

Traffic on the street is light, but the snow banks created on either side by plows are always either slippery with ice or dense with slush. Elsa was content with her own small hill, conveniently located near the back door, where she could wave to her father watching from the kitchen window. But we wanted to give her more.

When we rebel, planting our metaphorical boots in the snow and refusing to budge, it's often because we imagine that something precious is being taken from us, as if God is a cruel father snatching away our favorite snowy hill. In those moments, we associate giving in with defeat and weakness. We fail to understand that the loss we fear is also an invitation. Determined to hide our weakness from others (and perhaps even from ourselves), we forget how beautiful smallness can be. We forget how precious we are to the One who calls us out beyond the familiar fences of our comfortable life.

The birth narratives in the Gospels are shot through with astonishment that the God of the universe came to us in a vulnerable and small form. Jesus did not descend on a cloud but was born. Yet as early as the age of 12, Jesus began to say yes to the invitation of His Heavenly Father. When He stayed behind at the temple in Jerusalem while His family journeyed home, “all who heard Him were amazed at His understanding and His answers” ([Luke 2:47](#)). My own children have, very occasionally, amazed me with their understanding, but my amazement speaks to the fact that this is rare with most children most of the time. We are big, they are little, and their littleness is precious to us. But it also means that we know more, see more, and, yes, understand much more than they.

Why did Jesus say we must become like children in order to enter the kingdom of heaven ([Matt. 18:3](#))? I imagine He looked at the crowds gathered to hear Him and saw what we so often fail to recognize: We are already small and there is so much that we do not see or understand. To become like a child, then, is to wave a white flag of surrender. It requires walking through life with the perspective most small children take for granted—that we need a loving hand to hold, strong shoulders to lift us, and the best way is always to be guided by someone bigger and more able than ourselves. We may be weak, but we are precious, and our surrender is not a defeat. It is the beginning of a great adventure.

When Elsa dug in her boots and refused to budge, we pleaded, “Elsa, please. Elsa, come with us. We promise you'll have more fun if you'll only follow.” But when you are 4, your memory of winter does not extend beyond the snow that fell last week. You do not remember that you were once a fat baby in a pink snowsuit, sitting contentedly on a wooden sled. You do not remember how your father pulled you far beyond the yard and on toward The Big Hill your siblings speak of with reverence. All you know is the small hill on which you sledded, happily, only yesterday in your own backyard, beneath the bare limbs of your mother's peach trees.

How could I convince my daughter that the cold trudge toward The Big Hill was worth the struggle? Worth frozen toes, even? It lay far beyond Elsa's limited range of vision. She had only my pleading and her siblings' tales of joy to entice her in the direction she had no desire to go. It takes a great deal of strength to yield and walk a hard way.

Where would such a small child find that kind of strength? As the terrible beauty of the gospel narrative unfolds, it's almost as if Jesus grows smaller. First, there is the triumphal entry into Jerusalem. He is above the crowd; He is hailed as king. Then, there is the fierce showdown in the temple as Jesus drives out those who “have made it a robbers' den” ([Luke 19:46](#)). But after all that, Jesus kneels like a servant to wash dirty feet.



He does not resist arrest. He does not speak up in His own defense but is silent. Then comes the heavy weight of the cross, and our larger-than-life Jesus appears diminished to a concentrated core of suffering and love.

Jesus wasn't a survivor, but He was victorious. He gave Himself up to death and so secured, for Himself and us, a whole new world. Is it weakness or strength to pray, as Jesus prayed, "Abba! Father! All things are possible for You; remove this cup from Me; yet not what I will, but what You will" ([Mark 14:36](#))? We simply do not have a category for the kind of strength in weakness Jesus demonstrated for us. If power is perfected in weakness, as Paul writes, then surrender may be the toughest and bravest act of all ([2 Corinthians 12:9](#)).

Something beautiful waits for us on the other side of that difficult choice. When John the Baptist said, "[Jesus] must increase, but I must decrease," he explained that "this joy of mine has been made full" ([John 3:29-30](#)). In Hebrews, we read that Jesus surrendered to the cross "for the joy set before Him" ([Heb. 12:2](#)). Surrender does involve loss, but that loss is finite, like something circled by an old split rail fence. What is gained is infinite, eternal, belonging to a world without end, and worth far more than any price we might pay.

That January day of fresh-fallen snow, I watched Elsa lower her head and walk past the small hill that meant so much to her. Stepping carefully in the footmarks left by her older siblings, she let go of the familiar. Why did she do it? Perhaps four years of love from a mother and father, a sister, and two brothers was just the right amount to steady those little red boots with trust.

My husband lifted Elsa over the drifts, the older kids called out encouragement, and I matched my pace to hers. The red boots left footprints so small they might have belonged to the deer that live in the woods nearby.

Elsa and I navigated the snow-plowed ridges of the street, her tiny pink mitten hidden in my warm glove. We climbed the last rise, Elsa focusing on the snow-caked boots beneath her.

"Elsa, look!" I said.

Only then did she lift her eyes. Only then did she see the new world spread out beyond her feet. Still holding hands, we gazed out over a forest quieted by snow and a sledding path through trees that seemed, almost, to have no end.

And Elsa laughed for joy.

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Prayer Requests:

Peggy Flathmann, Renee Cass & all 1st Responders and their families. Continue to pray for those effected by the recent fires we've responded too.