

Blue Christmas

*I'll have a blue Christmas without you
I'll be so blue thinking about you
Decorations of red on a green Christmas tree
Won't mean a thing if you're not here with me*
(Words and music by Billy Hayes and Jay Johnson)

This popular 1950's tune has been an anthem of heartbreak for two generations. We tap our toes to it, hum the background refrain, and try to ignore its repetitious tune as it runs endlessly through our heads. Christmas background music more ignored than heard. As we ignore the music, it seems as if we are trying to ignore the heartbreak, too. After all, who really wants to be blue at Christmas time?

Christmas will be especially challenging this year because of what it will mean to my family. My brother, Harold, died this year. Harold was born on Christmas day, and I last saw him when I celebrated his birthday at Christmas time last year. He died five weeks later. Somehow, Christmas day now signifies both his beginning and his end, and never again will I be able to separate the two. Christmas has always been my favorite holiday, and the joy of the season hasn't totally escaped me, but as it draws near, a new awareness is beginning to creep in. I think I'm going to have a Blue Christmas.

Like a lot of people, I have been in avoidance mode, unprepared to embrace the full impact of the coming day, and not really knowing how to prepare for it anyway. My younger brother provided a speed bump for me this week when he told me that the siblings who live closer to my hometown have made plans to memorialize Harold on Christmas day. I had no plans to return home for the holidays, but that didn't prevent me having a flash of sorrow and feelings of being left out. Guess you just can't predict what a grieving heart will do.

If your loved one died recently, chances are you feel like you are hurting while the rest of the world goes on as if nothing happened. Even worse, you may feel like the world demands that you celebrate even though you are hurting. Not that they should not celebrate; it's just hard for you to fit into all that joy and festivity. It is no secret that grief seems more acute at Christmas.

Early Christian writings contain a letter written by a church leader to the church in ancient Corinth. In his greeting, the writer reminded his readers that those who have been comforted in times of trouble must in turn comfort those who are in any affliction. I have taken this charge personally, and I hope others will, too. We will not all feel the same pain, have the same struggles, or bear the same burdens. But, if we have ever felt relief or comfort in our lives, who among us would not wish that others be comforted when in pain? It doesn't take much. The simple act of acknowledging the pain of another lets them know that we have not forgotten them in their time of sorrow. You can be sure that many of us who mourn will feel our holiday sorrow over and over again for years to come.

Some churches today offer help for the conflicted feelings that so many of us can have at this time of year. Blue Christmas or Longest Night services are special worship services in which mourning is recognized as sacred, and those who mourn can come together at a special time set aside just for them. They understand that thousands will feel blue each Christmas as the memories and feelings surrounding their losses come to the surface, and let mourners know that others remember and care about their sorrow. These churches believe that God doesn't

begrudge the mourners' sadness at Christmas time, and we should not try to force happiness on people who have reason to be sad. Instead of feeling ignored, mourners feel a sense of relief as others acknowledge their pain and remember loved ones who have died. It seems to comfort them and make worshipping easier.

I once read of a mother whose husband of many years died a few months before Christmas. When Christmas rolled around, the family struggled to create new meaning without grandpa. Everything reminded her that he wasn't there. The climax of the family gift exchange came when she received a two-pound box of chocolates like the ones her husband had always given her on Valentine's Day and Mother's Day. The giver, her young grandson, said that he didn't want her to feel sad because grandpa was not there to give them to her any more. At the end of the day, she observed that her family had given and received gifts of mercy and remembrance, and their souls seemed restored, if only for a short while. I can think of no better way to explain a Blue Christmas.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. We can't do anything to change the cause of mourning, but with a little thought, we all can do better at comforting each other. Over the years, mourners have taught me some things that help and some that don't. Remember them this holiday season:

Don't treat me as if nothing has happened. Forgetting the deceased or the sorrow of survivors can be insulting. Acknowledge the lives of both the deceased and the struggles of surviving family members.

Don't make a big deal out of the death when it occurred and then forget me during the holidays. I still need you.

Always remember my loved one by name. You help keep their memory alive.

Let me have a place where I can cry and no one will mind.

Many people say that special days like Christmas continue to be hard for them, as feelings of sorrow threaten to overshadow their joy for years to come. I will know for myself all too soon, as I experience my first Christmas without Harold. This Christmas, my faith will confront me with the paradox of a Savior born to die for me, as my family struggles with the bittersweet memory of celebrating Harold's birthday last year just days before his death. Maybe it will draw me deeper into my faith; maybe it will just make me sadder. Whatever happens, my Christmases will never be the same again.

If this is a Blue Christmas for you, may you find the comfort you need, and may you receive the blessings that you deserve.