

Longest Night Service
(December 23, 2018)

After I sprained my ankle, it turned several satisfying shades of blue and purple, some of which has yet to completely fade weeks later. My ankle swelled up like a parade balloon and wouldn't allow me to put weight on it no matter how much I wanted it to, forcing me to take the past few weeks much more slowly than I wanted to. People noticed the boot and or the crutches and the brace and they leapt to help me, carrying things for me, opening doors, holding doors open for about forty-five seconds longer than they thought they were going to need to as I hobbled my way forward. Friends and acquaintances alike would exclaim, "What have you done to your foot!" upon seeing me arrive with my patented step-sliiiiide, step-sliiiiide, step-sliiiiide. In short, everyone could see that I was hurt and everyone was understanding; helpful, even.

I needed that visibility in order to heal, because deep down, I think that if you can't see a problem, it's not a real problem. Unless you're gushing blood or a bone is sticking through, you need to get back up and play through the pain. Mind over matter. We'll look at bandaging up whatever's wrong when we've got some time to rest, when there's not so much to do, but right now, unless it's an emergency, we're going to keep on keeping on.

I come from a line of football coaches, in case that wasn't apparent.

But the truth is, it would have taken longer to heal if I didn't acknowledge the injury and rest my ankle when I needed to, and if I didn't accept the help that other people offered me. My black-and-blue foot probably saved me a couple of weeks of lingering pain on the other side of the healing process. If my sprain that hadn't shown up so vibrantly, I would have ignored the pain and limped on for months.

Grief is like that for many of us, I think. If it's not visible, it's hard to heal from, and it's only visible for such a short period of time. The time between the diagnosis and the funeral, or the time between the phone call and the wake, or the time between the papers being filed and the divorce being finalized, as long as they may seem in those moments, are finite periods of time. It's not often that you find people who understand that those moments are the tip of the iceberg when it comes to grief. And just when you think that iceberg has melted, it surfaces again, brought up by the warm currents of the holidays or anniversaries or triggered memories. This on-going, invisible grief can be more difficult to deal with than the fresh grief we felt at the moment of loss.

Of course, there are also those kinds of hurts and loss that people never see, or don't take seriously when they do see them. Struggles with fertility. Miscarriages. Abuse of every kind. Loss of friendships. Loss of relationships. Loss of homes or places of safety and comfort. Loss of jobs or careers or roles or dreams. All of these things cause real pain and real grief that is exacerbated by this time of year.

And we wish someone, anyone, would just understand, without us having to explain. Telling someone else that you're grieving takes vulnerability and energy and we might not have that in us right now, but it would be so good for someone else to understand that we do want to hear our loved one's names. We do want to tell stories and think of all the things they loved, or would have grown up to love. We want someone to understand that we need space sometimes and not come chasing us down, or someone to ask if they can join us at the Christmas tree as we sit looking at the lights, and just listen to a little bit of what's going on. We wish someone would just get it.

But the world is not a wish-granting factory and so we do our best to get by. We share articles on facebook that explain why the holidays aren't happy for everyone, hoping that they'll open just one person's eyes, and go back to our celebrations in whatever mood we can muster up that day. We say the responses that talk about joy we don't feel. We pray the prayers that talk about hope that we don't have. We sing the hymns that talk about love when we're not experiencing. We do our best to smile and laugh around family and friends, to meet the expectations of the season. That's just the way life has to be lived.

I know that's the way I've lived my life. Most of the darkness in my life has been the invisible kind, the kind that I myself even have trouble taking seriously. Grief over the sudden and unexpected deaths of two of my friends, both of them educators who should have had long lives ahead of them, has hit me in waves over the past year, but it's not my dinner table that will have an empty seat, it's the one in their families' homes. The same with the three matriarchs of my life back home who died this year. The empty spaces where they should be in church and around the neighborhood are real, but I was not the one who had to greet everyone who came to their funerals. I mourned right along with four of my friends as they lost their children before they were born, but it's not my arms that ache to hold a baby lost to miscarriage. I have walked with my friend as she and her husband divorced and she begins to heal, but it's not my heart that was broken over unmet promises

of faithfulness and forgiveness. It's been death by a thousand cuts this past year, but none of them was big enough to break the surface.

And then there's the pain that's only my own. Seminary is a time of tearing apart so that you can rebuild and if you're doing the work right, you're not only tearing down your false idols of what you understood God to be, you're also tearing down some of the mistaken ideas you have about yourself. I had thought I was indomitable, inimitable, and inexhaustible, but I've spent the past year being knocked down upheaval in my personal life, by past abuse becoming a present emotional reality, by changes in relationships, and by depression and anxiety that has been exacerbated by all these challenges, all of which have caused me to fail to uphold my responsibilities in school and in work. I've felt like a complete failure, completely alone, completely hopeless. There have been times that I haven't wanted to go on, times that I've wanted to be done living my life, and yet, even with all that scary, serious loss staring me in the face, it's hard for me to take it seriously. I found myself in my therapist's office listening to her explain an activity that would, in the end, be the thing that would help me pull my mind back from the edge it was teetering on, saying, "Oh, but that's for people with real problems."

Sometimes our pain is invisible, even to ourselves.

But the wonderful, glorious thing about the Christian faith is that our pain is not invisible to God, even when it is to us or to those around us. We are seen and known and loved by the God who made everything, from gluons to galaxies, from quarks to quasars, from starlings to stars. When we hurt, we never hurt alone. God shouts this truth from every inch of creation, but sometimes our pain and grief, the world's pain and grief, is louder than that, and so God chose to whisper it, to come to earth as a tiny baby in a far-off land a long time ago. Christmas is the time when we remind ourselves of the lengths God will go to in order to be with us, especially in our pain. We are not alone. Our pain is not invisible or unimportant to God. No matter what it is we've lost, it mattered. That's why it hurts, and will continue to hurt.

And that is why God will continue to be with us, in this season and throughout our lives. Because God knows our hurt and God knows that there's no simple solution to our pain, so God chose to join us in it. Now, I know that this is a high-flying theological claim and that for many of us, in our pain, we could not care less what

God is “doing.” But whenever we’re ready to see it, I promise you that we’ll be able to see the presence of God around us, even in this season.

It’ll be there in the hug that brings unexpected comfort.

It’ll be there in the picture that brings a smile where before there had only been sadness.

It’ll be there in the loud, boisterous moment where for a second, just a second, everything seems whole again.

It’ll be there in the stories we tell about those that we’ve lost. God is always there in our remembering.

All those moments of kindness and goodness were planted into creation and they were given new life right alongside the baby who was laid in the manger. We only need to welcome them, the way we will welcome Jesus on Christmas.

Now, none of this is easy. I know that firsthand. But we’ve already made a first step. We’re here, in this place, with these people, who have all come because their pain, visible and invisible, was too much for this holiday season. We’re not alone. And best of all, God is with us. My prayer for you and for me, in the days ahead, is that we would see our pain and acknowledge it, no matter what it is. Pain is pain and grief is grief and it all deserves our attention and care. You can’t just treat the wounds that bruise. And once we’ve done that, I pray that we would be wrapped up in the kindness and goodness hidden in this world that has been so unkind and cruel to us, and held close in the presence of the God whose coming this season celebrates. Amen? Amen.