, and he'd get a little light in his eyes, a slight softening

of his crumpled face, and it seemed to help him. He knew what to expect; he knew that the day had a routine, regular as clockwork. And he knew that, no matter what, Mommy would come back after nap and snack.

And I always did.



Years ago, when I was engaged and planning the wedding, the enormity of what I was about to do started to sink in. *Wait a second: I am about to pledge the rest of my life to this relationship. I am about to stand up before God and the world and promise to love my husband through richer and poorer, for better and for worse, until we are parted by death.* I had no prior experience of making a promise like that. The closest I'd ever come to making a Big Life Decision was picking a college, which seemed like an enormous commitment at the age of eighteen—but we all know that you divorce a college after four years. Though I loved Scott and had no doubt that I'd chosen the right guy, the mere fact of making that epic a promise gave me pause.

“This is wild,” I told a much older colleague of mine one day. “I’m really not used to this. Getting married will be the first promise I’ve ever made that I can’t undo.”

She smiled with the wisdom of several decades’ more life experience. “That’s even truer of parenthood,” she said. “That’s really something you can’t undo.”

And now that I have five years of parenting under my belt, I agree with her. Marriage was the first of the Very Big Covenants I’ve made, but parenthood is even larger and more primal. It feels at least as huge as God’s covenant to Noah, or God’s promises to Abraham. There is no way to undo my tacit vow to be there for my boys, to love them and care for them—not that I’d want to undo that

promise. For richer and for poorer, in vomiting and in health, in times of sweet little boy hugs and of teenage surliness, I'm going to be there, on their side, caring for and about them. I may leave from time to time, to go to work or the grocery store or a girls' night out with my friends, but I will always come back. *Mommy always comes back after nap and snack.* Don't worry, my little boy. I will return.

I could sense the magnitude of this promise well before Matthew was born, which was part of the reason why I, in the very smallest and most secret chamber of my heart, was quietly terrified of taking the plunge into parenthood. And yet it's an undeniable truth that making a promise to another person can actually be liberating. In my marriage, for example, I've found that there's a paradoxical freedom in making a commitment to Scott and vice versa. I can trust that he will not reject me if I gain thirty pounds or get cancer or have a nervous breakdown. It's freeing to know that even if we disagree on something, there is the expectation that we'll work through it rather than let it drive us apart. Our marriage promise has also liberated me from wondering if I'd ever find a guy who could connect with me mind, body, and soul, which for years seemed about as likely as tracking down the yeti. And it also gives me a little hint of God's commitment to me. God is here for the long haul. God is not going anywhere, no matter how much I may change over the years.

The covenant to my kids is certainly freeing for them; they don't have to worry about whether or not they can count on Mom. And I've found that it's also freeing for me. No, I can't get a pedicure rather than pick them up from school. Scott and I are no longer able to drop everything and spend a cozy weekend at a little inn on the coast, something we didn't do very often in the pre-kid days. (If only we'd seized the opportunity while we had it!) But when I look a bit deeper at my unyielding commitment to my boys, I see all the ways in which it's good. There's a more definite shape to my days now, an

accountability. I know where I'll be at 4:30 every day and what I'm going to do with my evenings.

Does that predictability feel boring sometimes? Absolutely. I'd be lying if I said that I do not have days when I long for a shake-up of the routine, for a dash of positive drama. There is not much that is emotionally stimulating about spending my evening fixing dinner and packing school lunches for the next day. On the scale of excitement, this period of my life certainly can't compare to my college semester in Paris or to the year I spent living and working there after graduation. Back then, I did not have to worry about cooking for anyone but myself; I could spend my evenings doing whatever my budget and common sense allowed. I was free then, not bound by the very real demands of a home and family.

And yet it's easy to forget that a constant theme throughout my single years was the innate desire for a husband and children, along with the latent fear that they'd never materialize. As much as I enjoyed the freedom to float wherever I wanted, I also knew that I was called to the relationships of marriage and motherhood and that I would find fulfillment there. My life these days is less exotic and exciting than it once was, but on another level, it's far more peaceful; I'm living the life I am called to live, and there's something deeply affirming about that. I can stop worrying about whether I'll ever have a family of my own. I have that life now, and what remains for me is to live it as intentionally and as gratefully as I can.

And this covenant to my kids—that I'll always love you, that I'll always be there for you—is just one more aspect of my life that helps me understand God's promise to me. In the Old Testament, God promises Noah, and promises Abraham, and those promises are fulfilled. There's a satisfaction in knowing that I am bound to my little boys as surely as God is bound to me. I reaffirm this covenant over and over, every time I change a diaper or hug someone after a

nightmare or pick up my little preschool scholar after nap and snack. And I like knowing that I am providing two little people with a sense of security, that I am giving them the confident assurance that Mom isn't going anywhere. I hope that, with this security, they can relax and expand into their fullest, strongest, most beautiful selves. I hope that my commitment is helping them grow up to be safe, hopeful, and optimistic about life and the world.

Maybe this is why God made that covenant with us: so that we can exhale and enjoy the world he's created. Instead of worrying about whether we'll be abandoned, we can rest secure in the knowledge that God is in it for the long haul. As a result, we're free to turn our attention to other things; we hope to transform it into creative energy for the good. And I think this process must be as satisfying for God as it is for us.

So I understand now what my colleague meant about marriage and parenthood all those years ago. There's the promise that you say to the guy in a tuxedo on a very memorable day, but that's not the end of it. There is also the promise that you say to the little guy in Velcro sneakers who is hanging onto your leg at the threshold of a classroom, and it's the promise that you repeat day after day in ways that are both spoken and silent. Mommy won't ever forget you or leave you. Mommy always comes back after nap and snack.

And that's not Mommy's burden. It's her privilege.