

Bold in Joy

Sermon 100 | Greystone Baptist Church | May 16, 2021

Psalm 47

“When was the last time you were overcome with joy?” the facilitator asked a computer screen full of squares as the seminar began on Zoom. Nobody moved. Nobody raised their hands. Nobody typed into the chat box.

“Ok then. When was the last time you experienced joy at all?” the facilitator asked again, adjusting the question a bit for the unresponsive crowd. Still nothing.

“Alright,” the facilitator sighed, “let’s try one more time. What would it take for you to know joy again?” Soon the responses started flowing in:

I need my kids to go back to school.

I need this vaccine distribution to ramp up.

I need less politics and fewer conspiracy theories in my life.

I need to see some bit of normalcy.

I need my mom not to be sick anymore.

I need a different job.

I need to pay off this debt that I’m drowning in.

I need to go back to church.

I need to hear the choir again.

I need this pandemic to be over.

I need to know I’ll be able to get gas when I need it.

“Ahhh, there we have it.” the facilitator continued. “The conditions of our joy.”

I had a professor say in class one time, “If the books of the Bible are God’s words for humanity, the Psalms must be the words from humanity back to God.”

There is a certain power to that thought, an invitation of sorts to use the Psalms as a communication tool between us and God. Often when we turn to them, it is because we are searching for words that speak the truths we do not know how to articulate. And this search does not leave us disappointed. There are psalms of lament, psalms for worship, psalms of intercession and cries for help. There are psalms of grief, psalms expressing faith despite hardship, and psalms of joy, like the one in focus today.

Besides being a summons to joy, Psalm 47 is also called an “enthronement” psalm, meaning, it describes God’s kingship over all the earth. In the ancient world it wasn’t uncommon for people groups to claim kingship for their gods. Chief deities like Baal and Marduk would have also been named ruler, king, lord, among their ancient and loyal followers. Unlike these gods, who were assumed to have taken possession through battles, violence, and war, the God of Israel, Yahweh, does not move in such a way. Yahweh does not need to engage in forceful seizures of power because – despite all appearances – Yahweh has always been God of all people, God of all nations.

A quick review of the story of Israel might cause us to question this confidence of enthronement and the joyful celebration described in the 47th Psalm. The very people who are celebrating God's rule are the people who have experienced expulsion from the Garden of Eden, the flood survived only by Noah and his family, captivity and enslavement at the hands of the Egyptians, decades in the wilderness, a momentary season of calm that seemed just long enough for the Jerusalem Temple to be built before it was decimated and the people were thrust back into captivity, this time at the hands of the Babylonians and then the Persians. This is the people who were led by divinely appointed kings and judges who always seemed to fail them. This is the people who were given the words of the prophets, but never seemed to follow them. The very people who are now rejoicing in God's favor, God's kingship, God's rule are a people who seem to have had more difficult days than good ones. How can they bring themselves to sing? How can they clap their hands? How can they shout with joy?

Could it be that the Hebrew people knew something about joy that was unthreatened by momentary conditions? Joy that could survive, even thrive, when things didn't seem to be going their way? Could it be that somehow in the humbling experience of pain and struggle, joy arrived like a gift from on high, a lifeline of hope, and an eternal promise that God was at work – despite all appearances to the contrary?

As so many of us struggled to find joy in that Zoom call a few weeks back, I couldn't help remembering the songs of the Black Freedom Movement. Songs like: *I'm Gonna Sit at the Welcome Table*, *We Shall Overcome*, and *This Little Light of Mine*. Songs expressing a defiant certainty of God's presence, protection, and provision. Songs brought to life and given voice with a joyful resistance and captivating resilience we... I... seemed to know nothing about. How could their voices resound with such confident, resilient, almost defiant joy?

When was the last time you were overcome with joy? If not overcome, when did you feel it last? What will it take for you to experience joy again?, the facilitator asked.

Could it be that we were all disillusioned about what joy really was? Maybe we were thinking about happiness, a situational pleasure and contentment that comes from a sense of safety and security, deep social connection, and financial stability? Just looking at our list of joy-inhibitors would support this conclusion. We were all waiting on something to change in order to reclaim our joy and begin sharing it with one another.

In their book appropriately titled: *The Book of Joy*, Desmond Tutu and the Dalai Llama write, "Joy subsumes happiness. Joy is the far greater thing. Think of a mother who is going to give birth. Almost all of us want to escape pain. And mothers know that they are going to have pain, the great pain of giving birth. But they accept it. And even after the most painful labor, ... you can't measure the mother's joy... Joy can come so quickly from suffering."¹

¹ <http://bestbookquotes.blogspot.com/2018/07/81-spiritual-quotes-from-book-of-joy-by.html>

Maybe the truth all of us on the Zoom call needed to remember was that joy, much like love, isn't situational at all. It can never be found in material gains or any superficial sense of safety and security. No, joy, true joy, comes from our faith that – despite all appearances, God is at work in us, through us, and around us, working to bring healing and hope to our suffering world.

This truth is, of course, made evident as we remember how God has worked for good in our past, even when we didn't notice it, even when it didn't seem like it in the moment.

Contrary to popular belief, joy doesn't exist outside of suffering and pain, rather joy transcends them. Joy persists despite them. And joy awaits on the other side of them, ready to be claimed and proclaimed by people of faith who are bold enough to shout and sing alongside the Hebrew people who boldly dared to clap their hands, singing and shouting songs of joy, despite appearances.

In her poem, *Joy Unspeakable*, Barbara Holmes writes:

Joy Unspeakable
is not silent,
it moans, hums, and bends
to the rhythm of a dancing universe.
It is a fractal of transcendent hope,
a hologram of God's heart,
a black hole of unknowing.
For our free African ancestors,
joy unspeakable is drum talk
that invites the spirits
to dance with us,
and tell tall tales by the fire.
For the desert Mothers and Fathers,
joy unspeakable is respite
from the maddening crowds,
And freedom from
 "church" as usual.
For enslaved Africans during the
Middle Passage,
joy unspeakable is the surprise
of living one more day,
and the freeing embrace of death
 chosen and imposed.
For Africans in bondage
in the Americas,
joy unspeakable is that moment of
mystical encounter
when God tiptoes into the hush arbor,
testifies about Divine suffering,

and whispers in our ears,
 "Don't forget,
 I taught you how to fly
 on a wing and a prayer,
 when you're ready
 let's go!"

Joy Unspeakable is humming
"how I got over"
after swimming safely
to the other shore of a swollen Ohio river
when you know that you can't swim.
It is the blessed assurance
 that Canada is far,
 but not that far.

For Africana members of the
"invisible institution," the
emerging black church,
joy unspeakable is
practicing freedom
while chains still chafe,
singing deliverance
 while Jim Crow stalks,
trusting God's healing
 and home remedies,
 prayers, kerosene,
 and cow patty tea.

For the tap dancing, boogie woogie,
 rap / rock / blues griots
 who also hear God,
joy unspeakable is
that space / time / joy continuum thing
that dares us to play and pray
in the interstices of life,
it is the belief that the phrase
"the art of living"
means exactly what it says.

Joy Unspeakable
is
both FIRE AND CLOUD,
the unlikely merger of
trance and high tech lives
ecstatic songs and a jazz repertoire
Joy unspeakable is
a symphony of incongruities
of faces aglow and hearts

on fire
and the wonder of surviving together. ²

According to the poet, joy is not a situational reality rather joy is a choice, a commitment, an ever-present possibility, joy is a verb!

So what will it take for us to find joy again?

Despite the pandemic, despite the inconveniences and adjustments, despite the pain and grief and suffering of our present moment, what if we could boldly claim joy anyway. In an act of faithful and bold resistance to all that threatens to steal our joy, and the joy of our friends and neighbors, what if we, the people of faith who call Greystone our home, decided that we would participate in the symphony of incongruities being played through the instruments of our lives?

What if we let our faces glow with the radiance of God's promise?

What if we let our hearts blaze with holy fire?

What if we took the time to stand in awe and wonder that by the grace of God we are surviving together, growing together, learning together, being transformed ... together...
into God's new creation.

What if we allowed that simple miracle to become the backbone and the bedrock of a joy that was unable to be extinguished by pain, by circumstance, or suffering?

Could we then be a church that was bold in joy?

Could we then be a place for others who are searching for joy in the midst of suffering?

The joy of life, the joy of relationship, the joy of community, and the joy of knowing that no matter what, we are not alone in this world. But we are one, one body, one family, one beloved community that *will persist* in the bold joy of God that – despite all appearances – is making all things new.

² <https://cac.org/joy-unspeakable-2018-05-23/> and <https://www.drbarbaraholmes.com/single-post/2016/08/15/read-between-the-lines>