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Before I had children, I was prepared.

I had read all the books. Seen all the instructional videos. Attended all the parenting classes. All prepared. Ready for baby. There was not one contingency I was not prepared for. Remember me, then?

I couldn't have been more wrong.

The truth is, I *thought* I was prepared for anything and everything...the reality is, I was prepared for nothing. Because my precious books didn't tell me what to do when baby is screaming at 2:00 and they are fed and changed and they don't have a temperature and nothing appears to be wrong. And my instructional videos didn't tell me what to do when the postpartum days hit and mom cries at absolutely everything. The classes didn't give me advice on what to do when you're so tired you don't remember your own name.

I thought I was prepared, but I was not prepared at all for being a mother.

You tried to tell me that, kindly. But I didn't listen. Some things have to be learned on your own.

What I have discovered over the years is that even though motherhood wasn't what I was prepared for, it has turned out to be much, much better. The books and classes and videos undersold motherhood. While they taught techniques and skills and tips and offered helpful medical advice, they failed to address the main component of being a mother—love.

I wasn't prepared for the fact that I was going to fall head over heels in love with my sons. Nothing could have prepared me for that. Even now, when there have been tantrums and backtalk and attitude and rolling eyes (and this is just the beginning), I am bound to these boys not because of what I learned from books, videos or classes. I am bound to them out of sheer love.

And nothing can prepare you for love.

When love walks through your door, it knocks you over. You can't prepare for it, there's no way.

And so when the prophets like Isaiah and John the Baptist tell us to prepare for Jesus, we *think* we do a pretty good job. We come to church. We say our prayers. We try to live good lives. We think we're pretty well prepared for this Jesus character...after all, what surprise can there possibly be? It's been two thousand years since his actual birth. We've read the books, seen the movies, attended the classes. We've got this. We're prepared.

Except for one thing, a big thing, a huge thing...and that is, we've overlooked the love factor. We've failed to address the fact that preparing for Jesus to come to us at Christmas is not like preparing for any other guest, when you put clean sheets on the guest bed, clean the bathrooms and stock up on bread and milk. Preparing for Jesus' arrival on this earth and in our hearts is, finally, impossible...we cannot prepare for him, sorry Isaiah the prophet, sorry, John the Baptist...

We can't prepare for Jesus because we don't know how to receive him. An ordinary guest might turn up her nose at your casserole or snub your housekeeping or judge your unruly children. No matter how hard you work to lay out the red carpet for a

guest, there is always a chance that your guest will reject you. And we all know what rejection feels like. We all know the disappointment of working hard to earn the favor and affection of someone who just plain doesn't give a damn about you. We all know the sting of loving and not being loved back.

So that's why we simply don't know how to prepare for Jesus, as Isaiah and John call us to...we can't possibly know how. Thank God, then, that Jesus' arrival in this world and in our hearts doesn't depend on our being well-prepared. Thank God Jesus doesn't say, "You know what, you keep working on things, I'll come to you when you're ready for me." Because we will never, ever be fully ready for Jesus.

But he comes to us anyway, even in our ill-prepared state, even in our world that is in upheaval and turmoil, even in our lives that are chaotic and hypocritical...we are not prepared for Jesus, and we know it. But still we beg him to come to us anyway. Because, prepared or not, we know we need him...deep down, we know we need God to come to us—to this world, into our lives—so that we can physically touch him, so that he can walk the same paths we walk and cry the same tears we cry. If he is to save us, he must first know our pain.

We are no better prepared for Jesus than I was for my firstborn child. We think we are, but we're not, and that's ok. We can make all our preparations and have all our expectations, but we finally confess that we don't know what to do with a love like the love that Jesus has for us...a love that has no condition and no end...because it's unlike anything we've ever known before. We can prepare and expect all we want, but we are forever surprised by Jesus, because sometimes, when a guest comes and the love is real, the guest decides never ever to leave, and then things are far better than you ever expected, far better than you ever could have prepared for.