

What is Your Cardboard Testimony?

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Unworthy, depressed, struggling to find meaning in life, constantly letting people down. This was me. This was how I saw myself. This was how I felt. But it's not true. It's not who I am. It's not how I feel now. Something happened to me – and it changed everything.

My name is Katie Heaton. As a member of Woodside since 2002, I know and have grown up with many of you. Woodside is definitely my second home. Cliff and I have been married for 12 years and we have two children, Colin and Caroline. We also recently adopted a puppy named Rufus. I am very involved at Woodside in the Praise Band and various other ministries.

I grew up in the area and always loved music. We didn't attend church, but I grew up going to CCD at a local Catholic church learning a little about God and making my sacraments. I knew who God was but didn't really have a relationship with him.

My childhood was happy. There were great memories of spending countless hours in our pool in the summer and going on vacations with my family. My younger sister and I had a dog named Beethoven (yes named after that cool movie from the 90s). My best friends lived on my street. We would play outside all day and I remember being happy and carefree.

Then in my teen years, things changed. My parents got divorced, my dad moved away, and I lost three grandparents. Grief wasn't something I was familiar with or knew how to handle. Looking back now I don't think I ever really dealt with it and kept my feelings inside. Anger and resentment lived in my heart for the longest time. For years, no matter what I did I struggled with not feeling good enough. Everything happening in my life seemed like my fault, even if it wasn't. I was so frustrated and felt like something was missing. It was a really dark time in my life.

In my junior year of high school, I received an invitation from a friend to come to Woodside. I was hesitant, but I tried it. The Celebration Service had great music. It drew me in and I wanted to keep going. After attending services for a while, I started singing in the Praise Band at the age of 16. "Come Now is the Time to Worship" was played in my car over and over again. I loved listening to the Newsboys, Third Day, Chris Tomlin, Lincoln Brewster. Pretty much any Christian music on the radio at that time. I went to Creation (a Christian music festival) a few times. It was so inspiring. I left there with an important purpose, to lead others in worship. A weight was lifted off of me. Looking back now I know it was the Holy Spirit filling me and the brokenness I was feeling. Music is the way I feel closest to God.

My husband and I met right here at Woodside in the band. We got married in 2007, and to the surprise of some of our friends and relatives, at the end of the wedding ceremony, a group of our best friends, including us and Pastor Doug, played the song "Sing for Joy." We loved seeing the reactions of the non-Woodsiders when the Pastor got up to play guitar.

We wanted to have kids right away. Cliff and I tried for many months with no pregnancy. We decided to move forward with IVF and became pregnant after two tries with our son Colin

who is almost 10. Four years and three more IVF cycles later, we had Caroline who is almost 6. It was an exhausting five years. Between our kids I lost a baby. It was so devastating. I struggled a lot during that time and again, I was in a dark place. When you are going through tough times it's so easy to feel not good enough, unloved, unworthy.

Having young kids was (well, and still is) busy! Despite being a busy mom, I managed to still sing in the band, which I love. Thinking about how I could grow in my love for worship, I thought, what if I played guitar? Cliff bought me a guitar over 10 years ago, and I knew some basic chords, but that was it. I decided to try it. I started in February 2016 with the goal of playing at the Women's Retreat in April and then with the Praise Band on Mother's Day (which for those doing the math was only 2-3 months away). I like to set crazy goals for myself with the hope of tackling the impossible! So, I started to practice.

"You're not good enough" I heard as I practiced, every day, for months. I couldn't change chords right and got frustrated. I cried a lot. "I'll never get better. No one thinks I can do this. Why should I even try?" Somehow God gave me power to continue practicing and I did play for those two events and have played many services (and many more instruments) since! That experience taught me that sometimes God plants a seed in you, but you have to do the work to grow!

God was continuing to fill me with His Holy Spirit and guiding me through life. And then I got a concussion in March of 2017. I didn't realize at first it was a concussion and went on with life as normal. After a few days I was stopped in my tracks and suffered headaches, fatigue and eye problems. This injury really set me back. I became very depressed, anxious, and felt like I lost the Holy Spirit's guidance and strength.

I was feeling really bad and worthless. Despite having great family and friends, successes at work, and making strides at my newfound love for guitar playing, something was missing again. My feelings were consuming me, and I felt so stuck for the longest time.

I cried out to God for help, asking to hear his voice, which I hadn't distinctly heard before. Two times soon after, I was awoken out of a sound sleep by God speaking to me. He told me He was with me and to let things go, including the depression I felt.

So how do we know God remains constant, even when we might not feel his presence completely? How do we know He loves us and has accepted and forgiven us, just as we are?

First, He knew you before you were born: Psalm 139 says:

For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful; I know that full well. My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place, when I was woven together in the depths of the earth. Your eyes saw my unformed body; all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be. -Psalm 139:13-16 NIV

God had a plan for us even before we were born. That's pretty amazing isn't it? Think about it. God has a real purpose for your life. It doesn't matter if you can't see it right now

because He is preparing you for it. Every failure and struggle, every success and triumph is a stepping stone to what you were meant to be and to do.

Looking back, for the longest time I didn't believe I had a specific purpose. My journey led me to Woodside almost 20 years ago. Many years of chorus in school gave me a true appreciation and love for music. So, when I stepped into church for the first time ever outside of my childhood Catholic church which I rarely attended, I was drawn in through the music. God led me there that day, to hear those songs, so they would light something inside of me that made me want to come back. What if I hadn't listened to God? So many things would be different. I give thanks every day for that moment that changed my life. God sometimes surprises you.

Second, He died so you and I would be saved: Galatians 2 tells us:

I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. – Galatians 2:20 NIV

Jesus was born and lived as us. He lived and experienced the day to day and struggled as we did. He sacrificed Himself on the cross so we would be free from sin, each and every one of us.

Is it really so hard to believe you are special? You are loved? And wanted? Why do we so often beat ourselves up and put ourselves down? Jesus died for YOU. Not just everyone else but you too. Because He wanted to free you from the chains that are holding you back from truly doing what He intended you to.

I experienced some pretty dark times in my life. I think we all have. And when you are in the midst of those valleys, it is so difficult to get out sometimes. You can go through your days in a blur, just getting by without any energy or sense of worth. And then get up the next day and do it all over again.

But friends! That is not what God wants us to do! He wants us to find passion and purpose even in the day to day, and especially during hard times. When I am feeling down, if I keep it to myself it only gets worse. We all need to pray to God during these times. Even if we don't feel God's presence strongly, we have to remember the sacrifice He made for us because He loves us. And He wants a relationship with us. And prayer is how we keep that relationship going!

Third, He is always with you and will never leave you:

Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.” Joshua 1:9 ESV

For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.
- Romans 8:38-39 NIV

Nothing can separate us from God. There may be times when you feel like the Holy Spirit's presence is not as strong. But that's ok because God is preparing you for something else that will fill you more than you can imagine.

We all get discouraged throughout life. But anything is possible with God and when we pray to Him, He listens. Sometimes, we fail. But that's ok too. God is there when we're happy or sad, or even embarrassed. I've had my share of those moments on this stage alone. But when we put our trust in Him, we can do great things. We can get through great trials. And even find joy in the darkest times because God is with us. My relationship with Jesus is essential. But I can't do this alone. I realize I need others to lift me up, encourage me, and strengthen me to thrive. My Mom gave so much of herself to raise me and encourage me to be who I am today. My husband Cliff stands by me, supports me, and encourages me to reach for some of my crazy goals. The Praise Band, various growth groups over the years, and so many here at Woodside who also lift me up and encourage me. Jesus doesn't want us to keep to ourselves. He wants us to share the good news and fellowship with one another. I encourage you to join a growth group, find a ministry you love or simply invite a friend to worship.

At Woodside we have an amazing group of women who create, lead and implement a Women's Retreat every year. They are a lot of fun. I wasn't going to go one year as I was feeling unworthy. Feeling conflicted. Just not feeling it. I received a text from a friend asking to stay in a cabin with their group. I took that as a sign I should go, so I signed up and went despite my hesitation.

That weekend, we read a story by Max Lucado called "You are Special." This is what the story is about: Every day, small wooden people called Wemmicks do the same thing: stick either gold stars or grey dots on one another. The pretty and talented ones always get stars. Others, though, who can do little or have chipped paint, get ugly gray dots, like Punchinello. One day Punchinello met Lucia, a Wemmick who was different than all the others. Her stickers, whether stars or dots, didn't stick. Why was she different? Every day she went to Eli, the Woodcarver (who is God in the story). When Punchinello went to Eli, Eli told him to visit every day. "You are special because I made you," Eli told him, "And I don't make mistakes." At the end of the story, Punchinello's dots start to fall off because he sees himself in God's eyes. Regardless of how the world evaluates you, God cherishes you, just as you are. As we read the story, I started to think, "wow, how did I miss this? How did I forget how special I am to God?"

At the beginning of my message I read words on a piece of cardboard. Those words are the first side of my "cardboard testimony." A cardboard testimony demonstrates the power of words and faith. On the first side, you write a personal struggle, trial or sin. On the opposite side you show where you are today, because of your relationship with Christ. There are no words spoken, just the written testimony presented. At the Women's Retreat, with the song "You Say" by Lauren Daigle playing, each person walked to the front of the room and shared her testimony by simply holding up a piece of cardboard and then turning it over. They didn't even have to speak. It was really powerful. Seeing so many of my friends share their transformation through Christ was a turning point for me. Everyone struggles with so much. I am not alone. And there is freedom in knowing the awesome, holy, loving, powerful one true God! The Lord reminded me again how loved I was.

Through all the ups and downs in life, God remains constant, even when we might not feel his presence completely. He is the calm in the storm and the light in the darkness. He has accepted us, just as we are. He wants us to come to him every day with our cares and concerns so He can remind us we are loved, no matter what. Accepted. Loved. Forgiven. A child of God. Amen.