

Sara Groves, Episode 2

Michael : So here I am with the wonderful Sara Groves. So thank you so much for coming on the podcast. I recognize that some people, especially here in the UK, might not know who you are, so I wonder if you could just tell us who you are, what you do?

Sara : The highlights are, I am a singer songwriter. I've been touring as a touring musician for 25 years and 14 albums, and I've been to the UK a few times. I have three children and a husband. They're older now, they're 22, 20 and 15. My kids are in that place launching into life and then my husband and I own a place here in St. Paul, Minnesota, and we own the Art House North, which is a plant from the Art House in Nashville, which was the brainchild of Charlie Peacock and his wife Andi Ashworth. And "Creative community for the Common Good" is the banner that we work under. And so we are doing a lot of things here locally through the arts and having hard conversations through the lens of the arts is an aspect of what we do. And then we have a lot of theatre and concerts and things like that. So we live across the street. There's a church right across the street that's Art House North, and then we're here in the heart of St. Paul.

Michael : That sounds amazing. What got you starting to write songs? What pushed you to write songs and get them out there?

Sara : Well, I was writing from very young. It was my way of, I struggled in school. My mom was shocked. She thought I was reading really young, but just the way that I learned and the way that I interfaced with normal school just wasn't a great fit. And so I had a lot of frustration and things like that. And the way that I worked through that was playing the piano. So from a very young age, I would come home and spend one to two hours a day just poking around, writing my own songs, copying other songs. I took lessons. So that was a part of my life then, but I didn't know anyone who worked in the arts in that way. It was always, my dad sang in church, but that wasn't his career. He was a Professor of Old Testament. My mom was an Elementary School principal. So I went into education. I saw that modelled and loved it. And I taught High School for three years right out of college, which is our secondary, what do you call High school again?

Michael : Secondary school.

Sara : Secondary, yeah. So I taught 15 year olds, 10th graders, and then I was about three years into that. And my husband and my father-in-law were just, they're activators. They have that gift. And so they felt like the songs I was playing at home just for myself had merit. And so we started going out touring and within a year we were on the road full-time, Troy and I, so that was in 1997. We started recording and travelling. Then it just never stopped basically. In the early days I just remember every invitation would lead to more invitations and we just kind of followed that thread. I heard Andy Gullahorn say once, I'm very grateful for my small career and I also have a very wonderful listening audience that have just supported me over these years. And it's my little niche, but I love it. And then to be able to also be in the community through Art House North has been wonderful.

Michael : I keep having to remind myself that 1997 is 25 years ago. It seems like it's closer than that.

Sara : 26. Yeah, no, it's insane.

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Michael : So this podcast is about artists who explore, like you say, those difficult questions, particularly grief, struggle and hope. And listening through your back catalogue, it's quite clear that those themes are there from very early on. So what draws you to those themes and the need to write about that?

Sara : Well, I think I've gotten closer and closer to, (and I don't think this will ever stop), that you're trying to sort of become who you are and do the things you're called to do more clearly. When you start out, you have all this baggage or oughts and shoulds and things. And so I have learned about myself that the best songs come from my bearing witness in the most truthful way possible, in that I feel like even the Psalms really bear this out, that David is just bearing witness. So the different roles that we have in our faith communities, I feel like the artist is supposed to talk about the whole thing and just react basically on a very human level to what is happening. And I think the closer I can get to telling the truth about how that felt, how this affected me, what that meant, how I held my faith in this moment of crisis, the closer I get to telling myself the truth and then telling the truth through my art making, that's very helpful.

Not that it's all utility, but it seems to resonate more and is really important to me. I think I used to start my songs by asking what is the faithful thing to say? And I don't start writing that way now. I think the faithful thing would be to bear witness to the whole thing. And I think if I only bear witness to the glory and the shine, then I lose credibility. I think we have to bear witness to the whole spectrum of the human experience. I think Jesus in His very being and what God does through Christ is evidence that that human experience is valuable. It's something He wanted to be acquainted with. And so I think sometimes we are moving in the other direction where we want to be acquainted with the 'God way', the 'God mind' in a sort of hyper spiritual way.

And I've always been drawn since I was little to, 'but wait a minute, what's the orthopraxy? What is happening here in practice?' We are here, we are here and this is hard and we're doing this thing. There's really no delineation to me between the two. I would work to tear down that sacred-secular divide and... Sorry, I forgot where we started with this question. But yeah, that's what drives me. When I get out of bed in the morning, I want to create or unpack or name the things that are happening to me, because I think when I do that for myself and it helps me, then it goes out from there and it helps other people say, 'oh my goodness, that's how I feel!'

I wrote about my marriage and I've written about relationships and all that, but it wasn't until much later that I began writing about my journey with depression, and that was a whole thing. I didn't realize how much shame I had around that, how much hiding I was doing and trying to keep everything kind of tucked in. And so over and over again, the album-making process has brought to light, 'oh, I've got to work on this. This is a whole room that I haven't even entered'. And so I find that it's very helpful, cathartic, but beyond that, turns the light on. It brings light into places that I've been hiding. And I think that that is important too.

Michael : Yeah. Oh goodness. So I was just scribbling down notes. There were so many avenues we could go with all of that. And I think you're so right, aren't you, that us speaking from that place of difficulty gives credibility, like you say, because it's real. But it also, I think sometimes people think we've got to sing about all the glory and the light, and that somehow that's going to drag people out of difficulty. Whereas actually, like you say, the Psalms, they don't start there. They end up there eventually sometimes, but they spend a good while just going, 'this, I dunno what to do. I don't know how to praise you right now. My bones are being crushed and you are crushing them. What do I do?' And actually as we read that, we go, 'okay, I can walk this journey with him because he's starting in the place I'm at,

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rather than he's going, come here' from a great distance. And I certainly have found that with your music. I was going to come onto this later, but since we're talking about this kind of thing, let's do it now. Your song 'Enough' on *Floodplain*. So what year did this album come out? 2015?

Sara : Yeah, 2015. *Floodplain* came out in 2015, *Abide With Me* was 2017.

Michael : So we heard it a few years later. We were in Nashville for Hutchmoot in 2019, and we had just come out of a very difficult church situation, and, I was never diagnosed, but I think I went through depression for the first time at that point. And hearing your album and you singing it from, it seemed, such a place of pain and struggle, I could go with that. In the song 'Enough', you sing about these "stretches of sorrow" and they're "patches of joy", but "stretches of sorrow" and that being my experience at that point. But you are clinging onto the hope and it's almost like clinging on for dear life, and that's all we can do. And that is an act of wonderful faith. So thank you for doing that. And it's so, so vital, but enough of me talking about your song. Could you tell us more about that song and perhaps that album where that all came from?

Sara : Yeah, I talk about this story now a lot because I think that I stumbled on a whole ... not stumbled, I knew we were there. I knew we were there because I have many people in my family and in my life that struggle with clinical depression. And I watched them in a faith community just do their best. And like I said, I just had a lot of shame myself. And then when I started waking up to my own loads and loads of shame around this that I was dealing with depression, I started looking at the other people in my life. And my dad has been faithful, he's been faithful with his depression, but he has dealt with clinical depression his whole life.

I grew up in a holiness background in a Pentecostal space. I love my people and I am still speaking to that space. I am not in that church now, I haven't burned any bridges or anything like that. But what I would want to say is in that space, these things are made. They are a spiritual problem, really. That is the way that they're addressed. And I don't understand how the body and the spirit and all those things work together. But I have seen the people in my life who have struggled, they have extra rocks in their backpack, and they get up every day. And many of them have made something beautiful and many of them with the extra weight of this heaping shame, heaping shame. And I think, look at you, look at us. Look what you made. Yeah. So I wanted to speak about that, and that wasn't me just trying to say, 'well, I'm not going to get better, so I'm just going to get comfortable here'. I told Troy, I don't want to turn into Gollum and say, this is my thing, my pet, my depression is my precious, you can't take that or that's my identity. It's not my identity. This is the trail that I'm on. It's not who I am, but I'm on this trail. I find myself there. And it still, again, since *Floodplain*, I have had two more pretty big bouts of depression, and I've known better now what to do. I know how to take care of myself. I know how to push pause and how to think about it.

But the gift of the floodplain in that metaphor, I'll just go into that for a second. Obviously this goes into a whole lot of directions for me. But when I was in my deepest depression ever, it was 2013, 2014, and I could not see myself in the future. I would look at the calendar and think, 'how much longer do I have to do this', meaning life? So I wasn't even aware, I didn't have some kind of suicidal ideation or anything like that. But I was asking myself daily, how long is life? How long do we do this?

Michael : How long oh Lord?

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Sara : Exactly. And I was not handling it well. I was self-medicating at a level. I was not taking care of myself and it was very self damaging. I had lots of good friends who were saying, 'you need to read these verses and eat better food and run and do all these things'. And I believe all these things are true, and I'm doing all those things now. But at that point, I was at such a critical place and, even with this set of friends, I couldn't even talk about it.

So I realized I was trying to engage all these things, and one day I was running along the Mississippi River, (I live just a quarter of a mile from the Mississippi) and I was running downtown St. Paul trying to get those endorphins going, just literally holding on for dear life. The way I describe it is if you had a really difficult confrontation ahead in your day, how you might feel that morning you wake up and maybe you know you're going to get fired or you have to fire someone. I mean, at that level of conflict. So I will wake up to those feelings of conflict days on end for no reason.

So my body is doing something and my brain is a meaning maker. So it runs around and it tries to find out 'why do you feel terrible?' 'Well, because you're a terrible mother', 'because you've basically failed at life'. It'll pull up all kinds of wonderful things. And so your body is going to keep trying to make sense of what's happening to you.

So then I entered a season of insomnia, and I didn't sleep for three months, and that was the worst of it. I wouldn't wish it on my worst enemy. This is the point where I'm running downtown, I would stay up all night. I would just try to get all this adrenaline in my system to just be able to go to sleep. And so I was running and I saw a man experiencing homelessness down by the Mississippi River, and I thought about his life, and most of the people experiencing homelessness that I know even by name here in our neighbourhood, they have mental health issues. I was thinking about him and how maybe he didn't have the protections that I had, the many support networks that I have.

Then I looked up the hill and at the top of the hill, (St. Paul's on a bluff), and at the top of the bluff was the James J. Hill house, and he was a railroad baron. And he had built this beautiful mansion at the top of Summit Avenue in St. Paul. And I was thinking about these two men and thinking in my sort of emotional poverty or in this place, I know people that are just rock solid. They don't struggle, they really don't deal with that kind of thing every day. And my question to the Lord, as I'm running and trying to get these endorphins going, is 'what do you make of this man? And then what do you make of me? Am I not trying hard enough? Did he make his bed and now he has to lie in it? What's your view of him and what's your view of me? I'm like, I'm on the floodplain down here and the waters rise and I am flooded. I can't bootstrap my way out of that place'. And I felt this very quiet word to my heart that some hearts are built on the floodplain, and it wasn't a negative. For me the floodplain for years had been a place where I hiked and it's verdant and green. It's not a utility place, it's not practical. You can't build on it. It literally exists to accept the water when it overflows its bounds.

And it's amazing. There are things that happen in that biome that don't happen anywhere else in the world. And so it was a positive, it wasn't like your depression is positive, but it was like some people's hearts are built in this fragile, very close to the edge place. And it was an invitation to write about it. 'Will you write about this place?' And I was at this point, bawling and running, but I accepted that. I felt like God said, 'This is not your identity in Christ. I've got folks all over. I've got folks that are on the bluff. I've got folks on the floodplain. I have a lot of folks on the floodplain. They're beautiful children of God, and they wake up every day and they've got extra rocks in their backpack'. And so it was an invitation for me to write about this place and explore. Later I read that the floodplain actually scientifically is both the

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most fragile and the most resilient biome in the world. So these words, I hold them together. We are fragile and we are resilient. And I've seen that in my own life. And so I wanted to explore that space.

Michael : That's beautiful. Thank you. Thank you for sharing that. And again, thank you for sharing that with others so that if they're walking that road, they can walk it with you. I'm quite conscious as an artist that I think we have a responsibility not only to tell our own stories, but also to, I guess, steward the stories of those around us. And you mentioned earlier on about reacting to what is going on around you. I mean, how do other people's stories come into your writing?

Sara : Yeah. I think a lot of people assume any relationship story I'm writing is about Troy and I. And it is not! I'm often exploring or putting myself in someone else's shoes and exploring. 'Enough'. You asked about that song earlier, but I had a friend who had experienced food insecurity. I had gone to her house and we were talking in the kitchen, and I just got up (because I feel at home there), and opened the cupboard to get something, and there were a couple of cans of beans. And I turned to make a joke about it, 'someone needs to go grocery shopping'. And the look on her face was just... and they were college educated and they just had hit on a time. And I realized it opened my eyes to the number of people around me who might seem solvent and are not, and again, the shame covers that. And so the song 'Enough', this friend of mine remained very scarred by that experience. So even years later when they were doing better and they were on a more firm foundation, there was just a lot of fear about what if that happens again? What if we lose everything again? I heard in this little promise that God says to the people of Israel basically that you'll find honey in the rock, and this is sweetness in hard places. And so I was just thinking about that. There aren't a lot of things I can say for sure. And as I get older, there are fewer and fewer things that I can say with total certainty because my ability to deal with mystery has grown exponentially as I've gotten older. But I felt like I have found sweetness in hard places. That is a truth about life that I believe resonates with me and life can be exceptionally difficult. So I was trying to capture that idea on behalf of her story. So she's the one with the child upstairs sleeping.

Michael : Oh, beautiful.

Sara : Waiting and kindness. Yeah,

Michael : That's lovely. I guess another more recent example from listening to your, I thought it was a great idea, you doing the commentary on your album on your recent one, and you talk about 'Remains of the Day' and dealing with the difficulty of celebrity pastors. Again, like I say, we came out of a difficult church situation, so that resonated a lot. And the Talking Heads influence as well. Love that. Always good to have a bit of Talking Heads in there. I guess the question is when people are dealing with something quite difficult and deep and sensitive, how do you navigate telling their story? I mean, do you literally ask them permission or do you feel, if I can keep it vague enough, it's going to be helpful in a more wider way? I dunno, how do you deal with the sensitivity?

Sara : Yeah, yeah. I have to struggle with that. And I remember reading Anne Lamott, she basically said, everyone's fair game. They know you're a writer, so if they didn't want to be talked about, they better be on their best behaviour. They knew you were going to write about them basically. And so she kind of goes all out. I am sensitive about that. I've made mistakes in the past too, but overall I'd say no one knows it's them. I wrote a song called 'Tornado' and it's about this destructive personality or whatever. And I was writing about a couple of different people that this kind of person that just comes no matter what you do to sort of firm things up, they come in and just rip things up. And how I wasn't going to let bitter seeds grow in me. On my end, how do I respond? How do I continue to live with this tornado

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person? And one of them was a friend, a friend's sibling, and then another person was a person in my life and they called and said, 'I love that song'.

Michael : Did you tell them?

Sara : No, no. Oh no, no. I work a lot with songwriters and teach, do a lot of teaching around songwriting and we have workshops at Art House and then I do one-on-ones and things like that. And one of the things I find is people are afraid to get specific because they feel like they're being exposed. And I think that's kind of where the art and the poetry, that's where that resides and that there are ways to be very truthful and actually very clear without exposing someone. But I will sometimes write to someone and say, 'I just want you to know this was influenced by your story' or something like that. Every time I've done that, it's been well received, but it's never been negative: 'you need to know this is you'

Michael : The preacher who uses it to ... Yes. And that's not a good thing, is it?

Sara : No.

Michael : Yes. In fact, I was struck with, in 'This Cup' in *Floodplain* about the line, if I got it right, "thank God for our dependence to our chasm of need and how it binds us together in faith and vulnerability". And there is a beauty, like you say, about opening yourself up and putting it out there and then being specific about the difficulties and about the situations. And that's going to help people more if you are that honest about things.

Sara : Yes. And specificity. People think that universal means 'I need to take my experience and make it more broad'. And I think that if it's too broad, it's like a rock face with no footholds, you don't have any way in. People will write a song and then I'll listen to the song and I'll say, 'tell me the story behind this'. And the story behind it is so alive. And I'll say, 'okay, some of that language has got to make its way into the song, or people will not have any way in. It's like a wall with no doors'.

The song 'Nothing', it's at the end of my last record. And it's about a person who's maybe not emotionally available and they don't basically tell the people in their life that they love them. And it's the family kind of moving through different emotions. You move through 'really?!', incredulousness, 'are you kidding me? You have nothing good to say?' To anger. 'This isn't about you'. And to sorrow, sadness. Yeah, actually, it would be nice. I could use that. I could use your support. And then at the end to hope of 'I'm going to hope and believe, give you the benefit of the doubt that all that same stuff is in you, you just don't know how to get it out'. And so I move through those different emotions and, again, it was very personal to me and someone that I am close with, but also, I can't believe the number of people, and especially the guys in my life, the guys that were playing on that song, all of them came and said it resonated. That father-son relationship, I was really surprised it really hit a nerve in that way. So yeah, I was kind of nervous about writing this, is someone going to feel like I'm talking about them? No one identified with that song or felt like, 'I think you're talking about me'. But I felt like I'm really grateful that I responded to that conflict in me and kind of worked it out.

Michael : I wonder whether it's a bane of artists that we think we're unique, but actually our art depends on us not being unique and the fact that we have shared experiences. But as artists, we're able to express those experiences so we're able to give words to situations and feelings and so on that other people maybe haven't got the words for, but they're still feeling it all. They're still going through it. And

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so embracing the fact that we're not that unique will actually make our art better because then it's a shared story.

Sara : Yeah, that's beautifully put. I've never heard it said that way. And I really like that we are some sort of door or we're playing a role in the whole. And that I think gives you a better sense of it's your job, your job. I remember Charlie Peacock saying to me early on, he said a couple things that really shaped the way that I write. One was, 'God is the ocean, and we keep writing about a cup of water'. That really has stuck with me, and I've been trying to write about the ocean ever since. The other thing he said was that he said, 'you are a contemplative. Not everyone does what you do. They don't wake up. And for you it might be a bit haunting, it makes you crazy and you wonder, why can't I be like everybody else? Or why do I do this?' I didn't even know that that was unique to me in the sense that I just was a naval gazer at the nth degree. But Charlie was saying, 'lots of people go to work, they do their job, they're having this conflict in their marriage, they don't even know how to address it or what it is'. (*Fireflies and Songs* was my marriage, sort of relational record.) 'And they stick that in and something, 'oh yeah, that's what I'm experiencing''. We do have this weird relationship with artists in the way that we have hierarchies of who's making it and what you're actually doing. And the pedestal obviously. But yeah, Charlie made it more domesticated. It made it more pedestrian, like, 'yeah, that's a job. That's a role that we need someone in the community to mine the language for our different experiences'. So I love that.

Michael : Yeah, I do a lot of children's music and a big sort of philosophy behind what I do is the fact that children, even more so than adults, lack the words to express things. And that's why I think as a children's songwriter, it's important to write about struggle and suffering and even death because kids experience all of that as well, but they really lack the vocabulary to, and when you don't have the vocabulary, you struggle to understand something, but as soon as somebody puts a word to something, oh, okay, it suddenly comes alive. And so being able to do that and do that for kids and adults is so vital.

Sara : I love that. I love that. You're right. How alone did you feel as a kid? You were just trying to make sense of the world? I think childhood is such a, we're innocent. We have our innocence, which is when we lose that we see it. We have that awareness. But yes, that place without language is very lonely and to the kid. I think when you interview people about their childhoods, there's just so much unnamed feeling in that space. And that's beautiful. I love that. What a lifeline.

Michael : Well, and thinking about it in terms of, well, grief, abuse, sufferers, depression, those are very lonely places as well. And you can feel one of the big things is that you feel so alone. And so having somebody who walks alongside you and just says, 'I've been there'. It's like in *The West Wing* when Josh ... do you know the episode? ... Did you watch *The West Wing* back in the day?

Sara : It's been a while.

Michael : Yeah, it has been. So when Josh is struggling with trauma and the Chief of Staff who struggled with alcoholism and he tells a little story about somebody coming along, somebody's fallen in a hole, but instead of trying to pull him out or whatever, he gets in the hole and he says, 'well, that's no good. You're in the hole with me now'. He says, 'yes, but I've been here before, so I know the way out'. And so it's getting alongside people and a big thing is just going, 'oh, I'm not the only one'. And that immediately just gives some rays of hope. And art is just such a wonderful way to express it because like you say, artists are contemplators, so they're analyzing and working this stuff out. And if they're good artists or musical and writer artists, they're good with words so they can find those words or words for it. That's wonderful.

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I was going to say, and maybe we've answered this already, but you seem comfortable, if that's the right word, with being vulnerable. Does it always come naturally that you go, 'I've heard this story, I've just got to get it out there'. Or sometimes is it a bit of a battle going, 'I should tell this or I should express this, but I'm not sure if I can'?

Sara : Yeah, I think we still have hierarchies of acceptable sins and acceptable struggles. I think that exists. So sometimes I think I'm being very vulnerable and then I'll sit down with something else and think, 'Ooh, but I could never talk about that'. I think it's not that I'm not trying to build a mystery here like I have these vast secrets and stuff like that. I just think that's human reality, that we're all in the soup. My mom said the other day, she was reading this story about Jesus drawing the line in the sand and she said, 'He basically says, if you're an alien from outer space, you can make this call. If you're a human being, you can't make this call'. And she just said, 'we're all in the soup. We're all treading water'. And I dunno, that's also giving me language.

These days I feel like the "with-us-ness" of God, what you just said in *The West Wing* reference, yeah, "with-us-ness" of God is the gift. And again, I grew up in a space that was like we had to claim victory. It was very bootstrappy in the sense that it was like we were attempting to be holy, that God's work through us could only happen the cleaner we were, the more efficient or effective that work was going to be of being a conduit. So then you have this, in my experience anyway, and I won't judge everybody who's trying to be holy, but in my experience it created a very siloed, I was then on my own to get holy so that God could then do his work through me. And it was a very siloed, lonely and then very performative masked experience. So I still have some of that mask. I definitely still think if I were to talk about *these* things or *this*, I would be really judged because that was, you're going to church and coming together. And there are a lot of wonderful things I loved about growing up Pentecostal, and there was a real openness to the way that I expressed myself to God. I loved Sunday night altar time, you just go and cry. And as an emotional person, sometimes you're down and it's so physical, you're down at the front with your whole family on your knees, hugging each other. I mean, it's very emotional, but also there's something very beautiful about it. To me. There's also, I had to find God outside of my emotions and that couldn't be the only measure of God's activity in my life. If I'm feeling really super worked up, that means God's at work. I had to find a new way to know that God was.

So that "with-us-ness" of God to me is more the point these days. It's just like we're all in the soup. We're all just kind of making our way. And so how much more so love and kindness and gentleness, it's needed. It's the only thing that communicates. Because when we come at it from this thinking that we have a footing or a leverage that we don't actually have, to me that confessional life, that kind of constant, 'I'm in the soup, we're all in the soup' is a better place to come from because then it allows for curiosity about my neighbour, 'how are you doing? What have you found? And are you okay?' And a little less, 'I made my way out of the soup' and operating from a place that actually isn't real. And I think that bears out in what I read in Romans and what I read throughout Scripture.

Michael : So related to that, with the new album, you talk a lot about what goes before, how we remember things, both the good and bad. So I guess this is related, how do you feel those experiences of hurt and struggle shape us, shape you today? Shape our relationships?

Sara : Well here, and it's not just in the United States, everywhere we're experiencing a rift, a tumult. It's in our national dialogue and it cuts right down to our kitchen tables and we're all doing that. So this record was my way of, I'm treading water alongside everyone else and we're trying to find our way and find our space and everyone's laying claim to Jesus and laying claim to, 'He would be on *my* side', 'He

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would be on *my side*'. And you have this rearing of, for us, a big-time Christian nationalism, 'we should be in charge and we should be making ourselves a Christian nation in these ways'. Top down, power over. So yeah. And then I'm in a city, I'm in St. Paul, Minneapolis, that's the Twin Cities. So we've had a racial reconciling or a confrontation, a conversation just exploded out on the world stage with the murder of George Floyd.

So this record is my trying to grapple with both that national conversation and the conversation around my kitchen table. There's a woman that was like a second mother to me and we've had ideological differences and it's had real world impact. And then you can't believe the things that are coming between you, someone you feel like 'you were the one showing me the way, you were the one inviting me into this gospel life, this God way. And I kind of can't believe what you're saying'. This has been difficult for me. And so I've always been a justice-minded person. And so I want to learn, especially here in the Twin Cities, my family, those events, George Floyd, the crossroads where that happened was 38 and Chicago and we lived at 42nd and Chicago for 10 years.

So we went right down. That had been our neighborhood. We went right down and we were in the middle of all the feelings, everything that was going on. Not later into that night, but we were there the first day and then we were taking our kids out to just, let's go listen to people. People are saying there are two Minnesotas, there's a white Minnesota and there's a black experience here that is totally different. So I was trying to work with not just our civic dialogue here, but also it's permeating everything. And I tend towards grief. Some people I know tend towards anger. Troy was out having street fights on Facebook. My husband, he's a very big personality and he's vocal and I don't love conflict. So we all are reacting in our different ways. And I'm off in the weeds now, but if you listen to the song, every song has sort of like it's touching on some broader topic like church abuse or something like this. But it's also then really bringing forward the grief around the people involved.

So 'Remains of the Day', I had someone close to me that was just absolutely tuned up and spit out in a megachurch situation. And you have these people that are supposed to be sowing wheat and you look up and realize they've been sowing weeds for a long time and now where do we go from here? And I was trying to say, I think we can still be noble. I think we can still, let's keep telling the truth. Let's keep reflecting, turning on the light. Let's keep turning on the lights on these spaces that have become secretive and dark. Yeah, sorry, that's all over the place.

Michael : No, that's fascinating. As I was writing my own album, exploring the grief and hope, I was quite struck, although it came out of my Dad dying, but the whole experience and experience that other people had in terms of church and church abuse and things, it's a grief of its own. It's a grief and it's a loss, but there is hope. The gospel does bring hope. It does bring light. Yeah.

So I've come to my final question. What's next for you? You produced, you mixed and engineered your recent album?

Sara : I did not. I just produced it. I'm on the computer. My little setup right here is where I write. So it was very rudimentary, but I would build the track, send it around to friends, get it back, and then I send it to my friend. It was mixed by two friends, Ben Gowell and John Mark Nelson and then mastered. So yeah, I still sent away for those steps, but it was stretching enough.

Michael : So what's next musically for you?

Sara Groves, Episode 2

Sara : Last year I went on a stillness retreat to think about where I am headed and over and over again I felt I'm supposed to put my parents in the centre of my attention. And so I am still writing. It's been a very full year of collaboration. I just wrote with Ginny Owens and I've been writing with Paul Zach and different writers here. And so I've had kind of a year of collaboration, but I haven't started my own sort of thing again, because I am in this journey. Both my folks have new diagnoses that are difficult and especially my Dad is terminal. So they're in the centre of, they just moved here about a mile from me. And so we're all, again, treading water and I see my family on a raft, all these little pictures. But I see us and my job these days is to just check in even with my kids, my parents, 'everybody ok?', and someone needs to be attending to just checking in on everybody. And so that's a big part of my life right now is caregiving and making sure everybody's able to talk about what they're up against. So that, and then I'm still writing and working, but I don't have any concrete music plans.

But Art House is at work all the time. Our art centre is across the street, and we are having a lot of fun there. So if you go to arthousenorth.com, we have some things online. About half of what we do is in person, well maybe three fourths of what we do is in person. And then about a quarter of what we do is online. And there are a lot of resources for artists. In partnership with Art House Dallas, we do songwriter groups, feedback groups, writers groups. Art House Dallas has virtual artist groups. So all of those things are online and it's really a great way to, if you've felt like 'I want to share what I'm making with somebody', it's a great way to do that.

Michael : That's brilliant. The links will be in the show notes. People head straight there. What song should we play out with?

Sara : I'll let you choose. Honestly, you've mentioned a few, so whatever you think.

Michael : Brilliant. Well, thank you so much, Sara, for joining us on the podcast.

Sara : Thank you, Michael. Thanks for inviting me.