

# Searching for Joy in a Happiness World

## Sermon 193 | Greystone Baptist Church | August 13, 2023

### Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10

Anyone have a guess as to what might be the most popular college course ever offered? The most popular college course ever offered? Popularity, being subjective, in this case is measured by the total (cumulative) number of students registered for the class. Think about your college classrooms. Which auditoriums held the most seats? Which topics filled all of those seats? Which professors were the most sought after? and what kinds of information did they impart? Was it Chemistry? Computer Science? Math?

I went to a small liberal arts university and I majored in Sociology and French so my experience was probably not the norm. But as best I can remember, it was the class called *Deviant Behavior* that always filled up with upperclassmen and usually carried a waiting list.

As popular as that class was, it doesn't even come close to being the most popular class ever offered. So do you want to know what it is? Well, I'll give you a hint: it is offered at Yale University. Yale is more than 300 years old and in its long history, the most popular course ever offered isn't one of the classes that's been around forever like English Literature or Biology 101. Nope, it didn't show up on the course list until 2018. It isn't even part of their core curriculum. It is an elective! Yet its in-person offerings fill up every time they're offered.

Because of its wild popularity the class is now not only offered to Yale's student body, but it is also available to the public through *Coursera* (an online education portal). You can pay a nominal fee if you want to submit written assignments and get feedback on your progress. Otherwise, it's completely free. This class has only been around for 6 years and it boasts over 3.7 million enrollments. It continues to draw unprecedented crowds.

Are you ready to know what it is? Well, the official title is "The Science of Well Being" but it is more commonly known as "The Happiness Course" and it is taught by psychology professor, Dr. Laurie Santos, who created the course after living "in the trenches" with students, eating meals with them, and noticing the kinds of mental health issues many of them were experiencing. These reflected the national trends which most mental health professionals say are getting worse. So, Santos created the course and listed it with the original title: "Psychology and the Good Life," an academic exploration of happiness that educates and then equips students with behavior change exercises to help rewire the brain.<sup>1</sup> All of this, of course, is intended to lead to more happiness, less despair.

Now it makes sense why this course is so popular, especially given the timing. Think about all we have been through since 2018! I heard one of my neighbors say it plainly just last

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.cnn.com/2020/03/23/health/yale-happiness-course-wellness/index.html>

week in casual conversation about life... "I feel like we are all just teetering on the edge of deep depression and despair." It is a fragile position, the one we are in. All the things into which we place our trust are crumbling and falling apart. The economy must be monitored daily so that we can know how to make major life decisions like the timing of retirement and the measure of our ability to give generously.

The job market is OK they say, unless you're in tech (at the moment), but even still, we can't ever be too comfortable or certain because we know that most people will not have a linear path of consistent growth culminating with a reliable pension after a long career with the same company. No, most of us are on our own.

Even our friendships feel particularly vulnerable as life picks up its pace and everything (literally everything) is demanding our time - leaving no room for meaningful social connection.

Or maybe we have the opposite situation. Whereas the slower pace of previous years allowed more visits, more calls, more cards, more attention than before and now our loved ones are once again preoccupied with other engagements causing us to worry about our place in their lives.

Whatever our situation, it is no wonder we are all searching for happiness.

These are only a few of the reasons we are all feeling exhausted, insecure, uncertain, and well... as my neighbor said... teetering on the edge of despair. Maybe this is why the weeping of the gathered people in Nehemiah 8 resonates so deeply with us. Can't you just imagine us right there among the crowds when *all* the people gathered to hear the scriptures read by Ezra the priest or a bit of good news from Nehemiah the governor? The people were weary from years of exile - separation from one another and their place of worship in Jerusalem. They had been given permission to return to Jerusalem and rebuild their Temple, by Cyrus, King of Persia. I don't think we will ever be able to fully imagine what that season of destruction, distance, and exile felt like. I *hope* we never have to know that kind of displacement. But we do, from time to time, experience glimpses of it.

When COVID came and the doors to our church closed for in person gatherings - we learned what it was like to worship outside of our sanctuary. After a long time, we came back, but nothing is quite the same.

When children grow up and go away for work or school, they leave and return home forever changed by their experiences.

When we go through serious illness, medical treatment, job loss, divorce, or you name the tragedy, the experiences change us forever. Making us wholly different than we were before.

So we know that when the invitation to come back home and rebuild the life we loved comes, we don't walk, we run home. And that is exactly what the Hebrew people did when Cyrus invited them home. They returned from their places of exile (not all at the same pace, not everyone at the same time, and not everyone the same as they were before... they'd all changed and been changed by their experience).

As they began to pick up the pieces of their lives and of their Temple, they must have realized that even though they were home, nothing would ever be the same again. It was a season of grief-filled renewal. By the time Ezra reads from the scrolls of Torah, the people have been working hard to rebuild their city, its walls, and the Temple for nearly seven months. Not only is that a good long while, long enough for the fatigue and frustration to set in, but it is also a theological number. Seven - usually indicates a time of completion, rest, and renewal. But here we are in complete exhaustion.

The Israelites are a people who seem to be a lot like us as we teeter on the brink of despair. And they gather together - searching for a bit of happiness, a word of hope, a word of joy. Those who understand the Torah reading immediately bow down in prayer. And when the others hear the text interpreted for them, they respond by weeping.

Nobody knows for certain why the people responded like this but "Rashi, a great 11th century French rabbi argued that the people wept because they were confronted with how many ways they had failed to fulfill the laws of Torah."<sup>2</sup> Other commentators agreed. And that makes sense, right? How many times have we encountered the words of scripture, how many times have we come to church only to leave feeling guilty for the things we have done... or for all that we have not done?

But some commentators find another possible conclusion: that somehow in the reading of holy words the people were not overcome by guilt and shame, but that they were overcome by the presence of God with them, in that place, in that moment. And that maybe, just maybe, those tears that fell from their eyes were a sign of the overwhelming nature of true joy? An outward sign of an inward grace.

We know what it is like for tears to stream down our faces in moments of sheer happiness, but what if this is something even greater than that? Rather than crying happy tears, what if in the experience of the gathered community, in the communion of the saints who had long been dispersed, what if then, in the culmination of their reconstruction, at the end of a long day or week or month or seven months there was something more than they could ever have anticipated. Maybe they were surprised by the presence of God that showed up in the form of joy on that day even in the midst of their fatigue, their exhaustion, their disbelief, and maybe even their grief.

Joy does that, you know. It shows up in all the wrong places.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/third-sunday-after-epiphany-3/commentary-on-nehemiah-81-3-5-6-8-10-5>

Joy is, as one theologian writes, “An illumination, the ability to see beyond, to something more”<sup>3</sup> And maybe the other theologian was onto something when he said that, “Joy is best experienced in community. Joy seeks company [Joy beckons us,] (come and rejoice with me) and the company of those who rejoice feeds the joy of each.”<sup>4</sup>

Have you ever been surprised by a certain *joy* that interrupted your darkest hour?

I can certainly remember the tears that fell from my own eyes the first time we gathered back in this place after 18 months of worshiping elsewhere (either outside or in our homes). Tears of unparalleled and indescribable joy - joy that wasn't found in any of the usual pursuits toward happiness, joy that was unaffected by any merit of my own, joy that somehow broke through a season of despair reminding me, reminding us that when the people of God come together - for worship, for study, for prayer, and for discerning the movement of the Holy Spirit, joy can't help but show up. Because... Joy longs to be shared.<sup>5</sup>

Last fall some of us read a book together, a book on joy, written by Baylor professor, Angela Gorell - whose work was a part of the ongoing *Happiness* studies at Yale. I told you this story then, but it's so good I decided to tell it again. Besides, I figured if I had to ask three staff members and search a couple of key phrases in my google drive to verify that I had in fact used the story, y'all wouldn't remember having heard it either. So here goes.

As part of her *joy research*, Dr. Angela Gorell was leading a Bible study in a women's prison. The women loved to sing at every gathering. Angela hated that part, but one night, everything changed. The women were singing *This Little Light of Mine* with extraordinary passion. They had a tradition of letting different people in the group write their own lines and then everyone would chime in after. So for example, a woman might call out, “All up in this place,” and the rest would sing back, “I'm gonna let it shine!” On this particular night everyone was out of their seats, on their feet, jumping and dancing and singing so loudly that one of the corrections officers came into the room. She watched what was happening with amazement until eventually she joined in, clapping her hands, singing out, and smiling like never before. Joy gathers.

As the women sang their mourning turned into joy, their despair, into praise. Their song became an act of resistance to all the forms of death that they had experienced and were experiencing in their lives.

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<sup>3</sup> Angela Gorell, *Gravity of Joy*, p. 141.

<sup>4</sup> Miroslav Volf as quoted in Angela Gorell's *Gravity of Joy*, p. 175.

<sup>5</sup> Gorell, 173.

Gorell writes: “Our singing turned into embodied opposition to our fear, our anger, and profound loss. Our joyful noise opposed the imprisonment of bodies, minds, and hearts. Suddenly, we were rejoicing in what ought to be.” Their dancing, jumping, clapping, and singing together pushed back against the voices telling these women that they were alone, that they were worthless, or that there was no hope.

It was healing joy. And in the very act of gathering - of committing to rejoice and to recognize what was good and true, as the women declared their God-given meaning and dignity - they were participating in the joy of God.<sup>6</sup> A joy that had nothing to do with material gain, personal achievement or circumstance. Joy rather, that was found deep in the heart of God, expressed and experienced in the communion of saints, gathered to read holy words, sing holy songs, and share their holy stories.

Maybe some of you are among the 3.7 million students who have taken Yale’s “Happiness Course.” Or maybe you feel like you are “teetering on the edge of despair” and therefore you’re thinking about registering for the class today. Don’t let me stand in the way of any higher education. I am sure there is much to be gained from the Happiness Course. But I also believe that we already know - at least in part - that the secret to happiness and the good life, the path toward wholeness and a life worth living begins with a life deeply rooted in the heart of God, shown to us in the way of Jesus. And when we lose touch with that truth, all we have to do is *this* - gather together as the church...

For where the body of Christ gathers, where holy words, holy songs, and holy stories are shared... Joy is sure to follow.

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<sup>6</sup> Gorell, p. 89-90.