

Advent Mourning

December 2 - December 25

This Advent calendar is meant to demonstrate that the birth of Christ is not only an invitation to the brokenhearted, beat down, and depressed to join in the fun all the merry folk are having. Christ's birth is *for* those who mourn, who recognize their neediness. It is for those who say, "I am broken, I am hurting, and I am a sinner. Jesus, save me."

Soak up these scripture passages. Be encouraged by these short reflections meant to articulate the complex reality of living in pain while waiting in hope. Follow up with your own prayers – both praise and lament. And know that Christ is with you. Always.

Grace and Peace,
Kendra Broekhuis

December 2 – Prophecy

He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he has born our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God and afflicted. {Isaiah 53:3-4}

The Old Testament contains hundreds of prophecies about Jesus that He fulfilled during His time on earth. The prophet Isaiah makes it clear that Christ's victories weren't the only thing that was foretold. Jesus was nicknamed "Man of Sorrows" hundreds and hundreds of years before He was born. His role wasn't only to be our saving Messiah, but to first become entangled in our earthly grief.

Even a short highlight reel of His life can attest to that fact: everything from His humble birth in a stable, to seeking sanctuary as a refugee in Egypt, to the rejection by even His closest friends, to His excruciating death.

As humans we are wired to flee from suffering. It's contrary to what we were originally designed for. And yet, Jesus embraced suffering on purpose, starting with stepping down from everything twinkly and bright – even His heavenly throne.

Man of Sorrows. What a name.

December 3 – Longing

*O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not hear?
Or cry to you “Violence!” and you will not save? Why do you
make me see iniquity, and why do you idly look at wrong?
Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention
arise. So the law is paralyzed, and justice never goes forth.
For the wicked surround the righteous; so justice goes forth
perverted. {Habakkuk 1:2-4}*

The essence of Advent is waiting. People had been waiting for the Messiah to come and save them ever since that first fateful bite of fruit and invitation to Death in the Garden of Eden. From Genesis 3 all the way to Luke 2, there were thousands of years of waiting. Thousands of years of suffering.

“Waiting” almost seems like a weak word when that timeline is put in perspective. The prophets weren’t just patiently sitting in a waiting room to get their teeth cleaned, or counting down to December 25 so they could open a couple boxes wrapped in paper. As heard in Habakkuk’s emotional opening to the rest of his book about Israel’s looming destruction – the prophets were constantly *longing* for a rescuer. Both from their physical agony and their spiritual distance from God.

Like a deer panting for water, like a prisoner crying out for mercy, like a world groaning for relief from its chaos: So we long for Christ to come.

December 4 – Weeping

Thus says the Lord: “A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping. Rachel is weeping for her children; she refuses to be comforted for her children, because they are no more.” {Jeremiah 31:15}

Jesus was born. Herod learned about this newborn King and was overcome with dark fury. As told in Matthew 2, He ordered that all boys age two and younger be murdered. A man blinded by jealous rage committed genocide against his own people – and left an entire region in a state of severe grief.

“Rachel is weeping” because the babies she conceived, bore, and tenderly cared for were ripped from her hands in the name of ruthless supremacy. “Rachel is weeping” because senseless acts of violence—falsely justified in the name of maintaining power—happen every single day. “Rachel is weeping” because grief is real and pretending we can ignore it is a fantasy.

Sanitizing all that happened surrounding Bethlehem during the first few years of Jesus’ life does us no favors. The more we look away from the world’s weeping, the less we understand our collective need for that newborn King to bring peace on earth.

December 5 – Promise

Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. {Hebrews 10:23}

As human beings we make a lot of promises to each other. A friend promises to guard a secret. A husband promises to keep his marriage vows. A parent promises to care for her child. And yet, when we look around the world it's easy to see that very few keep their promises. Many can testify through the pain of their own lives: nothing hurts quite like that of a broken promise.

God made a big promise too – a promise that one day He would send the world a savior. Though the prophets never had the joy of receiving that promise during their lifetime, the book of Hebrews commends them for holding onto hope in what they didn't get to see with their own eyes.

In God's perfect timing, He kept His promise. Even Jesus' many names declared as such:

Messiah – the King promised to save us.

Immanuel – the Comforter promised to never leave us.

Everlasting Father – the Caretaker promised to never reject us.

Finally, promises kept.

December 6 – Freedom

The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion— to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the Lord for the display of his splendor. {Isaiah 61:1-3}

This is who Jesus came to save: the poor, the brokenhearted, the captive, the prisoner; the mourning. Which one are you? This is what He promised to do: to proclaim good news, to heal, to free, to release, to comfort. Which are you most yearning to receive?

The greatest gift we'll ever get can't be stuffed in a box or ordered on Amazon. Christmas is anything but worthless plastic. It's the beginning of the solution to our every problem and basic need, starting with that fresh baby lying in a manger.

Whether we are grieving our losses or in despair over our brokenness – trusting Jesus is the spring from which our freedom arises.

December 7 - Comfort

*“Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel” (which means, God with us).
{Matthew 1:23}*

The Bible often encourages us to not be afraid; upwards of 365 times it references God telling His people, “Do not fear.” That’s one reminder for each day of the year. At times that might feel like a personal failure and source of guilt for those who have experienced grief of any kind. They know that some of their greatest fears have already come true, that they aren’t immune to sorrow. It’s hard *not* to fear what else could happen.

But the beauty of the Immanuel Promise is that God doesn’t just nonchalantly yell, “Don’t be afraid!” right before He walks out of the dark room and shuts the door. He answers our fears by promising to be with us. He doesn’t expect us to face our fears alone.

Those who have walked dark valleys also know that even the most articulate words can’t take the pain of our reality away. But where words fail, *Immanuel*.

Surely He is with us always.

December 8 – Hope

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God’s power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. {1 Peter 1:3-5}

We might feel a little bruised, beat up, and exhausted as we come into the holidays. Maybe it’s cancer, grief, divorce, anxiety, or depression. Maybe it’s something else.

Whenever we begin to question whether or not Christmas is for us, we must remember that Christ’s birth was the beginning of the man whose entire purpose on this earth was to live, die, and rise up from death in order to save us. Christ’s birth is the reminder that our hearts won’t always feel this way; our minds won’t always be broken. It’s the gift that some day we will be made whole, we will be fully satisfied, and we will live in perfect fellowship with our loving Father.

Christ’s birth is for those who realize that hope isn’t a feeling; it is the act of believing. And so in this season, we wait. And while we wait, we often hurt. But while we hurt, we always hope.

God is with us. This weary world rejoices.

December 9 – Preparation

*In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said, "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight."
{Matthew 3:1-3}*

We spend weeks preparing. We cook extravagant meals, bake delectable goodies. We decorate our homes and wrap presents. And on top of all that, we up our social interaction by 400 percent. It's easy to get plowed over by the emotional burden of preparing for and experiencing the holidays.

And yet, all of our traditional preparations have little to do with what John the Baptist had in mind when he preached from the wilderness. He wasn't concerned with outward appearances as people prepared for Christ's ministry to begin. He commanded listeners to prepare their hearts: Repent. Make way for Christ by turning away from darkness to a life rooted in trusting Him. Allow the King uninhibited access.

There's something about sorrow that strips away our need for outward pretenses. Sorrow leaves glitter less sparkly; it reminds us we must loosen our grip on all that is fleeting. Sorrow makes it easier to understand that God doesn't

desire our fancy; He desires our humility. He favors a contrite, needy heart.

December 10 – Bethlehem

But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days. {Micah 5:2}

Bethlehem was labeled unimportant and undistinguished, especially compared to Jerusalem, its royal neighbor five miles to the northeast. That fact alone kept this tiny town in tune with a major theme related to Christ's birth: God loves to ignore our labels in order to work in His subversive ways.

A delightful fact about Bethlehem is that its name means "house of bread." Bethlehem might have been considered "too little," but the meaning of this tiny town is still significant to a faith whose life revolves around bread. It's significant to a people who know what it is to hunger for more.

We physically hunger for a loaf of bread. We hunger for a loving community to gather together with around a table in order to share bread. We hunger for the bread of truth from God's Word that nourishes our souls. We come to Christmas hungry, and from the House of Bread came the One who would break His body - like bread - for us.

December 11 – Mary

And Mary said, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant.” {Luke 1:46-48b}

We carry expectations with us all the time – into careers, church, marriage, parenthood. And now we’re in the season when we’re told to expect the “most wonderful time of the year.”

I wonder if that’s what Mary felt through months of scrutiny for being pregnant sans husband; if that’s what she felt as the pain of labor mixed with the smell of hay and manure, or when the only place to lay her baby was in a manger. “Yes, this *must* be the happ-happiest season of all.”

No matter how Mary felt, she knew the birth of God’s Son was about something more than her circumstances. It was about much more than what she expected her life to look like. It wasn’t about lowering her expectations, but erasing them completely to replace them with the highest expectation of all: A baby boy named Jesus. God becoming flesh and making His dwelling among us. The beginning of salvation from our brokenness. This gift fueled Mary’s faithful obedience.

Whatever our not-expected circumstances, we can cling to our long-expected Jesus.

December 12 – Joseph

And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” {Matthew 1:19-21}

Joseph had a dilemma. The woman he was engaged to was pregnant, and breaking up required both a divorce and to stone Mary to death for her alleged infidelity. But then Joseph had a dream. An angel appeared, affirming the truth of Mary’s role in Christ’s first coming. He told Joseph to take Mary as his wife. Whichever of Joseph’s fears remained, he faithfully obeyed.

Joseph was a carpenter from an overlooked town, but God always favors submission over status. Joseph was a compassionate husband, and he became a protective father. He teaches us that though life is unpredictably hard and we won’t always have angels appearing to us in dreams to direct our paths – we can seek to honor God over satisfying our own gut feelings, or pining after others’ approval. As we face the unknown, this is what matters.

December 13 – Birth

Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit.

{Matthew 1:18}

When someone loses a loved one, they don't just lose a person they are deeply attached to. They lose all the future milestones they will never get to celebrate together. They lose all the memories they will no longer make. They lose everything that never was. Death – for those left behind – feels like a sharp ending.

But when someone holds a newborn baby, there is often a feeling of hope. That baby is fragile and innocent – their life outside of their mother's womb is just beginning.

It's remarkable that God chose to come to earth through birth. He made Himself tenderly vulnerable, yet used symbolism that was ever so hopeful. Though the story could have sharply ended after Adam and Eve left the Garden of Eden, through the birth of Jesus, God wrote a most beautiful beginning.

When all seemed lost, hope was just about to be born.

December 14 - Humble

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.

{Philippians 2:5-7}

Though He never gave up being God, Jesus embraced the humility of becoming human. And not just any human, but a baby born to a couple of modest means, seeking shelter among farm animals, living under the ruling of a hostile empire. Jesus chose to humble Himself all the way to the cross. There were times the pain of His humility was so great that He begged God to relieve Him of His suffering. But Jesus obeyed even to the point of death so that He could give us life.

Sorrow has a way of humbling us. It reminds us that we aren't in control; that we aren't the ones who open opportunity's doors, or force our kids to turn out a certain way, or add to the number of our days. Though we certainly don't choose our sorrows, we can choose to humble ourselves in the way we cry out to God and lean into His provision instead of our own insatiable need for understanding. We can ask Him to soften our hearts toward others who are also suffering. We can beg Him to help us trust His purposes through what seems senseless.

December 15 - Love

See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. {1 John 3:1a}

The holidays have a way of either emphasizing our nostalgia for the good gifts we've been given, or the pain of the dysfunction that clouds our daily lives. The idea of being part of a church family with loving brothers or the child of a loving Father may feel completely foreign to those who've experienced deep bitterness around the dinner table.

But if there's one thing we can mine from digging into God's grand story, it's that He loves us: from the time He looked over all that He created and called it "good," to the way He sent His one and only Son to save us, to the way He is preparing a place for us to join Him as the ultimate, redemptive, never-ending finish to this story.

No matter the pain in our lives, we've been given great gifts: faith to believe in the One who can save us, and hope to hold onto while we wait. But even greater than faith and hope is the love He gave us when He set His glory aside to die for us – His friends, His children. This isn't a reason to not feel saddened by the rejection we've experienced. It's a reason to rejoice in the genuine love of God - our friend and Father.

December 16 – Shepherd

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want...Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. {Psalm 23:1,4}

Long-term suffering has often been described as a journey. But unlike a journey, suffering isn't something that is chosen or that can be prepared for ahead of time. It's overshadowed with so many uncertainties, like not knowing where you're going or how to get there or exactly how long it will take to arrive. Long-term suffering feels more like a dense forest, desolate valley, or unpredictable storm.

The good news is that for every forest, valley, and storm we find ourselves in, we are promised a Shepherd to lead and guide us. Long before Jesus invited the shepherds to herald His birth, He referred to Himself as a shepherd. The title richly explains the way we rely on Him moment by moment, and the way He promises to stay with us no matter what.

With Jesus as our Good Shepherd, we are promised the protection of His rod and the direction of His staff – comfort through whatever desolate, valley of the shadow of death we may face. We might not know when or if our suffering will end this side of heaven. But with the Lord as our Shepherd, we have hope that our wants are only temporary, and that our eternal needs will be satisfied forever.

December 17 – Angel

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!” {Luke 2:14}

Angels used their overpowering presence to prepare the world for Christ’s birth. They remind us that Christ’s humble humanity was preceded by His heavenly divinity. It’s also noteworthy that the angels ended their grand announcement to the shepherds with worship: “Glory to God!” they sang.

Worship can be hard to embrace when you’re struggling. But when we choose to worship through our pain, we realize we’re not praying the prayers or singing the songs for the physical health, wealth, or surface-level happiness that isn’t guaranteed. We’re there for something far better, far richer, and more lasting than what time steals or decays. We’re there for hope – for that tiny newborn baby who grew up to have his outstretched arms nailed to the cross in love for us. We’re not worshipping to receive anything. And yet – as we die to ourselves and to all we thought this life could have offered us but didn’t – we’re worshipping to gain everything.

Even when we’re casting our deepest sorrows into God’s hands, we can give Him the glory by praising Him for who

He is and what He has done for us. Painful worship is meaningful worship.

December 18 – Found

When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.” And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph and the baby lying in a manger. {Luke 2:15-16}

There were no passive characters present at Christ’s birth. Mary went through the nausea, aches, and pains of pregnancy and delivering a baby. Joseph acted as protector and companion in their journey to Bethlehem. The angels worked as God’s messengers. The shepherds weren’t teleported to the manger where Jesus lay, but used the sign the angels offered them to actively seek out and eventually find Him.

Though we view even our faith in Jesus as a gift, we are still given an active role to play as we live out our faith. Like the shepherds, we are told to seek Christ, knowing that seeking anything but Him will always leave us feeling empty and in want. We don’t seek Jesus *and* the world’s frivolities. We seek Christ alone. In our poverty, our disillusionment, and our rejection – we must seek the One who truly satisfies. The beautiful thing is the promise we can trust God to keep: If we seek, we will find Him.

December 19 - Witness

And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. {Luke 2:8-9}

Being a shepherd in ancient Israel wasn't considered cute like it is when we dress five-year-olds in tunics and send them stage left during our Christmas dramatizations today. Shepherds were despised, considered unclean, and stereotyped as unreliable. They were rough around the edges, even marginalized.

Once again, Jesus not only associated with society's lowly, but invited them to take a special role in the real-life drama of His birth. It was the shepherds God chose to first announce Christ's birth. And then it was the shepherds – who were not even allowed to bear legal testimony in court – who immediately ran around town and bore testimony to their Savior.

How we herald Christ's power to our weary selves and the weary world around us says a lot about who we truly believe Him to be. If Christ is the good news of great joy for all the people – even to our modern-day shepherds – then we will put our hope in Him and seek opportunities to share that hope with others.

December 20 – Blessing

But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. {Luke 2:10}

We can't grasp how Mary must have felt after Jesus was born. The Bible doesn't share any detailed dialogue from around the manger. We can imagine that – compiled with intense exhaustion – Mary was beautifully overwhelmed by the majesty of all the miracles God had just performed.

Though she may not have had many words in the moment, she cherished what she saw and processed it as much as she could. Mary counted her blessings. Though she didn't have many earthly treasures to her name, she had the one true blessing of being in the presence of God. And that was definitely a moment deserving of her awe and reverence.

Pondering our blessings this Christmas season is not about calling bad things "good." God certainly grows beautiful roses out of the scorched earth of our lives, but that doesn't mean we must pretend the part when we burned to the ground was pleasant. Disease is painful. Death is the enemy. Broken friendships wound.

But we can ponder the ways God has used our trials to shape us, broaden our perspective, and mature our faith. We can praise Him for the way He has provided for us. Grief for our sorrow and gratitude for the blessing of God's presence can live together in tangled harmony.

December 21 – Jesus

And at the end of eight days, when he was circumcised, he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb. {Luke 2:21}

God named Him Jesus, which translates, “Yahweh is salvation.” His name proclaimed the one reason He came to earth. He was also called Christ, which means “Messiah,” or “anointed.” He was not only the newborn king, but He was covered with the power and guarded with the wisdom of the Holy Spirit.

His name isn’t only a declaration, but the way to our salvation. When our emotions are feeble – ebbing and flowing and overtaking us each day through seasons of sorrow – we cling to that one simple Name. When our brains can’t handle deep thoughts or shallow clichés, we can grasp the Name above all names: *Jesus*.

We cling to Him and He helps us deal. And when we just can’t deal because it’s all just too hard, He provides the people, the prayers, and the help we need through the valley.

He is Jesus Christ, our promised king and deliverer. To the weary world full of us burdened by our sins and its companioning darkness, Jesus’ is the best news of all.

December 22 - Joy

The Lord has done great things for us, and we are filled with joy. {Psalm 126:3}

Though we might assume the opposite of joy is sadness, sorrow, or grief, the Bible confirms that joy and grief aren’t mutually exclusive of each other. We can grieve our present sorrow and find joy in our future hope all within the same moment.

But there is one thing that a life of joyful focus on Christ can’t harmoniously live with: a life of sinful self-centeredness. When our daily agenda is absorbed with our worldly desires, we lose the potential for the lasting joy that is found in being Jesus’ friend.

Though our suffering might not be rooted in a personal sin we’ve committed, our suffering is still a ramification of living in a world torn apart by sin. A world that we – as sinners – have contributed to. This is why the birth of Jesus is good news of great joy. In Him we receive forgiveness for our sins; we no longer live in shame before our righteous God. And with our sins washed away, we find lasting joy in His infinite grace.

The joy of Christmas isn’t wrapped up in all the gifts we think we deserve to open from under our tree. It’s actually wrapped up in the gift of the tree that was shaped into a cross. The gift we are undeserving of but received anyway.

December 23 - Peace

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this. {Isaiah 9:6-7}

Each day can feel like a battle when life chaotically churns around us. Anxiety over everything it takes to face twelve hours of being awake can make us want to immediately retreat to the meager safety of our bedcovers. Not to mention the constant barrage of bad news coming from our real life and our newsfeeds.

It's easy to over-spiritualize peace – to mistake it for something equal to a lack of conflict in our lives. But on the night of Christ's birth, an army of angels came to declare peace to God's people. Peace – paradoxically – is often something to be fought for: everything from giving our bodies the physical rest that they need, to defending our mind from anxieties with prayerful dependence on God, to seeking justice for those oppressed by our world's constant state of war.

Peace is often beyond our human understanding – especially during chaotic seasons of sorrow. But finding

peace is not a matter of strengthening our faith. It's a matter of recognizing that the object of our faith is strong, and therefore trustworthy.

December 24 – Light

In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. {John 1:4-5}

Sometimes it's not during the day when our pain hits us. There are enough distractions and daily to-do's that keep us occupied. Sometimes it's when the quiet darkness of nightfall sets in that we're reminded of our harsh reality. That's when our anxieties flock and our questions compile. That's when the tears come.

When God created the world, His first words were to push back the darkness: "Let there be light." And in the second beginning of His story, God once again sent a great light into the world.

Darkness can feel overpowering. It can take the form of broken relationships, shame, power struggles, people who inflict pain, and that pain inflicting other people. There is darkness in death. There is darkness in the way nature groans from an absence of shalom. But even with all that teaming darkness, Christ's light cannot be overcome.

December 25 – Good News

And the angel said to them, “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.” {Luke 2:10-11}

Jesus was nothing anybody expected, but He is good news for all:

To our hunger, He is the Bread of Life.

To our darkness, He is the Light of the world.

To our despair, He is our Hope.

To our chaos, He is the Prince of Peace.

To our rejection, He is our loving Father.

To our injustice, He is our just Judge.

To our brokenness, He is our Healer.

To our grief, He is our Comforter.

To our confusion, He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

Jesus was nothing anyone expected, but He was everything everyone needed. And that is good news, *especially* for the weary.

Whether or not we have a “Merry” Christmas, I pray we’ll have a holiday filled with hope.