

March 2024

Dear friends and family,

Well, now that we are getting into the later part of winter, we have proper cold. Many people who live up here say that we have six seasons, the usual spring, summer, and fall, but also freeze-up, winter, and break-up, each lasting two months. And it actually fits what we experience quite well. It's also fitting that we are getting quite a bit of snow right now, since most of the winter has had a bit less than normal. Still lots, but less than normal. Days like this always make me appreciate the Suburban that God provided for us about nine years ago. I've seen many vehicles stuck on days that it made it through. [Edit: this was true when I started putting thoughts down for this letter a couple weeks ago. Today, however, we passed plus ten. Go figure.] The running joke in Thompson is that the city crews clearing snow will always do the highway first, then the roads with schools, and then one or two other main roads. Following those priority items, everything else should be clear by May or June.

Our lives over the past few months have had lots of mundane keeping on keeping on, as well as times of busy and crazy. We'd like to share a few stories and memories that have happened so far this year.

A few weeks ago, I got up for the usual morning routine of getting the kids dressed, fed, and ready for school. Most of the time, they are up before me and reading or playing quietly(ish), but this time, I walked into the kitchen to find **Abigail** at the kitchen table with her Bible open in front of her, having just finished her devotional reading for the day. It was a very heartwarming moment, and a great encouragement to see her putting time and energy into such an important activity. Some days aren't so simple, and I'll be getting her into bed, and she goes, "Wait, I haven't read my Bible yet today." And so her bedtime moves back a few minutes. **Lily** too, as her reading has progressed, has been working on reading her Bible on her own. Since she's a few years younger, she struggles a bit more with comprehension, and big Bible terms, but it's so good to see her desire for learning God's word.

**Samuel and Ezra** continue to grow as well. They started sharing a room a few months ago, and that has led to some of their best times, and, of course, some of their worst. Ezra continues to be fascinated by anything and everything electrical. He's always the first to spot the light switches in a room. Samuel constantly gives us pause with his very inquisitive mind. Especially his random questions. The other day, in church, with no context, he leaned over to me and asked, "Daddy, do hamsters poop, or no?" This morning, at breakfast, he asked, "Could an elephant break into a police station?" Or the other day, "What if houses started falling from space?" He didn't have quite the same "Why?" stage of many children. Instead, he is in a long-running "What if?" stage.

**Hezekiah** is definitely the biggest, and fattest, of our kids at this age. He is getting into what I feel is the more interesting stage of babyhood, where he smiles, and interacts with you, and is starting to show a beginning of a personality.

We've talked many times in the past about the **Anchored Warriors** groups (formerly SALT groups), and wanted to give a little bit more information on where things are at with them. We made the

decision back in the fall to split the Thompson group into guys and girls. There were a few reasons for this, one of them being that the group was too big to conveniently meet at the place we had been going to. Another reason was that it gave more opportunity for deeper conversation on being biblical men, and biblical women, and the chance to talk about some things that you wouldn't be able to bring up the same way in a mixed group. However, we didn't want to completely separate them all the time, so we also started a monthly youth night at our church, and encouraged all the youth to attend, whether from the AW groups, the church youth group, or elsewhere in Thompson. The attendance for the gals side has been averaging three to six kids, and the guys is a little more complicated. For the first while, it was sporadic, between 1 and 6 or so. More recently, however, we've had some of the guys out regularly, including three boys who have been close friends since long before they came to AW. This means we are more often closer to 5 or 6 youth. One of our main study areas has been biblical men, highlighting their strengths, as well as their faults, and talking about how we can learn from their stories.

The **Anchored Warriors** group in Split Lake is still going fairly well. Attendance there bounces around a lot. Some nights are down to three youth, but we've also had over a dozen. It often depends on who is there, and whether they brought some friends along. Sometimes you go to a house, expecting to pick up one person, and leave with four or five. That said, there are a few kids who make up the core group, and whose desire for friendship and studying scripture keeps them coming.

Some of you may have heard about the excitement of a couple weeks ago when **Lily** managed to get a small plastic piece in her ear. Praise God, we are through the worst of it now, and only have a follow-up appointment in May, just to make sure that everything is back to normal. I will write up the story for those who want to read it, but it's rather long, so I will attach it to the end of this letter. We know there were many people praying for us through that time, and we are so very thankful for all of you. While it was certainly a hectic time, it was much more hassle than it was an emergency, and yet, we still saw God's hand at work in many of the details.

We'd also like to give some more details on **site 6**. That being the new site we are working on for building a new camp. The name "Site 6" comes from the fact that this will be the 6<sup>th</sup> location for Midway Bible Camp since its inception 70 years ago. By God's grace, and the generosity of many people, we got the driveway and main building site cleared down to the soil. We also got the first section of driveway, as well as the highway access, built in January. For some reason, building the entire driveway was well over what we budgeted, but clearing the ground, building the first 100 m, and dropping the necessary material for the rest of it, were about what we planned for. Now we are waiting on God to provide the labour to build the rest of it. Financially, we are just over the \$500k mark, which is very close to half-way for the total budget. We need another \$80-85k in order to get the main building up this summer, which would allow us to continue fundraising and work on the inside of it over the next winter.

Well that feels like a lot of information already, and there's a whole story to write yet. Thank you for your thoughts, your prayers, and your support of our family up here. We are blessed by the people that God brought together, such that we are able to live in Thompson and work the way that we do.

As promised, here is the saga of Lily and her ear. Fair warning, it ain't short.

We'd like to share this story here, not that it was a terrible time as such, but because it highlights some of the extra details that living in northern Manitoba can surprise you with, things that simply don't happen in larger centers. A few weeks ago, right after she went to bed, Lily was cleaning her ear with a small plastic item, and lost her grip on it. It got stuck in her ear canal, just before it would have been out of sight. Nicole was very tempted to try getting it out herself, but with the risk of making it worse, we decided to take her to the hospital in Thompson. Unfortunately, the first person to look at Lily there decided to follow the book exactly, which meant the first thing they tried was a shot of water in her ear. This only forced the piece right down her ear canal, so that it was pushing on her ear drum. Unfortunately (this word comes up a lot), the piece had a point on the back, which was now the main thing against the ear drum, which caused a lot of pain. The emergency doctor then tried the water numerous more times, with no success. At this point, he sedated Lily, so she wouldn't move as much, and tried with various other implements. Now, up to this point, Nicole had been the one at the hospital. I (Thomas) had tried to go to bed, since there was no point in both of us losing sleep. Nicole called me shortly after 1, saying the doctors couldn't get it out, and one of us had to drive Lily down to the Children's Emergency in Winnipeg, about an eight hour drive. My sleep-deprived, and very foggy brain went, "Whuh...?" After I took a minute to wake up a bit, we concluded that neither of us was in a safe state to leave in the middle of the night for the drive down.

Now, I need to insert a detail here. Living in northern Manitoba, we have something called the Northern Patient Transportation Program. This is an arm of the healthcare system that pays for, or reimburses, people who have to travel for medical reasons, when there is no appropriate service where that person is living. So, in our case, there was no ENT (ear, nose, and throat specialist) in Thompson, which meant we had to go elsewhere. The NPTP is designed to make these trips, along with any other routine appointments where travel is required (like seeing an allergy specialist), more manageable. They don't always cover full costs, but will at least go partway.

Back to the story... While Nicole was on the phone with me, she was also back and forth with the hospital staff, who were in contact with the NPTP worker. Under the circumstances, they agreed to get us two tickets on the Calm Air flight that goes down to Winnipeg every morning. Unfortunately, Lily was still not out of the sedation yet, and Nicole was going to need to come home to nurse a baby soon. So we called a co-worker, who graciously came to be at our house while Nicole and I switched places. Eventually, Lily woke up enough for me to bring her home, which was after three in the morning. I got her into bed, and packed a backpack that we could take on an airplane. Exhausted, but wide awake, I crawled back into my bed around 3:30, with an alarm set for 4:45, so we could make it to the airport in time for the flight. It turns out that we really didn't need to be there quite so early, but overall, the flight down went pretty smoothly. As did getting a taxi in Winnipeg.

Time for another behind the scenes detail. The doctor that had been working on Lily in Thompson told Nicole that he would contact an ENT in Winnipeg who should be expecting us by the time we got to the clinic. Since it was the middle of the night, he was going to make that call when he got off shift in the morning. Now I had been told very specifically to take her to the Children's

Emergency at the Winnipeg Health Sciences Center. So my understanding was that there would be a specialist ready to remove the object when we got there.

It was about 10 in the morning when we got to Emergency, a little over 12 hours after it all started. Since this wasn't a critical emergency, I wasn't sure what to expect, but the wait was only a couple hours. The nurses were very friendly, and very helpful. There was wi-fi, and I had Amazon Prime on my phone, so it was mostly restful, other than the whole reason for being there. When the doctor came to see us, however, it was an on-shift emergency doctor, and not the specialist. For reasons we don't know, the doctor in Thompson never contacted the ENT. So when the doctor we were talking to conversed with the specialist, he was not able (or not willing, it was hard to tell from my side of the middle man) to come help. To his credit, the emergency doctor in Winnipeg was also very friendly and helpful, and willing to try what he could, but his bag of tricks was identical to what had already been done in Thompson. He tried flushing with water once, and when that didn't work, we decided to wait for an appointment with the ENT. Especially since Lily had already been through the trauma of it. Unfortunately, this was only going to happen with a referral, and it would be at least a week or two before we could get in.

It was just after mid-day at this point, and I decided there was little point staying in Winnipeg, especially when Lily and I only had one backpack between us. Now, when we had first gotten to the Children's Emergency, I had checked with the front desk staff about contacting the NPTP for a flight home that evening. Now that I needed to get that figured out, it turned out there was a number on the wall for me to call, and they couldn't actually arrange it for me. It was upon calling that number that I learned an important detail in what they provide. Because of the medical nature of the trip down, they covered the scheduled flight for us (as opposed to a medivac, which clearly wasn't necessary). However, unless there is a specific medical reason, they won't cover the same flight home. While they guarantee a way home, it turns out that meant the overnight bus. Hooray. Now, to be fair, they were willing to put that amount towards flights, but then we'd have to cover the rest of the cost of the ticket. Which, under the circumstances, we gladly did. Unfortunately (there's that word again), the communication between the NPTP and Calm Air was anything but clear, and it took many phone calls, and having to go through the check-in line twice, before we were heading for security. So at the end of the day, we made it home, albeit having put in what I would call the most effort for the least productivity I've ever experienced in a 24 hour period.

Now we were supposed to wait for a call from the clinic, in order to book the appointment, as per the referral. There had been nothing that Thursday, and so, on Friday afternoon, Nicole made a phone call. And found out that the fax (yes, you read that correctly, the medical system still uses faxes) had not gone through. More phone calls. Resend the fax. And then we found out that the people who do triage on referrals were not in, and wouldn't be seeing it until Tuesday (since this was over the recent long weekend). Through this time, Lily was great at times, and suddenly sobbing at others. I think the piece in her ear was moving a bit sometimes, varying the pressure on her eardrum. Tuesday came and went with no phone call. So on Wednesday, Nicole tried again. And learned that while the fax had now gone through, the clinic that received it "could not take it." We still don't know what they meant or why, but it resulted in the referral being passed to another ENT at another clinic. And more phone calls. And tears, because it felt like we were

getting the run around. Late on Wednesday afternoon, Nicole was able to confirm that the next viable appointment, without having to wait another week or more, was at 10:45 the next morning. In Winnipeg. That's not much time. Do we book tickets to fly? Is it better to drive? The NPTP rep could not book us anything ahead of time without confirmation of the appointment, and the clinic was closed by the time we found that out. Fortunately, if they have advance notice, NPTP will still reimburse travel costs with receipts. So that was okay. In the end, we made the decision that Nicole would drive down. Immediately. She hit the road a little after 5:00 Wednesday evening, while I looked at booking a room somewhere. Ashern is the only likely spot for stopping, and is about six hours from Thompson. And since the appointment was in the later morning, there was enough time to still get into the city. In the end, with a five-hour night in a motel, they made it to the clinic on time.

Once again, the staff were good, and the ENT was particularly helpful. Although even he had trouble. After numerous attempts, and screaming that was heard in the waiting room, he started talking about surgery, and how long it had been since Lily had eaten, etc. Just before he started acting on it, he decided to make a last ditch attempt. And thanks be to God, he got it. All told, it was only a bit over a week since things started, but it was a pretty tiring week and eventful week.

Thanks to the hospitality of my uncle and aunt who live in Winnipeg (one of whom graciously came to the appointment to watch Hezekiah), Nicole was able to have a good meal, and a decent rest, before heading for home the next morning. Looking back, there were at least a few obvious points where God was smoothing things out for us. I know there are many things we don't know about, but of what I can see:

- God allowed the whole thing to start the week after I had taken my turn preaching at our church. One week earlier, and a lot of the time that I spend working on my sermon would have been very interrupted.
- Saturday is when I usually go to Split Lake, but the Saturday after Nicole drove back, there were some other people who were able to help out, which meant we could keep our family home for most of the weekend, allowing for a time of extra rest.
- While many of the details had a lot of headache and frustration around them (especially on the day I flew down and back), everything that needed to happen eventually did so, and in the grand scheme of life, we are now able to say, it could have been a lot worse.
- Nicole experienced a new peace in the fact that God loves our children even more than we do, and is looking after them. As parents, it can be easy to forget that “our” children is only one part of who they belong to.
- Inasmuch as the medical system leaves room for complaints, many of the people that work in it were working hard to do their job well. Obviously there were some mistakes, or else this story would be much, much shorter. But God put many more people in our path who wanted to help us, rather than not care. And this was true for myself, and also for Nicole, even a couple times at Costco, as she struggled with a baby and a full grocery cart.

– The NPTP is very helpful, up to a point, but they don't usually cover all the costs involved. Some very faithful and generous supporters have already sent us funds to make up for any lack, and we are very grateful to them.

As mentioned above, we have a follow-up appointment booked near the end of May. This is because the plastic piece spent quite a bit of its time against Lily's ear drum, and got poked and prodded quite a bit in the attempts to remove it. Therefore, the ENT wanted to confirm that any damage that may have happened is healed properly. I understand there is a slight risk that it won't, which might require surgery to repair. But for now, Lily seems to be doing well.

Thank you again for praying for us through this. We don't want to make this all sound worse than it was, or blow things out of proportion. We know that many people reading this will have had far scarier incidents with their children. But so many of the details felt like they came from living in Thompson, as opposed to an area closer to a larger center. As such, what we experienced will be very similar to what anyone living here could experience, and for that reason, we wanted to share this story. If you got this far, thank you for sticking it out to the end, and thank you for sticking with us.

Thomas and Nicole Olney

