



Student Work

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December 20, 2021

The lights dimmed, not dramatically, but enough to notice. The soulful notes carried hopes and fears that weaved their way through the gathering, stopping wistfully to light the heart of each person. Some heads were bowed in humble anticipation, some eyes were raised in hopeful adoration. And some were present, emptied with nothing to give. There was nothing dramatic or obvious about their sorrow, nothing to indicate that perhaps this time of year was the hardest to face. And yet they came, to hear of hope. To hear of something deeper and truer than their sorrow. To be sung over that this depth of hurt will not last, and that a better day is coming. This is the scene of Blue Christmas.

The Blue Christmas service seeks to acknowledge the often-hidden pain and sorrow of facing the Christmas season. Perhaps it is the death of a loved one, the lament of the pains caused by our nation or world, the heavy weight of loneliness, the persistent sin that does not seem to be whisked away when we leave the church walls, or a general pain of broken relationships with God, friends, or ourselves. In the joyous time of the Christmas season, it is vital to address the fact that we worship a God who did not come in glamorous clothes to minister to those who always wear a smile. Our Savior dwelt among the broken, the directionless, and the melancholy.

I was asked to help lead the Blue Christmas service ¹this year at a local church, Covenant CRC, alongside a few peers and fellow Dordt students. The request came right before finals week, in one of the busiest weeks of the semester. It also came at a difficult time in the semester for me—many of my relationships felt strained, and loneliness was never too far away. As I walked into the church to practice the liturgy, I did not feel as though I had much to offer. I needed these words and this hope as much as anyone else.

I often heard it said that leading from a place of brokenness displays the story of the gospel. My brokenness was showing me what the truth had been all along, and now I was “aware of my need, and awake to your grace.” ²As we practiced the music before the service, tears came to my eyes. We read beautiful words that lamented our wrongdoing and spoke to our sufferings. The congregation had not yet arrived and still the liturgy was moving me, allowing my pain to be brought to light. Inadvertently, my fellow leaders were coaxing my hurt to the surface, and instead of being met with shame or carelessness, I was met with holistic care. There was room for my hurt too.

The clock drew near the beginning of the service, and the congregants trickled in. My fellow leaders and I began the service again, sharing the beauty we had just witnessed and ready to partake in the hope that the gospel brings. Throughout the service, we played songs, we spoke with gravity as the words kneaded their beauty and lament into our lives. Silence was held, space was given, and the gift of presence was offered. There was no expectation for a right, put-together frame of mind. Instead, the offer of community and hope for what is to come was given.

This service took place in the light of a cool evening. The morning is a lovely time, but often by evening, there is a sense of tiredness, of letting your guard down, of awareness of your vulnerability and your inability to hide this vulnerability with others. Holding a Blue Christmas service at night isn't meant to manipulate emotions; instead, it aims towards realizing the natural inclination of humanity and working with that nature rather than against it.

A proper place exists for lament and sorrow, as seen in the prophets' cries over Israel's disobedience and distance from the Lord, in the Psalmists' songs of despair and sorrow, and in Jesus' own pain for the state of the world and his people. It is a suppression of our humanity, then, to fail to name and cry out against the wrongs of this world. Unfortunately, lament is not generally viewed as a good practice in the Church. The Church often presents a polished look, failing to engage the hurt, pain, and grief of its members. This lack of integration of lament in the family of God doesn't move us quickly to a deep-seated hope, however. Things are not the way they ought to be, and it is a denial of our calling when we ignore the pain. Where there is not true lament, can there be full celebration? This Blue Service didn't put a band-aid on the pains of the Church; it invited participation and openness to see and name the hurt that colors our daily lives.

The Blue Christmas service allows the children of the Lord to come together and communally confess their sorrows and the world's hurt. We do this together, to remind each other that we are not, indeed, alone. We say it aloud because we need to hear it: we need to engage with our whole body. We sing it because we are not merely intellectual beings. The melody of repentance harmonizes with our lived experience.

And that is why we come to the Blue Christmas service—the hope of the grace of the Lord, his persistent desire to dwell with us, and the hope of restoration of all things despite the heartache we see and face. For perhaps even this sorrow has a purpose in the coming of the Kingdom. And there is a lovely rest to be found in the hope of dwelling with the Lord in the midst of our affliction.

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1. To find out more about “Blue Christmas” [read here](#).

2. McKelvey, Douglas Kaine, Ned Bustard, and Pete Peterson. "A Liturgy for the Ritual of Morning Coffee." Essay. In *Every Moment Holy*. Nashville, TN: Rabbit Room Press, 2019.