

grace like
Scarlett

GRIEVING WITH HOPE
AFTER MISCARRIAGE
AND LOSS

ADRIEL BOOKER



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The names and details of the people and situations described in this book have been changed or presented in composite form in order to ensure the privacy of the individuals involved.

18 19 20 21 22 23 24 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



To Jesus

Jesus, this book is for you—to expose your goodness.
Thank you for loving me into seeing it.
I still have so much to discover.

To Ryan

Ryan, your name belongs on the cover with mine.
Thank you for wading into the deep with me.
This is our astonishing and spectacular journey,
and it's only just begun.
I love you.

No matter how deep our darkness,
he is deeper still.

Corrie ten Boom

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Foreword

Standing at the lucky beginning of a long line to the only bathroom in a Tuscan monastery, I thought about what depth of discipline it must take these monks to share such a small space. If that one tiny stall didn't make the monks intimate friends, then I'm not sure what would. Adriel had already slipped into the restroom ahead of us; after all, she was pregnant and had the right-of-way. We were quiet in the sacred air, which hung with the exquisite fragrances of Italian cooking herbs, and that was all we needed to hear Adriel through the door. It was the angry moan of grief, so strong and familiar that another friend and I immediately burst through to where Adriel sat exposed in agony, and she leaned into our sides, and we saw the blood, and we said no words. We only groaned what sounds the Holy Spirit gave us.

It had only been eight years before that terrible, holy night that I had last doubled over a heating pad, two lost babies in a row. It was one of the most painful and isolating experiences of my life. To desperately want a baby only to discover that he or she had no heartbeat was like falling blind into a chasm of impossible desire. There was no way to fix it. There was only the presence of God in a way I had never experienced, and in time I became grateful for

a present God while loathing that such pain exists in our world. When we stood with Adriel in that tiny washroom, I felt it all over again: loathing and grace, the presence of God coupled with a desire to smash down walls.

When we left for that amazing writer's retreat to Italy, I had no idea the connections we would make, how intimate we'd become with friends we'd never met. It was that one-stall-shared-monastery-restroom kind of bonding. My husband and I showed up worn thin in the grief that came from months in the hospital with one of our sons. We came to Italy ripped open and ready to receive healing. I can remember it was the shared sufferings that brought our group to such close soul proximity, the ability to discuss sobriety, death, and lost dreams. It was the freedom to envision and experience beauty again alongside this shared suffering that made us lifelong friends with Adriel.

I suspect this book will do that for you too. Maybe hearing words said out loud that we had only ever let thrash around in the desert places of our souls is part of our learning to take the hard, deep dive she mentions in these pages. Maybe this space of shared suffering is also the space we need to dream again.

As a minister, fellow mother, girlfriend, and sister, I can't count how many times I've been a doula to women as their babies were leaving their bodies, but this book has been a reminder that the grief of losing a pregnancy is not one that really ever leaves us. It becomes ever a part of us.

Grace Like Scarlett is a timeless book because that's how grief works. You're never really done with it or undone from it. It's a voice of recognition, and maybe the acknowledgment that you're relearning how to be yourself. It's a room of shared suffering where too many of us find ourselves, hurting but not without hope.

Adriel writes with the authority of one who has endured suffering. She is a gifted teacher and a brave leader into the darker realms of faith. As she discusses the transformation that grief

Foreword

brings into our lives, she also acknowledges and then shoos away blame, comparison, false guilt, shame, and isolation. Though it's been years since I've experienced miscarriage, this book helped me remember and even shined a light into other areas of suffering that I hardly know how to address.

Amber C. Haines, author of *Wild in the Hollow*
Fayetteville, Arkansas, 2018

Introduction

Dear Grieving Mom

Maybe your grief is fresh and raw and you're still reeling from the suffocating blow of a recent miscarriage. Or maybe you've long ago buried a secret grief but something within is probing you to lean in closer to the pain once again. Let me be as straightforward as possible with you: I can't answer the cosmic "why" of your miscarriage, but I can validate and help you understand your pain and grief. I want to link my arm with yours in hope as we look together toward the day when Jesus makes all things new.

I discovered something in the early days after my first miscarriage, when grief came pounding with incredible force: If I didn't dive deep, the waves of grief would absolutely pummel me. In surfing, this is called a "duck dive." The apostle Paul calls it being "hidden with Christ."¹

I call it survival.

As I began to practice my own deep dive after losing our daughter, Scarlett Grace, to miscarriage, I discovered this was actually more than survival. It was an invitation: Would I find Jesus in the deep?

It's normal to be filled with questions when experiencing personal trauma. *What have I done to deserve this? Is this my fault? Why would God let this happen? Is he punishing me for something? What if God isn't who I thought he was? How can I go on with life as I once knew it? Will I ever feel normal again? Is God—or his goodness—even real? What if my whole faith is a sham?*

Because the grief of miscarriage often goes unspoken, these types of questions can eat away at the soul and confidence of a woman as she tries to shoulder the burden of them in secret. We'll look at some of these hard questions together, but first I must tell you this: It might seem impossible, but you can do this. You can lose and grieve and hope. The power of grief can, and sometimes will, sweep us off our feet. But we can learn how to breathe under the deep. We may even learn to open our eyes there. We *can* grieve with hope. We may be brokenhearted or even crushed, but we will not be destroyed. We might even find that, in our weakness, we're stronger than we think.

Scarlett *can* lead to grace—a grace I would need as two more miscarriages followed my first.

My husband, Ryan, and I have six children, only three of whom share our dinner table. Motherhood has been a brilliant teacher, exposing the paradox contained within the experience of my grief: Suffering and joy can coexist.

I still have moments of sadness over my babies lost to miscarriage, but now I also have wonder. It was in my darkest days as a mother that I found my brightest hope in Jesus. And yes, I understand how terribly cliché this can sound when you're left stunned and broken by loss. But it's true. True doesn't mean easy, but I promise you: Love will lead you there, even through questions that seem insurmountable when your life is in shambles.

I remember the days of wanting to crawl into a cave, find a place to curl up there in the quiet, and never wake up. It wasn't that I *actually* wanted to die, it's just that I didn't know how to live under the weight of my sadness and collapsed expectations.

Out of nowhere, sorrow would hit me like a heat wave, pressing on my chest, leaving me desperate to peel off layers so I could find some relief. But even while experiencing intense loneliness, I also remember feeling the sweetness of God’s presence in some of those shadowy hours. Something told me his quietness wasn’t abandonment—it was companionship.

This isn’t to say I could always *feel* his presence, or that I didn’t long for something more tangible—a touch or a word (a billboard in flashing neon lights with a backdrop of double rainbows would have been nice). But even when I felt like I was groping in the dark, I somehow knew there was a God acquainted with pain who stayed with me in mine.

But maybe this hasn’t been your experience at all. Maybe you’ve picked up this book wondering how it might help your soul rest after what feels like endless grief or a faith that never quite recovered. Maybe God seems absent or quiet. Or maybe, in haste, you downloaded the first book you found online because those words—“no heartbeat”—have just been uttered in your direction and you’re looking for a lifeline. Maybe you’re wondering if you’ll ever feel close to God again or if your faith is even worth holding on to while you wait. Maybe you just want to know you’re not alone.

I wish I could tell you unequivocally that you will “feel” Jesus near when you need him most, but I cannot. Who am I to presume my experience will translate into yours? I will not. And this, friend, is the truth of grief: It’s wild. Grief does not follow a blueprint. It minds no flowchart. It doesn’t tick off boxes, it will not be contained in your favorite list app, and it most certainly won’t stay put on the calendar.

Grief is wild like the sea, but it doesn’t need to destroy us. We can’t conquer it, but we *can* navigate it, and we can find Jesus there too.

Dive in, friend. Come with me. Let’s go deep.

Grace Like Scarlett will not help you solve the problem of why your baby died. It won’t help you systematically piece together a

theology to address all of the mysteries of faith. It's certainly not a handbook with three magic steps to healing. And it will not make false promises about what the shape of your family will someday look like. But what I *can* promise you is this: As we dive in to the goodness of Jesus, he longs to do a profound work within you, and he *will* hold you as he guides you through the wild waves.

When pain and suffering inevitably find us, Jesus calls us into the deep.

Every sentence I've written in this book has been preceded and followed by a prayer for you—mother who has miscarried—and for our sisters who grieve from similar, yet distinct, forms of loss. (Please note that I won't write specifically to the grief of stillbirth, infertility, abortion, molar pregnancy, neonatal loss, or the many other variations of pregnancy and infant loss, though I recognize there are many common threads to our grief, and I trust God to meet you right where you're at as you read.)

Together we'll explore the nature of grief and suffering, the human experience of community when it helps and when it hurts, the goodness of God and the promises we can hold to, and what it means to be reborn into our new selves, transformed by this experience of suffering and our revelation of hope. At the end of the book are meaty appendixes filled with practical resources for you, as well as a letter for grieving dads that my husband wrote. (We recognize there's a lack of support for fathers who've experienced this unique grief; you can find more resources for him in appendix F.)

The book is written to be read as a whole, with each chapter building on the next, and I hope you will sense companionship as we explore life after miscarriage together. Please read at your own pace. You may find some sections harder to read than others because of where you are in your grief journey, or because certain ideas or theologies are holding you together in your grief. If that's the case, then pause to process and digest before reading further or circle back around when you're ready to continue going deeper.

My prayer is that you hear your own story and grief experience woven throughout mine and that you would discover Jesus in these pages, find yourself within his care, and perhaps even discover the gift that your experience of loss can give way to. This is our collective story of the grace to be found as we dare to extend our trembling souls into the arena of hope.

Make no mistake, this book will include Jesus. It has to. He changes everything. Even if you're not sure what you think of God right now, I urge you to consider the possibility he offers.

May you grant yourself permission to feel, to wrestle, and to be fully awake to your suffering. May your soul be nurtured. May you take your time and breathe deeply. May you use your last bit of strength to dive below the surface when you see those wild waves approaching. Will you let your Scarlett—your own personal pain—be a gateway for God's grace?

The thought of my suffering . . .
is bitter beyond words.
I will never forget this awful time,
as I grieve over my loss.
Yet I still dare to hope
when I remember this:
The faithful love of the LORD never ends!
His mercies never cease.
Great is his faithfulness;
his mercies begin afresh each morning.
I say to myself, "The LORD is my inheritance;
therefore, I will hope in him!" (Lam. 3:19–24)

When you look toward the goodness of God, dear heart, I promise you'll see it. Let's look there together.

May all God's grace abound to you.
Love,
Adriel

Part I
Blindsided



PUMMELED BY
THE FORCE OF LOSS

one

Among the Fields of Gold

She always wanted to become a wife and a mother, so it shocked me when she announced she had entered the convent.

But then this friend from high school explained to me her revelation that all along her heart had yearned to be married to Christ and to mother the church; she only needed to discover what the depths of her soul were crying out for. It was clear to see how much she adored Jesus and loved her vocation. The habit she wore she likened to a wedding ring: an extravagant sign for the world to see exactly who she belonged to.

It sounded romantic and beautiful and fitting for a woman as faithful as her, and yet was hard to wrap my young Protestant mind around. In my early twenties myself, as she was, I longed to get married and have children. I found a vocation void of those things admirable but incomprehensible—equal parts mystery and practicality.

We lived on different continents and sporadically kept in touch through letters. I smiled when I received her notes signed, “May God bless you and Mary keep you, Sister Maximilian Marie.” She was no longer my friend Loretta, yet was more herself than ever.

Now, both of us well into our thirties, I planned to visit her in Rome after attending a ten-day writing retreat in Tuscany.

The Eternal City

I landed in Rome excited to see my high school friend. We were twenty years removed from jazz choir and our after-school jobs at a nearby daycare center, but I had the excitement of a young freshman regardless. I was a Protestant pilgrim on my first visit to Vatican City, bursting with anticipation about learning church history and tradition and the sacraments through the Roman Catholic eyes of my devoted friend.

What I was *not* expecting during my brief two-day visit to Rome was that, after joining with the masses at Saint Peter's Square to hear the noonday Angelus prayer and blessing from Pope Francis, I'd be waving down a taxi knowing something was drastically wrong despite my very full heart.

The presence of blood is hard to deny.

Within the hour I was labeled "patient #788" in the emergency department of Gemelli Hospital while bleeding my dreams and my eleven-week-old baby down the toilet.

Perhaps that sounds coarse; it *should*, because it *was*.

Patient #788

Stuffed into a narrow hallway in the obstetrics area of the emergency department, I waited for my number to be called. All around me swollen bellies attached to hopeful mothers reminded me that I didn't belong to them anymore. I knew what was happening; this wasn't my first miscarriage.

"Drop your pants," the doctor instructed after leading me into the examination room and exchanging awkward hellos through her broken English (and my almost nonexistent Italian).

From the other side of the curtain I heard the loud *whoosh-whoosh-whoosh* of a baby's heartbeat on the fetal monitor. What was once a magnificent melody now taunted me—the rhythm of

a slow, quiet torture I couldn't escape. I would have traded almost anything for a closed door, an ounce of privacy.

Deflated, I sunk onto the examination table and obediently spread-eagled, placing my feet in the halters. *Will I get kicked out if I throw my shoe at the whooshing machine across the room?* I can't remember feeling more humiliated. Ever.

Sister waited on the other side of the wall; I missed her and tried to visualize her there praying for me.

*Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.*¹

The obstetrician scanned my uterus and I recognized the black, empty screen. I had seen it before—the kind of *nothing* that's enough to simultaneously set your eyes ablaze *and* extinguish the brightest hope. I hated that cursed technology—mocking my emptiness, leaving no room for possibility. Surely “nonviable” is among the most revolting terms a mother has ever heard.

I bled all over the examination paper and cringed when she removed it to reveal it had seeped through and now covered the table. In haste she poured half a bottle of disinfectant on the vinyl to rub off the excess “products of conception” that my body was rejecting. I felt both disgust and satisfaction that a stain seemed to remain.

Miscarriage is ugly.

It was irrelevant how much experience or logic was stored up in the files of my brain; in that moment I deemed myself an utter failure. My body was a tomb and I hated it.

The doctor pressed for details. *Was I certain I was pregnant? Could my estimation of dates be off?* The dead fetus measured weeks smaller than the eleven weeks I had professed.

“This was my fourth pregnancy. I may be sad but I'm not an idiot,” I snapped. (Not my finest moment.)

Her English was better than my Italian, but it seemed there was an awful lot of guesswork as we each tried to determine what

the other was saying. And was I even listening? *I'm not sure I was listening.* She was doing her job but all I could think was, *My God, why do my babies stop growing?*

I couldn't believe this was happening. Not here. Not now.

Not again.

Maybe the only thing worse than carrying a dead baby is finding out you've been carrying a dead baby while blissfully unaware. I felt like a giant naive fraud of a mother who'd been prancing around gleefully pregnant while in actuality my body was a walking death sentence. The thought repulsed me.

When the examination was finished, I was told I'd need to wait three hours for my blood test results to come back so they could determine the best course of action. I asked to lie down and was put on a rollaway cot in the hallway. *In the hallway.*

Turning my back to the row of expectant mothers seated across from me—so close they were within arm's reach—I began to sob. I tried to hold it in; the last thing these hormonal, expecting women needed was a reason to be afraid or sad. (*Sad* seems such a grossly insufficient word here.) But there was no holding back the avalanche, and as soon as I started, a few of them followed suit. It was a symphony of my sobs and their sniffles, echoing around that otherwise quiet and still hallway.

These women knew precisely what was happening with the foreign girl curled up on the bed in front of them at exactly eye level. Maybe we were more alike than I thought.

It was in that moment I more fully understood Sister's vocation. Her hand rested gently on my back until my weeping slowed to whimpering. I was mothered by my friend who saw her very calling in life as a mother to God's people. Being separated from my family by an ocean was excruciating, but she cared for me and loved me as I needed in that desperate hour. She was Jesus in a habit, and I loved her something fierce.

But before Rome was Tuscany.

A Dream Called Tuscany

When we arrived at the luxury villa in Tuscany for our writers' retreat, we joked about stumbling into heaven on earth. Our villa overlooked the painted countryside, our towels came wrapped in satin ribbon tied into bows, and fresh pastries were delivered before dawn each morning. The view from my bedroom window boasted olive trees and honeybees going about the work of the centuries. We shared our thousand-year-old walled-in village with two hundred townsfolk who took pride in their slow pace and their windows lined in linen and doorposts adorned in flowers. Soaking in the scent of jasmine and lavender, we feasted our eyes on golden wheat fields hemmed in by rows of cypress trees and vineyards swelling with what would become the finest of wines.

It was breathtaking.

These were gifts of pleasure for no other reason than to usher in delight and remind us to *taste and see that the Lord is good.*² We meditated on the sacraments of beauty and community, creativity and vocation, eating four- and five-course meals and exploring masterpiece landscapes that seemed too serene to be real. And yet they *were* real—it all was.

Together we relaxed into the generosity of God as he invited us to go deeper, to see wider, to listen closer. Loosening our grip on feelings of unworthiness and embracing God's abundance became our work and our rest. You might think it all sounds terribly romantic, and you're exactly right. It was. It was a dream.

Under the Monastery Stairs

Toward the end of our retreat, we dined in a monastery, eating ourselves happy on another four-course meal. I left my wineglass untouched, ever attentive to the little one I carried. We swapped

stories and shook our heads, recounting the ways Tuscany had swept us off our feet.

Before the drive back to our villa, I visited the restroom, and it was there I first saw the blood.

Tucked away in the tiny stall under the stairs where monks had once hushed their way to vespers and lonely rooms for solitary study and quiet communion with the God of hidden places, I ruptured the peace with groans and flailing. Within seconds, two of my brand-new friends were stuffed into the stall along with me while I wailed that I was having a miscarriage.

No, no, no, no, no. . . . I can't remember saying much of anything else. I wanted to rage against the darkness around me—that, I remember vividly. If I could have torn down those ancient stone walls or ripped the giant support beams out of the ceiling with my trembling fingers, I would have.

For the first time I understood the passages in the Old Testament that speak of mourners tearing their clothes and rubbing themselves in ashes—that sort of expression would have felt entirely appropriate as an external outworking of my internal anguish and lament. I distinctly remember wanting to tear my clothes off and throw myself into a fetal position on the floor.

After I had caught my breath and pulled myself together enough to stumble out from beneath the stairs, I stepped into the courtyard. I felt as if the canopy of lights in the night sky that had inspired artists for centuries now betrayed me. If only I could crawl under the dirt and hide from all that wretched beauty.

But I couldn't. So instead I blundered to the parking lot where the others were huddled, waiting and whispering, and then stood in disbelief as this tiny band of writers whom I had fallen in love with gathered around me and held me and prayed for me. I don't remember much from those moments, but I do remember one laying hands on my head and another praying to the God who holds all things together.³

Those writers lodged into my heart there under the wide Tuscan sky.

Is this God still holding me together? I wondered. I wanted to believe. But in that moment all I could do was breathe. Barely.

During the thirty-minute car ride, I tried to rationalize what was happening (*This is common, a little spotting is no big deal, it's the hormonal fluctuation as I change trimesters*), but I couldn't deny that for several days I had felt much more "normal" than I had before the trip. Where was the mild undercurrent of nausea? Where was the debilitating fatigue I had experienced for weeks? Why were my breasts no longer tender? Why did my fleshy belly feel less swollen and more "squishy" during the last few days?

The truth is, *I didn't want to know the answers to those questions*. If my worst fear was materializing, I wanted to deny it until I was home with my family. I wanted to stay in the Tuscan dreamland where everything hummed with the illusion of perfection.

But the other truth is, when you've lost a baby before, no amount of logic can shoo away the fear when the first sign of death creeps gingerly into your underpants. *This wasn't supposed to happen. Not like this. Not while I'm a world away from my family. Not during my Tuscan dream.*

The dream, it seemed, was hemorrhaging.

Suspended

When my Tuscan dream jolted into a full-scale nightmare in the hallway in Rome, I was confronted with another reality: I really hadn't found "heaven on earth" in Italy. No matter how wonderful our surroundings, no matter how perfect it all seems, we will never know and experience the fullness of heaven on earth until Jesus himself makes all things new. All that we see and taste and touch, though being redeemed, is still flawed—deeply and desperately.

The heartbreak and horror of what we experience in hospital waiting rooms and in our driveways and through our evening news and in Tuscany under a stairwell is part of this sacred reminder: Things are not as they should be, *but they will be*.

Jesus is making all things new. Heaven is at hand and heaven is still coming.

I wanted to linger in the romance, believing perfection was within my reach. But seeing the lifeless ultrasound screen was a stark reminder that we still live in the tension between the *now* and the *not yet*. Jesus has come but he is still coming. Restoration has drawn near but it's still approaching. Heaven is at hand but it's still descending. Every tear will be wiped away but for now we still have reason to cry.

My Sunday in Gemelli Hospital left me suspended—neither pregnant nor unpregnant—with a day of limbo before my flight home. I rejected the offer of a D&C (surgical removal of the baby) and decided instead to try my luck at getting back to Ryan and finishing the miscarriage naturally. Although I had chosen a D&C after my first miscarriage, I wasn't keen on surgery in a foreign country where my lack of language left more guesswork than I was comfortable with.

I spent Monday trying my best to blend in with the throngs of tourists in Rome. The best thing I could do for myself, given the circumstances, was to try to make the most of my last day in Italy. I couldn't exactly pretend as if nothing was wrong, but I couldn't pretend nothing was right, either. It felt ridiculous and desperate, simultaneously fraudulent and authentic.

Rome is truly enchanting; she made space for my pain in the midst of exquisite beauty. I marveled at the wonders of Saint Peter's Basilica and the Sistine Chapel—surrounded by manmade creation (clearly inspired by the Creator) while carrying death in my belly. I cried before Michelangelo's sculpture of the Virgin Mother weeping and cradling her lifeless son. I offered tears as

prayers when the words wouldn't come. The significance and the irony of holding life and death and the hope of resurrection within me while in the Eternal City wasn't lost on me.

The next morning I packed up the jumbled mess of my Italy experience and boarded a plane back to America. I was a hurricane of emotions in search of a shore that would tame and downgrade the storm and untangle the currents pulling me in opposing directions. How could one experience contain such soaring heights and crushing lows? It was all so confusing. I needed the concrete reassurance my husband's arms could give me.

Delivering Death

Almost exactly twenty-four hours after landing in Oregon, I labored and birthed our lifeless child.

The process sideswiped me, each contraction inviting the rush of pain and injustice and agony all over again. I had no idea this concoction of physical and emotional pain was possible; somewhere I had picked up the notion that a natural miscarriage would feel more *natural*. I was wrong. *This whole thing was wrong*. A mother shouldn't have to say goodbye to her child. It feels unnatural because it *is*.

I rocked through each contraction, wailing in pain and wishing someone could put me out of my anguish and wake me up when it was all over. Laboring was a misery unparalleled. Unaccompanied by the endorphins, adrenaline, and promise of holding a child on the other side of the pain, I felt each wave of cramping like another slap in the face—layers of pain, compounding.

Thoughts of laboring a dead baby spun in my mind, and I wished I could take those hours back in Rome and readmit myself to the hospital for the D&C like the doctor had recommended. I realize every woman handles this sort of thing differently—and for some, miscarrying naturally resembles a heavy period—but not

for me. This was full-blown labor, with no midwife there to cheer me on. I loathed every second of it and longed for the familiarity of waking up from the anesthesia with someone whispering, “Don’t worry, it’s all over now.” At least when they scraped our first miscarried child from my womb I could blame the doctors for taking her. This time I couldn’t shift that awful burden to anyone else; I was the one who delivered this child to his grave.

My doctor later explained to me that not every miscarriage ends with such physical pain, but that experiencing harsh contractions is not uncommon either. She apologized for not having had the opportunity to give me adequate pain relief before the onset of labor, and for not more thoroughly briefing me over the phone when I called, desperate, from Italy. (Our distance understandably brought limitations.)

Even though I had experienced twenty-one hours of painful back labor with no medication during our son Judah’s birth, I was not prepared for the intensity of this pain. The physical pain was awful; the emotional pain was worse. Losing one child felt like a tragedy that happened *to* me. Losing a second felt like something happened *through* me and because of me.

In the aftermath of this second miscarriage, I was a furnace of anger, yet over and over again God entered my flames, offering peace for my chaos, hope for my grief.

Peace, Beloved

We named our baby Oliver David. *Oliver* means “peace,” which we sensed God extending to us in the trauma that felt like war on our souls. *David* means “beloved.”

These names represented God’s heart and promise for us, and I believe they are a twofold promise for you too: Jesus offers peace when everything else feels upside down, inside out, and on fire. And *you* are beloved, no matter how broken you feel.