

Approaching Christmas was the time of year my wife had some of our biggest fights early in our marriage. The fights were mostly because the incongruity of our expectations or the contradictory feelings we had around the season. See, I grew up in poor, rural Missouri. My Christmases were universally disappointing. One year our pit bull – because in poor rural Missouri every white family has one – our pit bull tore down our Christmas tree and opened all our presents a week before Christmas. Another year, my mom couldn't afford Christmas presents for us so, on Christmas Eve, my uncle shows up with boxes of presents. He told us they were from my mom, but we all knew he'd gone to the Salvation Army and picked out boxes of random stuff. It was a nice gesture, but nothing in the box said, "Tom, we see *you*." It was clearly a box for "Boy, Age 12." Another year, my dad showed up on Christmas morning with the most Missouri-gifts ever. He gave me and my three siblings two----two!----Missouri lottery scratch-offs a piece. When you're a kid and you think you can win a million dollars in the lottery, it's pretty cool. But once you scratch them off and you didn't win anything, you're left with nothing for Christmas. I came into my marriage with expectations around Christmas were quite low...and behind that, there was the feeling of *sadness*.

My wife, however, grew up in a family that made a huge deal out of Christmas. Her mother always decorated for Christmas early. Christmas music played in their house for two months straight. Family always gathered at *her* house for Christmas. They stayed up late enjoying being together, playing games, and reminiscing. My wife had high expectations for Christmas. Her feelings were sentimental and bright...too bright.

So you can imagine our first year together at Christmas with our contrary expectations about how Christmas would go. She starts preparing for Christmas early. Decorations going up around our apartment. She's thinking in detail about the perfect gift for everyone. By October my house is smelling like wassel and peppermint tea...little Christmas gnomes everywhere. And I'm sitting there sipping my Mt. Dew waiting for December 26th. My expectations were low and sad. Her expectations were high and bright. Her expectations around the Christmas nearly ruined our marriage the first year. My expectations nearly did the same. *But it took both my sadness and her brightness to free us both from our prisons of Christmas expectations.* The incongruity of our feelings actually provided a needed perspective for both of us.

PERSPECTIVE BY INCONGRUITY

Many of you may know, I study Rhetoric at the University of Memphis. And in the Rhetoric there's a phrase that has captured my imagination for a few years. The phrase is *perspective by incongruity*. A perspective by incongruity is this: It's when you take a word or idea and you wrench it out of its original context and you put in a context with its exact opposite...and its in the collision of opposites that new meaning and new life emerges. We've seen this in our favorite stories: the plump, lazy, content Hobbit is ripped from the comfort of his Hobbit hole and flung into a great adventure where he meets dwarfs and wizards and dragons. He gains a new perspective because he's put into a situation opposite or incongruous with what he's used to. We've seen it in sitcoms where the sensual and not-too-bright Penny is neighbors with two physicists. Both of them are changed for the better by the incongruity of their friendship. Or where the

uppity wealthy family moves to the backwater town of Schitt's Creek and encounters loads of weirdos...but we see in the incongruity that the uppity family is also weird.

But it's not just in characters, it's also in individual words. Consider some of these everyday words or phrases that capture the idea of perspective by incongruity – that is, opposites thrown together to make a new idea: We refer to **smart bombs** to deceive ourselves into thinking there won't be collateral damage. We refer to **functioning alcoholics** in order to justify not confronting them about their need for treatment. Or exhausted parents say to each other, "**the days are long, but the years are short**" as a way of encouraging you to stay attuned to your kids even when tired.

Here's the point: the meaning is made by wrenching something from its original context and placing it with its exact opposite. And in this pushing together of opposites, a new meaning is made, something new is created.

ZEPHANIAH

Now think about the opposites inherent in what Zephaniah says here: **I will rescue the lame; I will gather the exiles. I will give them praise and honor in every land where they have suffered shame.** He brings together rescue and sickness, gathering and exile, praise and honor with suffering shame. So that when he calls them to: **Sing, Daughter Zion; shout aloud, Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, Daughter Jerusalem!** He is decidedly *not* telling them that their pain isn't real. He's not telling them to dive into toxic sentimentality that only remembers the good parts of life. The command to sing implies there are reasons not to sing. The command to shout implies there are reasons to whisper. The command to be glad and rejoice implies there are reasons for despair and grief. The command to be bright implies there are reasons for sadness. Shame without the ability to rejoice is despair. Rejoicing without the ability to grieve is toxic optimism. In Advent the two opposites are brought together into the realities of the human experience. Advent is bright. Advent is sad. Advent is the bright sadness.

ADVENT AS THE BRIGHT SADNESS

In those early years of our marriage, my wife and I were wrestling with the very human experiences of Christmas from two wildly opposite sets of expectations. But it was the pull of her sentimentality, and it was the pull of my sadness that helped us both heal.

What my sadness brought was the reality that Advent does not look away from the darkness but looks right at it. Advent does not look away from death but looks right at it. Advent does not look away from the last two years of missed opportunity and losses of life but looks right at them. That's why Herod's murder of the innocent babies is part of the Advent story every year. It tells us that Christmas happens in the *realities* of life, genocide, poverty, powerlessness, and global pandemics. Without looking at reality and naming grief and despair, Christmas becomes mere sentimentality, toxic optimism.

But my wife's brightness around Christmas also brought something meaningful. She taught me that Advent is an upturning of our lowest expectations. God said in Zephaniah, **Instead of shame, I will give you honor and praise among all the peoples of**

the earth when I restore your fortune before your very eyes.” Advent looks at the darkness so that the luminescence of God’s rescue shines brighter. Shines not with toxic optimism but shines with the brightness of Jesus’ promise to come a second time. It is not just sadness. It is the bright sadness. Bright and sad forced together to make a new reality – a perspective by incongruity that affirms our contradictory experiences.

SO HOW DO WE ENGAGE THIS PERSPECTIVE BY INCONGRUITY? I’m going to just give you one thing: Listen to the Voice in the silence. *Sit in silence* with the feelings of incongruity around this season. **When we sit in silence the silence speaks.** The truth about our pain from the last two years, the truth about our pain from childhood, the truth about our expectations of this season, the feelings of incongruity, none of these will come to the surface if we don’t give them time to bubble up. Find the Voice in the silence.

My wife finds the voice in the silence on Saturday mornings by locking herself in our bedroom. Because in a house of 6 people this is how her little introverted heart finds peace and quiet and an opportunity to listen to the Spirit.

For some reason, I find the voice in the silence when I’m driving in a quiet car. When my wife and I were living in Florida, our church opened up a second campus I was in charge of. For months I worked 60-70 hours a week, neglecting everything else in order to prove my worth, to be successful. When that summer rolled around and it was time for my vacation, I was desperately tired. So I decided not to take any work with me. I spent the whole week disconnected, not having the noise of work in my mind. Then on the drive back from vacation, kids in the back with tablets and toys, my wife reading a book, I sat in silence for miles and miles. And as we got closer to home I realized “I don’t want to go back. I don’t want to do this anymore. I can’t keep up this pace. I’ve got one chance with these kids. I will not be that person who sacrificed his family on the altar of productivity.” I wouldn’t have felt the exhaustion and despair and named them without that opportunity for silence. So often now I will just turn everything off in my car and just drive in silence with my feelings.

So this is what I want you to do to listen to the Voice in the Silence: Find a quiet place this week and sit with your feelings of brightness and sadness blended together. Carve out for yourself 5 minutes, 10 minutes, 30 minutes, and hour, a full day—whatever you can manage. Turn off the TV. Stop scrolling social media. Put work aside...and *sit with your feelings*. Write them down. Pray over them. Name the pain. Name the joy. Name the memories. And name the expectations. Mother Theresa was spot-on when she said, “We need to find God, and [God] cannot be found in noise and restlessness. God is the friend of silence.”

God’s voice is only heard in the silence. The Silence is where the Bright and the Sad come together to make something new. The Silence is the source from which the Voice that reinvents the world echoes out into all eternity. Find the Voice in the silence.