



HOPING FOR HOPE

By Alicia Stickles

It's the start of a new year, the brink of new beginnings. Like blank pages of a novel, most of us spend the first couple of weeks in the New Year dreaming of what we want to write on those pages of 2016. Last year, I chose to start this new adventure into the blog world in hopes of recording the little moments that make up my life as a mom, wife, woman etc. I wanted to record beautiful, ordinary moments that are so rich but can be lost with time. While I didn't write quite as much as I had hoped, I am happy that this is one resolution that I have seen through the whole year, which is definitely more than I can say for most of my resolutions.

So riding the coattails of one successful resolution, I began thinking about what my resolution for 2016 would be. During my pondering, I heard a great piece of advice to choose a "word" or a "theme" for your year that would encourage your actions to align with that word instead of coming from a negative place of "giving something up" or "cutting something out." (Because self-control and discipline are pretty easy, said no one EVER!)

Through my self-searching, it quickly became clear to me what my word for 2016 would be, and that word is HOPE.

As a Christian, and as someone who considers myself to have a mostly positive outlook on life, it is hard for me to admit that I struggle with hope. I can't say I am a hopeful person. I realize that I tend to be more of a "waiting for the bottom to drop out" type that constantly struggles to stay present to joy because I fear the heartbreak of when it is snatched away from me. Even worse, typically, I fully expect for anything that brings me joy to do just that; be tragically and painfully snatched away.

I realize that this belief is rooted in experiences from my childhood. I prayed for my foster sister to live; she died. I hoped that somehow my family would be rescued from a terrible financial crisis; we lost everything. I found a lot of love and joy in certain relationships; they turned dark and painful.

These life events left me HEARTBROKEN.

In attempts to guard myself from the pain of heartbreak, I adapted the policy of expecting very little from God or from people. Whether in new relationships, my marriage, dealing with tough news about loved ones, and most of all, my children, I set myself up to expect that the worst thing WAS going to happen. That way, when it did, I could "handle" it and minimize my heartbreak. An even greater win would be if the terrible thing didn't occur, and I could be pleasantly surprised instead of disappointed with God or people.

In short, I taught myself to HATE HOPE.

I once heard a pastor talk about his experiences of visiting the labor and delivery unit in his local hospital. He spoke about one week walking down the hall to a room on the right where he experienced the mountain top of joy in celebrating the birth and new life of a child with a couple from his congregation. He then turned to an experience in that same maternity hall just a week later where he walked into a room on the left full of the depths of sorrow and heartbreak where he embraced a wailing and sobbing father on the floor whose baby was still born.

I know all of the Christian responses to this scenario sound something like, "He giveth and taketh away," "His ways are not our ways," and "God has a plan and purpose that we cannot understand." I am not arguing against any of these truths but I am also wise enough to know that God does not exist as a genie in a bottle, simply answering our prayers the way we think he should.

I think the question that the pastor was posing to his audience, and the question that marks the beginning of my resolution is this, "How do I stay present to HOPE, stay present to JOY, in the face of BOTH REALITIES?"

In my life, and I'm sure in yours, we have experienced both realities of utter joy and extreme pain. Does that mean that God's grace and blessing is only on the moments where things turn out how we want them? Certainly not. Life is full of mountaintops and valleys and I have accepted that. What I seek is the ability to stay in the hallway and have hope despite whether life brings me to the room on the right or the left.

I know my journey of hope will involve wrestling out other questions like, "What exactly is hope? What can we hope for from God? And, what keeps me from hope?" From what I have studied so far concerning hope, I know that it involves faith, trust, waiting and EXPECTANCY.

That is my heart's hope. This is my journey of hope for 2016 and beyond: a fight to get my expectancy back. I know hope and I have a long way to go, and it's a road full of God's grace to understand in a way that brings heart change. I am excited for the adventure, and while I know little, I think some of the truth of hope may lie in the wise words of Birdie Pruitt (Sandra Bullock) in one of my favorite movies, Hope Floats. She says:

"Childhood is what you spend the rest of your life trying to overcome. That's what momma always says. She says that beginnings are SCARY, endings are usually SAD, but it's the MIDDLE that counts the most. Try to remember that when you find yourself at a new beginning. Just give hope a chance to float up. And it will, too..."