

How This Christian Woman's Faith Carried Her Through the Violent Death of Her Twin Sister

Kristine Luken was murdered by Palestinian Arab terrorists a week before Christmas, in 2010. What was supposed to be a joyous holiday became the most difficult Christmas ever for Kristine's family, and especially her twin sister, Kathleen. Less than a year earlier, Kristine and Kathleen celebrated together at Kathleen's wedding. That year, Kathleen was overcome by grief and loss that challenged her faith. In a lengthy dialogue with Kathleen she explains some of her thoughts then and now, about that year, the holiday season and her faith.

"I had asked Kristine a few months prior to her passing to come and celebrate Christmas with my husband and me," Kathleen said. "She moved to the U.K. in September 2009 and was somewhat lonely as she had left her country, her home, her family, friends, most of her possessions and her job to follow the call she believed God had placed on her life." This was a literal leap of faith.

As much as Kathleen had wanted her sister to celebrate Christmas with her and her husband, initially she had planned to stay in the U.K. "The Israel trip was a rather sudden decision to visit Kay, whom she had met four months earlier on a tour to Poland. She mentioned in November that she was going to Israel. I urged her to come spend Christmas with me," though it seemed like Kristine would be in Israel then.

In what would be their final communication, Kathleen shares, "I had hoped we would talk before she left for Israel. I

received a text from her the day she flew. I texted her back immediately telling her to have fun, and be careful, and call me when she arrived. I never heard from her again and I don't know if she ever read my text."

Kathleen is still overcome with emotion about that correspondence and what eventually happened. Tears well up as she thinks of it today. "I never ever could have imagined I would never see her or hear her voice again. My sweet sis, my best friend. How can this be? It is still so dumbfounding, so unbelievable. So tragic and so heart-breaking even years later."

Christmas came only a week later and was breathtakingly difficult. "I remember reluctantly going to a Christmas play. I was raw and in shock. The church that was not one I regularly attended. I was lonely for familiar faces, for people to hold me and cry with me. Those who knew my husband were in shock by the circumstances. Most barely knew that I, his new wife, sat among them grieving during a joyous holiday celebrating Christ's birth. I felt alone that Christmas without having my extended family around." Kathleen is reflective, however, and recognized that it was "no one's fault, just tragic circumstances accentuated in the wake of a traumatic loss" that she suffered mostly alone.

Yet for Kathleen, not only was Christmas to be joyous in general, but specifically, Christmas was her first with her husband. "Celebrating and decorating our home as we were making our own new traditions as a couple was strained by the loss of my sister. Our first Christmas was stressful, sad and bewildering. Going through the motions was very difficult. I was trying to process something I had no experience processing (or preparation for). I had never lost anyone very close to me and I was having trouble processing the tragic, violent loss of my identical twin sister and best friend."

Rather than spending Christmas with her extended family,

Kathleen was focused on things that were morose and very real. After Kristine's murder, spending Christmas together "wasn't really on my mind as I was now suddenly discussing with my family where Kristine's resting place would be." They were in a grieving state of limbo.

"There was talk of laying her to rest in Israel and my heart screamed 'No,' as I wanted her back in the U.S. and away from the land and place that took her life. I wanted her safely home even as I knew what I would receive back was only her 'tent' as her spirit was now in the presence of the Lord. Tears flow again at the recollection of this grievous time, and reopens wounds that may never heal completely, but as Kathleen affirms in everything she does, 'With God, all things are possible.'"

It wasn't just the death of her sister that caused pain. Because this was a terrorist murder, it was a criminal case of an American for which there was very little precedent in Israel. "During the weeks following Kristine's passing we were struggling to bring her home. It took nearly two weeks. I felt like I was having to fight to have her released. I wanted her home and not there, where I suppose she was being held per se due to the ongoing investigation.

"I felt helpless and frustrated that they would not allow us to bring her home. Not a fight I or anyone would want to deal with, especially while grieving a loss of unimaginable proportions. You can't imagine what this would feel like unless it was your loved one whose life was taken 6,000 miles away."

Paradoxically, Kathleen just wanted to "have my sister back safely, strange as it seems." She sought out the help of a Jewish congressman, thinking he would have the pull that she didn't.

What is celebrating Christmas like now, remembering that

painful year and the days following Kristine's murder? "Christmas (is still difficult). It has deep significance for me as a Christian even while understanding God is not bound by time, but instead stands outside of it, and knowing that Christ was not born in December, but more likely in September during Sukkot, the Feast of Tabernacles. It is still a very special holiday that I very much enjoy celebrating with my family and fellow believers in Christ."

That Christmas, however, Kathleen was "not really present, but in shock, unable to comprehend the reality of what had happened. December was spent working to bring my sister home," contacting those she knew to share the sad news, deciding where she would be laid to rest, buying a burial plot, planning a memorial service, planning a burial service and the unimaginably difficult decision of deciding what she would wear. "I chose a wedding dress to signify that she was meeting God, her Bridegroom (Isa. 54:5, 61:10). Never could I have imagined or pondered such decisions that I would have to rise up and make. My husband and my sister's friend Naomi helped immeasurably. She and her family lovingly served our family with a gracefulness, a beauty and peace, as we grieved. There are no words to describe what I had to do in my grief and sorrow under the tragic circumstances."

Since 2010, each Christmas gets "better." "It was such a hard time of year, which became sadly associated with her passing. As December approaches, and then the day, I find myself sullen, irritable and inconsolable. It was hard to celebrate, and I felt like for many years I just put on the face. But sadly, for many years, inside I swam in remembrance of her passing eclipsing the beauty of Christmas and the real reason for the season, Jesus."

Now, Kathleen hopefully affirms, "I am better able to separate the joyous celebration of Christ's birth and the tragic passing of my sister. It doesn't mean I don't get sad; it just no longer consumes me. Once, they were inextricably linked,

Christmas and her passing. I struggled to reconcile feelings of a God who loved her, yet did not intervene when she called out to Him. It cannot be reconciled, only accepted."

It was a struggle, but "accepting the fact that God is Good, He is Love, had to win out. My shaking fist had to come down. Demanding answers as to 'why' had to be relinquished. I surrendered to what I will never understand this side of heaven. I am grateful I chose God, and that He will never give up on me. I was running away from Him in fear, sorrow, grief and a pain so deep, but like in Psalm 139, where could I go to flee from Him? He is always there."

How does Kathleen go on and what about Christmases in the future? "I am grateful to God I am on this side of my grief, not that I am through it, but just on this side and not where I was. God carried me just like in the poem, *Footprints*. He has asked me to walk through the valley of the shadow of death and not sit down in despair, as tempting as it was. It takes more courage, fueled by God, to carry on and not give up. It's a huge struggle. Giving up is the very thing the enemy shouts and whispers not in my life, but in my love, hope, trust and my joy in God alone, and in His son Jesus Christ. In God and His goodness."