

The Empty Chair
Service of Remembrance
December 20, 2007
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On April 19, 1995, the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City experienced a terrible bombing. An angry young man named Timothy McVeigh filled up a truck with explosives, parked it in front of the building, and blew it up. He was fueled by rage toward the federal government for the way it handled the Waco Siege. It was the most destructive act of terrorism on U.S. soil before September 11, 2001.

Today there is a memorial at the site. There's a wall with the names of the more than 800 people who survived the explosion. There's the The Survivor Tree, an American Elm, which stands as a symbol of human resilience. And perhaps most poignant of all, there's a field of 168 chairs—168 *empty* chairs—each representing one of those lost in the attack. The memorial is a profound witness to the pain of that awful day, and to the necessity of hope in being able to go on.

The season of Christmas is upon us. The Christmas table will soon be set. Extra leaves will be put in the table, extra chairs set up. It's heartwarming to think about loved ones coming home for Christmas. And, let's be honest, it's sad—incredibly sad—to think about one chair at the table not being filled. Someone is missing, and though we feel their absence every day, we feel it most keenly on days of celebration.

What do we do about these empty chairs? We mourn. We try to keep busy. We feel the sting of loneliness. We find someone to talk to who shares our pain. Deep down, we wish things could be different—that our loved one would come back again or at least that the pain would go away. But, as we know all too well, wishing does not make it so. And we know too that the only way to get to the other side of grief is to go through it, one sorrowful day at a time.

God is aware of these empty chairs in our lives. Indeed, some people say that God *causes* them, but I don't believe that. Death is a mystery. There are too many tragic accidents, too many unspeakable wars, too many persons that die far too young. I refuse to say that all of these events are God's doing. No, they are a part of the mystery of life. This side of heaven, we often aren't able to understand why things happen the way they do—they just do.

As I see it, our only option is to trust, to trust that God knows about these empty chairs and God understands what we're going through. God feels our pain. And God promises to go through it with us. That's the message of the incarnation. God comes to be with us, whatever we're facing, and whatever we're feeling about it.

The darkness of our world is perhaps a little less dark because God keeps getting born into it. God wiggles a way into a life that has no room for him. God is born for a child in pain, for those afraid of cancer, for those worried about their families, for those anxious about paying their bills. And most assuredly, God is born for those whose hearts are almost broken because they've had to say goodbye to someone dear to them.

Here's a thought to ponder this Christmas: We probably know God better in the darkness than anywhere else. You see, it's in the dark that God seems to visit us most often. God comes to us to tell us that we are loved. God comes to heal our hurts a little at a time. God comes to give us the hope we so badly need.

What does this hope look like? In the book of Revelation, God promises a world with no more pain, or tears, or heart disease, or cancer, or Parkinson's, or Alzheimer's, or death. We won't need any sun in this coming world, because Christ will be eternal light and all the darkness will be gone.

As I imagine that day, I picture a table set for the great, heavenly feast of God. We are together again with those who've gone before us. All the chairs at the table are filled. And every day feels like a little Christmas.

While you wait for the dawn of that glorious morning, you do well to put your trust in the God who comes to you. As you sit down to Christmas dinner, or to any dinner, think of Christ as the unseen guest at your table, coming to transform your darkness into light, coming to change your sadness into joy, coming to fill up your despair with hope. Even though Christ can never replace your loved one, he can help put your heart back together again...a little at a time...and make it whole.

Come, Lord Jesus, be our guest. And let your gifts to us be blessed. Amen