

Growing in Joy

Sermon 41 | Greystone Baptist Church | December 15, 2019

Isaiah 35: 1-10 & Luke 1: 46 - 55

There's a question many of us are asking as we try to turn our attention to joy this third week of Advent. How can we have joy in times like these? Krista Tippet, who is an American journalist and host of the popular NPR show, *On Being*, finds this question so prevalent in today's society, she did a whole show on it.ⁱ Psychologists are also joining the conversation posting blogs and articles advertising "10 steps to Mastering the Art of Joyful Living."ⁱⁱ Architects and designers even offer aesthetic solutions that ignite sensations of delight when seen. Did you know circles are more joyful than squares? Bursts of color more delightful than toned down hues?ⁱⁱⁱ Everybody seems eager to provide solutions to what must be a universal question: How can we have joy in times like these?

I sat around a table with four other preachers this week and without prompting, one of them piped up: "Does anyone feel like this week, this third week of Advent, the joy week, is always the most un-joyful week of the year?" She went on to describe a litany of unjoyful circumstances facing her congregation right now. Then she remembered this same week in years past, for her, even in other churches, this week was consistently filled with pain, suffering, and loss. And she wasn't alone...before long, the rest of us had joined in sharing some of the pain that we were holding from our own congregations. We were a pitiful bunch. Somehow, the spiritual gift of joy seemed to elude us all at exactly the worst time possible. How were we to preach on joy when none of us seemed able to find it?

I think, the prophet Isaiah must have faced a similar dilemma. After all, he foretold the Assyrian invasion, warning the people that if they did not right their ways, if they did not turn from greed to justice, God would punish them with the army of a foreign king. Then it happened. Like some prophetic figures in our Bible, it might have been tempting for Isaiah to whine and complain, saying "I told you so" to the King and people of Israel who just wouldn't listen. It might have been tempting for Isaiah to pack up his prophetic calling and walk away. It might have been tempting to claim that there was no joy to be found, only destruction, disappointment, and an overwhelming sense of failure. After all, look at where his people were: stuck in the wilderness of exile, no temple, no promised land, no hope and certainly no joy.

Rather than giving up, Isaiah offers beautiful poetry full of images that promise hope, even in the worst of times.

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,
the desert shall rejoice and blossom,
like the crocus, it shall blossom abundantly,
and rejoice with joy and singing... (v. 1-2)

Isaiah's words also remind us of Mary who somehow claimed joy in the midst of suffering. There could be no greater horror for a young woman in the ancient world than to become mysteriously pregnant. There is a reason, I believe, Gabriel began the annunciation with the words "Do not fear," because there was actually much to fear. According to the law, Mary's pregnancy was a crime punishable by death. If she were to survive, she would suffer a lifetime of shame and isolation under the gaze of those who did not believe her innocence.

But Mary chose joy, singing out in faithful song proclaiming
My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my savior...
He has brought down the powerful
from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy,
according to the promise he made to our ancestors...
to Abraham and to his descendants forever.

Mary's song is a song of protest. It is the music of her faithful resistance to what others will say about her. It is a song that praises God for what God is doing in her life, but more importantly, it is a song affirming her place in God's history of liberation. God's people are suffering under the yoke of Roman occupation, just as they suffered in the wilderness after the Assyrians invaded and forced them into exile, just as they suffered in Egypt under Pharaoh's rule. And Mary isn't the first woman to proclaim joy in the unfolding of God's justice, there was another woman in Israel's history whose name was kin to Mary's. Miriam, the sister of Moses, also had a song of joy and freedom when she sang from the banks of the Red Sea after it opened up, making way for the Israelites to escape Egyptian captivity.

Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously... (Exodus 15:21a)

...she sang out proudly, in Exodus, chapter 15, playing a tambourine and dancing with all the other women. Mary and Miriam – which is the Hebrew name for Mary – sang songs of joy as they were being set free.

Liberation looked different for each of these women; but they both responded with joyful song. Miriam, was freed from Egypt when God parted the Red Sea, creating a path for Israelite freedom. And once they got to the other side, the wilderness greeted them, and they had to learn a new way of eating, drinking, and living together outside of the predictable rhythms of life they had known in Egypt. None of that was easy.

Mary's freedom is less obvious to the twenty-first century audience. While she was not held in slavery, she was captive to economic, social, and political systems that viewed

women as property and a means for childbearing – within the context of arranged marriage. Women were low on the totem pole, you might say. But Mary was freed from her lowly place in the ancient society. She was liberated by God's favor in the midst of struggle. Because of Mary, God was able to bring about freedom and liberation to the whole world through Jesus, the babe who she freely carried in her womb.

Although the songs of Mary and Miriam are songs of liberation and joy, we know that what they experience is not easy. Miriam walks through the parted Red Sea with her people and then they wander in the wilderness, surviving on quail and manna, for the next 40 years. Her people grumble and argue. This is not what she imagined when she was crossing the sea. Mary's life would also be wrought with stress and pain - starting with this pregnancy and then watching her son grow up to be the man he was. Both women sang of joy in times of danger, in times of distress, and yet, in moments of faithful-freedom from all that sought to hold them captive.

In the midst of all that life threw at them, Mary and Miriam refused to lose their faith, they refused to lose their hope, and they refused to lose their joy. Instead, they sang out with their prophetic voices, faithful songs of joy.

With all they had going on, the ability of Isaiah, Miriam, and Mary to find joy makes me reconsider my own situation.

In an episode of *On Being*, Krista Tippet interviews American poet and professor of English, Ross Gay. She starts that interview asking the same question we began with this morning. "How can we be joyful in a moment like this?"^{iv} Throughout the conversation, the two talk about life, pain, and struggle, and eventually they meander to a definition of joy that resonates with what we find in the songs and poetry of the Bible.

Joy is the light that flickers when the distance between us – and between us and God – diminishes. "... Sometimes.. there's a conception of joy as meaning something...easy. And to me, joy has nothing to do with ease." "Rather," Ross goes on to say, "Joy happens when connections are made despite the struggle that is the human condition."^v

In other words, it is some kind of joyful miracle that we find one another and connect with one another, and sometimes even smile or laugh with one another – even in the midst of all the pain that life throws our way.

Looking back on the scripture, we may recognize a new similarity about these ancient songs of joy. These songs of joy do not only emerge out of moments of pain and suffering, but they are also raised in moments of deep human connection in the midst of darkness. Mary goes to Elizabeth to share the moment, the experience, the miracle of pregnancy even when it wasn't expected or planned for. In the safety of their connection, Mary sings her song of joy.

And isn't it the same for Miriam? After crossing the Red Sea, she gathers up her sisters in the wilderness and in that moment of deep connection, in light of their shared experience of liberation, Miriam sings their song of joy.

And even the prophet Isaiah, he isn't alone enjoying the promise of God's restoration and redemption... no, he remains with the people, in the presence of shared suffering and waiting, Isaiah offers a word of joy in the midst of destruction.

Joy is a communal gift, it comes as a flicker of light radiating off of our encounters with one another, in those shared moments when God draws near, even in our darkest days.

If you were with us early this year when we read Brené Brown's book, *Braving the Wilderness*, you may remember her thoughts on joy. In the book she describes joy as the hardest, most dangerous, most vulnerable and powerful emotion we feel because we are always catastrophizing about the next disaster. We want to protect ourselves by minimizing joy so that the next time life hands us lemons (so to speak) we are not too disappointed. Brené Brown contends that allowing ourselves to be joyful in moments like these – as painful as it may be – is one of the bravest, most important things we can do.^{vi}

So, perhaps the answer to the question, "How can we find joy in times like these?" lies in our willingness to be brave. Maybe the answer lies in our ability to continue to draw near to one another, to laugh through our tears, and to sing through our pain? Maybe joy is there all along, waiting to be claimed, waiting to flicker like light, waiting to be expressed and experienced in moments of connection and in times when God draws near, offering a glimpse of hope in the midst of despair.

Frederick Beuchner says, "*Joy is a mystery because it can happen anywhere, anytime, even under the most unpromising circumstances... even in the midst of suffering, with tears in its eyes.*"

That group of un-joyful preachers I sat with on Wednesday...After sharing stories of pain, we also shared a bit about our personal lives and before long somebody was telling a story about their kid which had us all laughing so hard we were crying. And instead of telling more stories after the laughter died down, we all just looked at each other, recognizing that joy had indeed broken through, even in the midst of suffering.

For just a brief moment, joy, with tears in its eyes had interrupted our day, offering a glimpse of the true joy that we find in God's own presence.

So, on this third Sunday of Advent, while the long wait for the fullness of joy that we find in Christ child continues...we join with Isaiah, with Miriam, and with Mary, and with all who sing songs of joy in the midst of pain trusting that somehow, through it all, God is working to redeem us...

one moment, one glimpse, one flicker of joy at a time. Maybe in times like this, joy is all around, even in the midst of our suffering...and maybe it's been there all along, just waiting for us to grow brave enough to sing it's joyful song.

May it be so.... Amen.

ⁱ <https://onbeing.org/programs/ross-gay-tending-joy-and-practicing-delight/#transcript>

ⁱⁱ <https://gailbrenner.com/2011/06/10-steps-to-mastering-the-art-of-joyful-living/>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2019/06/why-joy-better-happiness/592735/>

^{iv} <https://onbeing.org/programs/ross-gay-tending-joy-and-practicing-delight/#transcript>

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^{vi} Brene reference needed here.