

A conversation about finding God with author **Anne Lamott**

muddling around with JESUS

BOB SMIETANA

ANNE LAMOTT wants to make one thing perfectly clear. She loves Jesus—because without him, she'd probably be dead.

These days, Lamott is a bestselling author, award-winning columnist, church elder, and proud mother of a teenager named Sam. But back in 1984, she was a thirty-year-old struggling writer, drowning in a toxic stew of alcohol, speed, pot, valium, and cocaine, complicated by bulimia and an affair with a married man.

She was, in short, a mess.

"The elevator was going down very fast," said Lamott in an interview from her home in Marin City, California. "I don't think I'd have been alive if I hadn't found that little church."

The church was St. Andrew's Presbyterian, a small congregation meeting in a run-down building near a flea market on the north side of Marin City. After a night of hard drinking, Lamott would slip into the church doorway and listen as the sound of gospel music sung by "a choir of five black women and a rather Amish looking white man" would soothe her soul. She would hang around for the Scripture reading and the passing of the peace, when the older, African-American women of the church would embrace her in God's love. But, as she describes it in her 1999

book, *Traveling Mercies*, once the pastor got up and started preaching about Jesus, she would scamper back to "the sanctuary of the flea market."

But Jesus would not let her be. One night, while still bleeding from an abortion she'd had a week before, and self-medicating with painkillers, Lamott lay down on the floor of the houseboat where she was living and hit rock bottom. She felt Jesus there with her, "sitting on his haunches in the corner of my sleeping loft, watching me with patience and love."

And a few days later, she gave her heart to Jesus with a raw and desperate version of the sinner's prayer which started with "f... it, I quit," and ended with "All right, you can come in."

Lamott laughs when asked if she knows of anyone else who has used similar language in becoming a Christian.

"No, I have never heard anyone else admit they have," she says. "But I bet that there are many who have—because people probably have converted when they are at their very most degraded and hopeless and out of control."

After her conversion, Lamott began the slow process of letting God rebuild her life. She went to St. Andrew's every week, where the congregation encouraged her to keep going, picked her up when she fell, and slowly but surely loved her into the kingdom. By 1986,

she'd given up the drinking and drugs and made plans to be baptized.

Still, she sometimes had a hard time believing that God really loved her. So on the morning of her baptism she called her pastor and tried to call it off.

"I called Reverend Noel at eight that morning and told him that I really didn't think I was ready because I wasn't good enough," Lamott writes in *Traveling Mercies*. "And also, I was insane. My heart was good, but my insides had gone bad."

Her pastor's reply? "You're putting the cart before the horse. So—honey, come on down."

Her life changed again when she became pregnant with Sam in 1989. For Lamott, life as a single parent—going three and four nights at a time without sleep following Sam's birth, dealing with a screaming baby for hours at a time—was almost more than she could bear. The books on parenting in her local bookstore were less than helpful—written by parents who "were doing well" and who said things like, "Well, children with colic can be a challenge."

"What I was looking for when I had a newborn was someone to tell me the truth—that some days are just too long, and you are going to go crazier than

Bob Smietana is features editor of the *Companion*.

“I like the bumper sticker that says, ‘God loves you exactly the way you are and too much to let you stay that way.’ I really believe that is true. And I know that everything Jesus promised us is true.”

you could ever imagine,” Lamott said during a speaking event at North Park University last year. She began writing down her experiences in a journal, which later became her first nonfiction book, *Operating Instructions*.

The book is painfully honest, and at the same time hysterically funny, capturing the absolute wonder and sheer terror of becoming a parent. It also details Lamott’s struggles with her newfound faith and the pain of watching her best friend, Pam, die of cancer. Her vulnerability about failure and uncertainty struck a chord with readers who were tired of pretending that everything is all right in their lives. In Lamott, they found someone who could say all the things they had thought, but were too afraid to say out loud.

“I try to write the sort of stuff that I wish existed—because once I write it, it does,” Lamott says. “Writing has profoundly helped me find out about and record the most important and real areas of my life. So part of the reason I write is to find out more about life, to try and make sense of really difficult life experiences, and to try to find spiritual meaning and humor in all that I have lived through.”

In *Plan B*, she writes about coming to peace with the memory of her mother, who Lamott had helped care for during a long battle with Alzheimer’s disease. Though she loved her mother, Lamott says that taking care of her had been emotionally grueling. So she took her mother’s ashes home and left them in the closet for two years.

“I know that sounds harsh,” she writes. “I assumed Jesus wanted me to forgive her, but I also know that he loves honesty and transparency. I don’t think he was rolling his eyes impatiently when she was in the closet—I don’t think much surprises him. This is how we make important changes—barely, poorly, slowly. And still, he raises his fist in triumph.”

After about eighteen months, La-



mott began to make peace with her mother's memory. The first step was sorting through her mother's belongings. She was surprised, when opening up her mother's purse, to find Kleenex inside. Lamott had almost never seen her mother cry, and realized that her mother had "drowned in uncried tears."

Since *Operating Instructions*, Lamott has written three novels—*Rosie*, *Crooked Little Heart*, and *Blue Shoe*—and three non-fiction books—*Bird by Bird*, *Traveling Mercies*, and *Plan B*. They are all about the same things, Lamott says: "Families, loss, sticking together, community, and the miracle that people can get to know you and still love you."

One of the recurring themes in Lamott's writing is the way God can bring miraculous transformations in hopeless circumstances. That continues to be the case in Lamott's life. She and Sam's father had a bitter breakup when she became pregnant, and did not speak for years. Then, when Sam was about ten, he began asking about his dad. It took some digging and lots of prayer but Lamott eventually found him, and delivered a letter from Sam.

"Hi Dad," Sam had written, "it's me Sam. I am a good boy."

Sam and his dad finally met, and have built a strong relationship. Lamott and Sam's dad have become friends as well. It is a miracle, she says in an essay called "Sam's Dad."

"When God is going to do something wonderful," Lamott writes, "He or She always starts with a hardship; when God is going to do something amazing, He or She starts with an impossibility."

Another miracle occurred six years ago, when Lamott found herself teaching Sunday school. The church didn't have a children's program at the time, and she felt God was tugging on her heart to start one. So she grabbed a friend, and the two of them applied one of Lamott's cardinal rules of writing

to their Sunday school—they started small and muddled around, believing that if they did so, something amazing would happen.

"We offered the kids a Bible story, a juice box, and art supplies, and told them about the love of God," she says. There were a few adventures along the way: some "minor injuries" during a Bible-verse memory game that involved tossing a beach ball, and one child who referred to the dreadlocked Lamott as "octopus head" during class. But to Lamott's surprise, as she describes in an essay called "Holy of Holies 101," the program took off, growing from eight kids at the beginning to more than thirty kids, along with a small youth group.

"I really think that everything I know about writing applies to faith and vice versa," says Lamott. "It all has to do with starting where you are and letting yourself do it poorly and make mistakes. Trying to start with just what you can see through a one-inch picture frame—whether it is writing or starting a church school. Instead of trying to see how it's all going to turn out and what you are going to see along the way, and what you have to worry about in a year and a half, just start small."

In talking about faith and her writing, Lamott likes to use a line from the novelist E. L. Doctorow: "Writing is like driving at night with the headlights on: you can only see a few feet ahead of you but you can make the whole trip that way."

"I am finding out that approach really applies to almost anything I do," she says.

Lamott's latest project is trying to love President Bush. A self-described "yellow-dog Democrat," she realized that her legitimate political differences with the president had metastasized into hatred. And that, she realized, was not going to fly with Jesus.

"I went up to the altar for prayer every week for literally a year and a half,"

she says, "and week by week, I have really experienced some change and some spiritual healing there."

While she's not ready to invite George Bush over for dinner, she has realized that she'll probably have to sit next to him in heaven."

Lamott admits that she still has growing areas. Being the parent of a teenager is one, as is her own brokenness and constant realization that she falls short of being the kind of Christian she wants to be—and to live up to the incredible mercy and love God has shown to her.

She sometimes thinks that life is an emergency room, full of broken people—her job is to pass out "orange juice and graham crackers" and to tell people that there is hope in Jesus.

"I try to put my hope in the promises that Jesus makes to me, and that I am totally loved the way I am," she says. "I like the bumper sticker that says, 'God loves you exactly the way you are and too much to let you stay that way.' I really believe that is true. And I know that everything Jesus promised us is true." □

Books by LAMOTT

Novels

Hard Laughter

Rosie

Crooked Little Heart

Blue Shoe

Joe Jones

All New People

Nonfiction

Operating Instructions: A Journal of My Son's First Year

Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life

Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith

Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith