

WALKING WITH MOM

A young mother gives thanks for God's gifts

by Andrea Foster

I went for a walk with my mom today. The air was crisp and the sun was warm. It was lovely. I like walking with Mom, being active together, chatting and ending with coffee. It is hard to put into words just how much I appreciate her and want to be like her. She is a gift and has been a continual source of practical support, advice and encouragement.

I have kept a journal most of my life and, as I write, I often wonder where the Lord is leading me. One thing I know is that my heart aches for families that live with some of the same issues our family does. I am aware that everyone's story is unique. I am also conscious of the many similar situations faced by families that care for children with special needs.

I will never forget the scene at the hospital when we were given the diagnosis of our baby girl, Annie. She was not quite five months old when she suffered two seizures in one day at home. I took her directly to the emergency room at our local hospital. The medical staff kept asking if she had had any fever. It seemed they were hoping she had, but she had not even had the sniffles. Now, after an initial CT scan in the local ER and a few days of anxious waiting at SickKids Hospital in Toronto, we found ourselves seated around a large round table of doctors, nurses and residents—all looking at us expressionless. I knew it had to be something serious. I was nervous but hopeful.

As the information poured out of the neurologist's mouth, I heard the diagnosis, "tuberous sclerosis complex," and the rest was a garble. In the midst of the information overload, I did manage to hear "...genetic condition." I bit my lip, trying not to cry. They didn't know. I waited politely, allowing them to finish with the passing of a sheet containing information printed from the Internet. When the paper slid across the table, I picked it up and looked at the doctor. Then I told them. "Annie is an identical twin." Faces went from being

expressionless to wearing looks of shock, and the questions ensued. Was I *sure* they were identical? I knew they were. I had undergone at least 15 ultrasounds during my pregnancy. The girls shared a placenta and the sacs were barely separated. I was considered high risk because they were monozygotic and shared the same DNA. This was not good news for our baby, Audrey, who was at home in the care of my mom.

Audrey began having seizures three weeks later, and both of my beautiful five-month-old babies began a life of drug dependency for seizure control. Both girls have too many benign brain tumours to count. Their skin shows the characteristic white "ash leaf spots," and they are both autistic and globally delayed. They are on the severe end of the tuberous sclerosis complex spectrum.

I know God has not forgotten us. I believe in miracles, but I also believe God makes no mistakes. My girls have an intellectual IQ somewhere around the first percentile—not encouraging or even completely believable, but nonetheless true. The reality is, our twins will never grow out of certain stages of toddlerhood. They may never toilet train and will never leave home to live independently. Their lives are, however, as valuable as royalty and as precious as the life of the beggar with no home. The One who created them does not overlook them. If I believe Jeremiah 29:11, then God has a plan for them too. He has a hope and a future for those who cannot understand the concept. He loves them as much as He loves those who knowingly seek after His will. We do not understand the complexity of God's love when it comes to people with special needs. I do not wish for different children, but I do wish and pray for healing. That healing *will* come. I have been assured of its coming. How or when has not been revealed. *Here* on earth or *there* in heaven? The details are not clear. But the thought of one day seeing them fully realizing their potential brings joy to my soul.

I have chosen to be thankful now rather than to wait for healing and then thank God. It is not a matter of positive thinking. The reality is, God has blessed us in many ways and I *am* thankful right now. I have the peace of knowing we are right where God wants us to be. Annie and Audrey are the siblings our other two children, Lily and Russell, were meant to have. Kirk and I are the parents designed for them all. We love them all the same and we are changed because of who they are. I am also thankful for the Holy Spirit, who continues to remind me that I am loved and I am not alone.

This road has not been an easy one, and there is no end in sight to the difficulties. There is also no end to God's unfailing love and His power to bring glory to His name through anything we face. I am at peace with the fact that my twins will never leave the nest. I cannot imagine life without them. Still, there are days when I cry out to God and let Him know, "*This* is all I can handle!" There are other days when I wonder if these two little lives are truly angels sent by God Himself. What an honour it is to see His reflection so close up!

I have seen the Lord use the twins' obsessions to remind me of biblical truths. I have seen a worship pastor strum his guitar and weep as my daughter dances and sings her few words—and everyone present witnesses what genuine worship is. God has used strangers to prepare me for treatments I might otherwise have second-guessed and feared. I have seen dark nights when my husband is on night shift at the fire hall and I am up with an insomniac child—or two—alone and afraid. Truly, I have seen the hand of God in many shapes and forms, and still I struggle. I am human, but I am a child of God. He has given me His Word. As I dig in, I find strength. I also find myself wanting to encourage, comfort and walk alongside those whose lives are not what they had expected.

I will walk with my mom again tomorrow. The weather will likely be as biting as it was today. For the most part, winter weather in this part of the world is predictable. Life is not. That, however, is not something I need to fear when I belong to a very big, ever forgiving and unchanging God.

Andrea Foster lives in Brampton, ON, with her husband, Kirk, and their four children. They are blessed beyond belief!