

From my earliest memories Advent has always represented a time of waiting in anticipation, of getting ready – both on the inside and on the outside for one of the most important and significant moments in our faith story. On this week of Advent when we celebrate Gaudete or joy and also bring our focus to Mary, the mother of Jesus, I would like to share you with you my experience of waiting in hope – also as a mother – in this case for her third child.

My story began on New Years Day 2011, when I told my husband that we were expecting our third child. To say we were overjoyed was an understatement and the wink and nod communications between us that day just added to the excitement of what lay ahead.

We went for our 20 weeks scan round about Eastertime and like all couples we were nervous but happy. But our world changed on its axis that day. The sonographer grew eerily silent and left the room to get the doctor. When she came back she explained that the measurements of the baby were not what they should be and that we should prepare ourselves for news we didn't want to hear. Meeting with the doctor, we were told that our baby's long bones were measuring too short and that we would have to return the following week to meet with the professor to receive our baby's diagnosis.

We left the hospital in a crumpled mess, stunned and shocked at what we had just heard. When we arrived back the following week, we were given the news that no parent ever wants to hear; our child had a life limiting diagnosis and would not live at all or for very long once born. And with that prognosis everything changed and our Advent began. In the same way as these weeks of Advent help us to prepare for the birth of the Christ child with peace, hope, joy and love – we had our own choices to make as to how we would prepare for the birth and with it the death of our child. And it felt like there was going to be only one of two ways that we could make it to that point – either denial or a full embrace of each and every moment of that Advent journey.

On this third week of Advent when we bring our attention to the mother of Jesus and the joy that the incarnation would bring to the world I often think about mothers and the responsibility that motherhood brings. It is no longer about me, my world is now lived through my best hopes for and love of my children, my life is their life. So how would I be a mother to my third child during what would be a very short life? Both my husband and I lived in hope, not that our child would receive the miracle of life but that we all would live in our Advent moment with peace and joy and love. And we did.

The first thing we did was to name our child. We called him Michael. The second thing we did was tell our family and friends about him and what would happen later in the year. The third thing we did was let people in. This was our journey towards hope, because with it came the realisation that a life lived isn't just about being born into this world, it starts before that, in the way we prepare for birth – even if that birth isn't what we expected. Our Advent journey became one filled with support, kindness, understanding and sensitivity. And in that we discovered the depth and breath of the love of God and of one another in the people who came into our lives and walked that Advent path with us.

By the time Michael was born, we had had some photographs taken in utero, had met with a bereavement photographer, had bought gifts from him for our other children and had written a diary about his journey on earth however brief. But that was just us. Alongside our family were our friends and extended family, neighbours, colleagues, parishioners and even strangers who wanted to help and did help in so many very kind ways. Everyone was on standby to do both the practical and the beautiful. Our journey of hope was that we would cherish what time we had with our son, not

be resentful but instead open our eyes to see the gifts his life brought us then and still bring us now. Isn't that what matters? Seeing the gift in who each of us are and ultimately allowing that to show us the true gift made manifest by God in the Christ child.

Michael was born and left this world on August 21st 2011 – interestingly the Feast Day of the Apparition here in Knock. It too was a silent occasion and one that left all who witnessed it changed forever. We later learned that the one of the nurses broke down in tears after Michael was delivered and another nurse went on to give a lecture about her experience of his birth. Two more came to Michael's funeral a few days later. Michael was baptised that day too by our very good friend Fr Tod and blessed with holy water we had brought from Knock. And he was photographed with love and compassion by a beautiful Now I Lay Me Down To Sleep photographer Louise who would go on to be a lifetime friend of ours.

The love that his life brought, however brief and sore it was for us, has never ceased to amaze us. And it is true that there is no footprint too small that it cannot leave its imprint on the world.

Our Advent journey found one of its destinations on the day of Michael's funeral. We, together with two very close friends, had planned out his funeral and had decided that it would be a day that would somehow have to celebrate all that he might have been had he lived but rolled into one occasion. We wrote a reflection, picked out our hymns and readings, chose a lullaby and brought balloons to his grave. What we were not ready for though was the love actively and freely given by all who held us up at that time. A beautiful hand stitched cloth was gifted to us with Michael's name on it, soil was taken from our vegetable garden to be used at his grave and his resting place was lined in its entirety with beautiful white flowers. It felt that we were handing him back to God rather than burying him in the cold earth.

In my office at school I have a small sculpture of the Pieta that sits on my windowsill, gifted to me by the Sisters of St Louis. Any parent who has lost a child at any age will feel the physical heartbreak of Our Lady and understand it will be an all-consuming swell of desperation – the could have beens, the confusion, the heartbreak and the desperation. There is nothing that quite feels like the pain of losing a child, the guilt of helplessness and the desire to swap places.

In our Christian faith God has gifted us with his understanding of life and death and the fragility of it all. He has given us a way forward in how to live our lives and our answers to all of life's great questions lie in the gift of one another and how we choose to be with each other.

That year our family waited in hope - not for a miracle, but hope that we would make Michael's life with us count. What we hadn't hoped for was that his life would matter to so many more people and that the delicate flickering of his short time on earth brought out the very best in us and all who we met on our Advent journey.

In the words of John O Donohoe "this beginning has been quietly forming" and so my questions are, with what hope do we wait with each year and how will that form the new beginning that will be the birth of the Christ child in our hearts. Who will we let in? For each of us receive little miracles every day if we are open to seeing them. They come in the form of other people who visit kindnesses upon us. Our Advent journey, if nothing else is open to the possibilities of hope, peace, joy and love if we see in one another the body of Christ.