

ENCOURAGEMENT FOR *Real Life*

19. When It Is Not the Most Wonderful Time of the Year

You are listening to episode 19 of the Encouragement for Real Life podcast. Merry Christmas and welcome to this episode! I'm glad you're here. In this season commonly termed, "the most wonderful time of the year," many of us agree that it is. And if you're like me, you like singing along with the popular Andy William's rendition of the song. (Great. Now I'm going to have that song on repeat in my head for the rest of the day. Sorry if that's the case for you, too.) But in all seriousness, sometimes this season is not the most wonderful time of the year for us. Sometimes it's the most stressful time of the year (like we discussed in last week's episode). Or it's the most emotional time of the year. Or it's the most sorrowful time of the year. I get it. How do we deal with real life like this when the rest of the world is singing Christmas carols and waiting under the mistletoe? In this episode we're looking at the hope available to us in this season when it is not the most wonderful. We will find encouragement for our real lives right now when we experience grief and loss during the Christmas season. Let's get into this episode.

I know what it's like to experience grief and loss at Christmastime.

It was a frigid December day, just five days before Christmas.

Everything was frigid, including the first-row wooden church pew I was sitting on with my family. The elaborately decorated sanctuary before me captured my attention. I had attended many a service in this church—my childhood church—during Christmastime, but never had I seen the sanctuary look this breathtaking. A brightly lit Christmas tree. A perfectly displayed manger scene. And some of the most gorgeous red Poinsettias I've ever seen filled the front of the church. It was everything lovely.

You'd think with such beauty and splendor this would be one of the most special days of Christmas ever. I wish I could say it was. However, this was my worst. I was saying goodbye to my mother at her funeral.

Who buries her mother just five days before Christmas?

When the rest of the world is rockin' around the Christmas tree and making their lists and checking them twice, how is one supposed to mourn the loss of her best friend during what's supposed to be the most wonderful time of the year? When others are decking their halls and trimming their trees and enjoying all the season has to offer, how in the world do we make room for grief and loss? For a casket and death and sorrow? Just five days before Christmas? How does any of that even begin to make sense? How in the world can this be?

There was absolutely nothing merry about that Christmas.

Mom passed away on December 16, 2006, fifteen years ago. It sure doesn't seem like fifteen years have passed since that day. But time passes quickly in this life, I guess. The days immediately following Mom's death were foggy at best. I don't remember much. Thankfully I had finished my shopping early and

prepared all I could for Christmas ahead of time. We knew she was ill, but we had hope she'd be with us one more Christmas.

Instead of enjoying all the season had to offer, we planned the services and made necessary excruciating decisions one has to make with the death of a loved one. We chose flowers, a casket, and scriptures to be read at her funeral. Those days were awful. My body was consistently numb. Every part. My brain was foggy at best. I couldn't eat and I was too weary to sleep. Thankfully my brothers and my husband and children carried me along when I couldn't carry myself.

What I couldn't prepare for, however, was losing Mom so close to Christmas, my favorite holiday.

Christmas has always been my favorite. Since I was a little girl. Fond memories of past Christmases added on to each year's celebration. And I always felt sorry for those who lost loved ones during the Christmas season. I couldn't imagine the heartache. Yet, there I was. This heartache had become my reality.

Our children were 12 and 9 years old at the time. They dearly loved their grandma and were grieving in their own ways. I desired to do all I could to bless them, and take their pain away, and to give them a merry Christmas. I so wanted to make their Christmas special. However, my own grief stood in the way. I couldn't function, let alone facilitate a merry Christmas, for me or anyone else.

Not only that, but this was our unplanned first Christmas at home by ourselves, ever. We always spent Christmas at Mom and Dad's. With both of them now gone, a change in tradition was a difficult thing to experience in itself. I remember sitting on our living room floor on Christmas morning, still in disbelief, yet trying to put on a happy face. But I couldn't stop the tears. I cried through opening presents. I cried through our Christmas dinner. We all cried and mourned and held each other throughout the day. Christmas would never be the same.

And it hasn't.

Experiencing grief and loss at Christmas time is difficult.

Maybe you know this, too. I wouldn't wish it on anyone. There's one less plate at the dinner table. One less present under the tree. One less smile, laugh, joyful presence. The heartache from the absence of our loved one is real. Grief and loss can be overwhelming and consuming, no matter what time of year it occurs. No doubt, the first Christmas without our loved one can be especially difficult. Life isn't the same without him or her and we wonder how will we ever make it through? How do we function when it is not the most wonderful time of the year?

The thing I kept coming back to that Christmas was my faith. I cried out to God often, and in His grace, moment by moment, He sustained me. I could feel His presence close in those difficult days, and I firmly believe He caused situations and circumstances of blessing to appear in our lives. For example, returning home later in the day after Mom's funeral, drained and sorrowful, we found a big Styrofoam package on our front steps. Here our cousins from Ohio had shipped us some of their very own and our favorite jarred pasta sauce! We can't find it here in Iowa, so this was a true gift! And the timing couldn't have been better. I knew God had a hand in this gift!

The promise of Christmas became even more real and special to all of us that year. And, even though it was the most difficult time in my life thus far, strangely, it was also one of the most blessed.

When someone is hurting or brokenhearted, the Eternal moves in close and revives him in his pain.

Psalm 34:18 VOICE

God was close and revived me in my pain.

How does one grieve the loss of a loved one during the holidays?

The thing is, we each experience grief in our own way, in our own time. Therefore, there's no right or perfect way to walk through it. Sharing from my experience, these are some of the things that helped me that Christmas season.

We started new traditions that very first Christmas in Mom's absence. They've become ones we now enjoy each year.

I let myself be sad. Instead of burying how I felt, I gave myself permission to feel any and all emotions. That was a new thing for me, because before this I was one who hid many of my emotions.

I surrounded myself with people who cared about me and who loved me. They allowed me to grieve and even grieved with me.

I drew near to God. As I read through the Psalms during that time, I asked God to infuse hope into my heart. Christmas, and the birth of Jesus, took an entirely new meaning for me that year. I became increasingly grateful for the hope we have in Jesus.

I took care of myself. That may look differently for all of us. Somedays I just allowed myself to "be." But I showed myself compassion, grace, and a whole lot of love.

Friend, if you're grieving the loss of a loved one this Christmas, I'm so very sorry for your pain. Please know you aren't alone in this. I am praying God meets you in our grief and loss, and I pray He comforts you and gives you His peace. He's with you, friend. He's with you.

God blesses those people who grieve. They will find comfort!

Matthew 5:4 CEV

Christmas brings hope when it is not the most wonderful time of the year.

Christmas is our hope. Even though Christmas has never been the same since 2006, that year the true meaning of Christmas became reality for me. If Jesus would never have come to earth as a baby, and if we wouldn't have taken my sins and the sins of those who believe in Him to the cross that day on Calvary, and if we wouldn't have risen on the 3rd day, I would never be able to see Mom again. But because He did, I will one day see her. I will one day see her healed and whole. And not only that, but we will be together in the presence of Jesus. That reality gives me such hope. And I pray it gives you hope in your situation this year too.

Christmas isn't about all the stuff we make it about. It's about a baby coming to save the world. This is the hope we have dealing with grief and loss at Christmastime. May God encourage your heart with this reality and truth. Especially if you're walking through a season of grief and loss.

I still miss Mom. For some reason she's been on my mind and in my heart a lot lately. Part of me is glad she's not here in this world right now, because I don't know how well she would do with the state of everything. Plus, I know she's safe with Jesus. Yet, part of me wants to tell her one more time how much I love her, and to hug her one more time. And to ask her all the things I either forgot to ask or didn't know to ask. She was an incredible woman, and I'm thankful I am her daughter. And of course, every year on the anniversary of her death, I still feel all the emotions and I still can't help but wish she was here to celebrate with us. A smile comes to my face as I think of how proud she would be today of her grandchildren and great grandchildren. Goodness, I can't wait until I see her again someday.

It's okay if it's not the most wonderful time of the year for you.

It's okay if your Christmas season doesn't seem or feel so merry. It is also okay if you can't be who the world says you are to be in this season or do the things it says to do in this season. Truly, it's okay. You don't have to. That's not what Christmas is about. This season maybe isn't the most wonderful time of the year for you in the world's eyes, but maybe this Christmas will be a turning point for you, like Christmas of 2006 was for me. Sometimes allowing Jesus to fill us from the inside and allowing Him to care for us in the ways only He can (and will) can make it the most special season of all.

God is with you, friend. Remember that in the days to come. Allow yourself time to just be. Give yourself permission to feel how you feel. And trust Jesus with it all. He's with you. He came to earth for you, after all. There's no better gift this season.

Thank you for joining me today. God bless you!

Julie Lefebvre

P.S. If you could use a little more encouragement in this season, please find our Encouragement for Real Life Community Facebook group. You'll find it to be a positive and uplifting place to connect and be encouraged!