

# Longing for His Presence While Celebrating Advent

This past Sunday, my two little nieces performed in their church **Christmas** pageant. I love to watch Christmas pageants and so few churches do them anymore (for good reason: that amount of work is no joke). One little red-haired lamb and one angel with tinsel-trimmed wings stole the show for me. But our littlest girl isn't known for her meek and quiet spirit: she's a ferocious mover-and-shaker, none of this silent night, holy night business for her.

So I found myself out in the lobby, watching Christmas through a glass partition. When she settled down into a calm heart and listening ears again, we sneaked into the back of the darkened room to finish watching. The children sang at the top of their lungs, beautiful in their simple costumes, surrounded by hay bales and iPhone screens, and in that moment, the grief of longing nearly overwhelmed me.

**Advent** simply means "coming" – so for me, it is about the waiting. When people talk about "living in the tension" I think of Advent. It's the time when we prepare to **celebrate** His birth and we also acknowledge that we are waiting here still for every tear to be wiped away. I think of the waiting for the **Christ** child, yes, and I think of the still-waiting for all things to be made right, for our longing for Shalom.

Would we be so filled with joy at his arrival if we weren't so filled with longing already?

If Christmas is for the joy, then Advent is for the longing. As I learned in particular through our lost babies, one after another after another, the joy born out of suffering and longing is more beautiful for its very complexity. The joy doesn't erase the longing and the sadness that came before but it does redeem it, it may even stain backwards changing how we look at those days or years. But the joy is made more real,

richer and deeper perhaps, because we longed for it with all our hearts for so many days.

I'm not one for crafts for Advent, I admit. I'm rather simple because I know that Advent is more for me than for little ones, and that's okay. Light the candles, say the prayers, read the Scriptures, let them learn to sit in that quiet tension, we are preparing for the joy that comes only after the longing.

I'm waiting for all things to be made right.

I'll be honest, I'm not feeling the joy much these days. I'm learning to be okay with that. I'm learning to be okay with the sadness that rises, with the frustration of a broken world, with longings still unfulfilled, with the profound ache in my human heart for all things to be restored, to be redeemed, to be whole. I'm learning to turn towards the third way: the one that holds both the joy and the sorrow.

People I love are struggling financially or emotionally or spiritually: real honest pain. I'm frustrated with divisions in the **Church**, with conversations that miss the point. I feel distracted and fragmented, caught in the thicket of other people's priorities and pet-issues and dysfunctions.

A hurricane in the Philippines slipped from my consciousness too quickly. My friend's son is sick, no one knows what to do.

My other friend's little nephew is in hospice. There is nothing more wrong than a child who suffers and a parent who feels helpless to make it stop – I need my Saviour who suffers with us, my God who weeps, who longs to gather us to himself as a mother hen gathers her chicks.

Advent has become more important to me as I've gotten older. When I was young, I couldn't understand this emphasis on waiting – let's get to the Christmas joy! Now that I have wept, now that I have grieved, now that I have lost, now that I have learned to hold space with and for the ones who are hurting, now I have a place for Advent.

Now that I have fallen in step with the man from Nazareth, I want to walk where he walked into the brokenness of this life, and see the Kingdom of God at hand. Now that I have learned how much I need him, I have learned to watch for him.

Advent is perhaps for the ones who know longing.

So during the Christmas pageant, the tears were sliding down my face as the beautiful children sang their innocent Christmas songs, they were illuminated angels to my eyes, and I was standing on the edges in the darkness in my sadness.

"Where are you?" I whispered to heaven. "The weary world is still waiting."

Evelynn began to dance. She raised her hands over her head, and twirled slowly, watching her hands move in the darkness. She sang along, off key without words but quietly now. I picked her up and crushed her to my breast. She wrapped her pudgy arms around my neck, "my mumma" she said. I began to turn slowly with her in my arms, swaying, both of us quietly singing a little off-key. I buried my face into her ringlets and held on.

Sometimes the only thing left to do is simply hold on to each other and dance in the darkness, waiting for the light.

Maranatha.

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