

Those Who Dream of Joy

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Date: 11 December 2022

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[0 : 0 0] Today, I'm feeling a little overwhelmed by the busyness of the holidays. Maybe some of you can relate. I'm also feeling very excited about some upcoming chances to see people I love. I am feeling anxious about preaching in front of all of you, but also very grateful for the opportunity to be here.

I also want to name that, like some of you, I am grieving. A couple weeks ago, or last week, our church lost someone many of us loved in Joyce Matthews, Miss Joyce, and I've been feeling real sad about it.

Everyone grieves differently. For me, I've been feeling really grateful for the very practical ways that Joyce lived out her faith. She came to the food pantry really consistently for as long as she was able and was so committed to making people's lives better, really on earth in our community, and I feel so grateful for that.

She was so grounded in this world, so grounded in this church, and in the people around her. She was also extremely silly and joyful and deeply generous, and I'm going to miss her a lot.

So this week, I've been trying to think through how to preach about joy at such a time as this, but maybe that's okay. When I asked you all to think about how you're feeling this season, maybe you thought of joy, but maybe other feelings came up.

[1 : 1 3] I know that I'm feeling a number of different things right now. If that's you, the good news is that in the stories we were talking about today and in so many of the stories in the Bible, joy does not show up alone.

It shows up alongside any number of other feelings. We are not the first people to contain multitudes. In that vein, we're going to start today's scripture reading with a story of a woman who experiences a wide range of emotions.

I do want to let folks know that in today's sermon, I'm going to be talking quite a bit about infertility as well as pregnancy. I know those may be tough or triggering. Feel free to step out as you need. We're going to start with the story of Hannah.

This is from 1 Samuel chapter 1. I've shortened it a bit, so if you are following along and you think I have skipped something, you're probably right. 1 Samuel chapter 1, verse 1.

There was a man from the high country of Ephraim, and his name was Elkanah, son of Eroham, son of Lehu, son of Tohu, son of Zuv. He had two wives.

[2 : 1 4] The name of the one was Hannah, and the name of the other, Penina. Penina had children, but Hannah had no children. This man would go up from his town year after year to worship and to sacrifice to the Lord of heavenly forces at Shiloh.

When the day came round, Elkanah would sacrifice and give portions to Penina, his wife, and to all her sons and daughters, and to Hannah he would give one double portion. For Hannah he loved, and the Lord had closed her womb.

Hannah's rival would torment her sorely so as to provoke her because the Lord had closed up her womb, and thus it was done year after year. When she would go up to the house of the Lord, the other, Penina, would torment her, and she would weep and would not eat.

Elkanah, her husband, said to her, Hannah, why do you weep, and why do you not eat, and why is your heart afflicted? Am I not better to you than ten sons? Penina arose, and she was deeply embittered, and she prayed to the Lord, weeping all the while, and she vowed a vow and said, Lord of heavenly forces, if you really will look on the misery of your servant and remember me, and don't forget your servant, but give her a boy, I will give him to the Lord all the days of his life.

No razor shall touch his head. That is 1 Samuel 1, verses 1 through 11. If you are familiar with the story of Hannah, you may know her as the mother of the prophet Samuel, which is why her story begins the book of 1 Samuel, but we aren't introduced to Hannah that way.

[3 : 38] We meet her as a woman mocked by other women, refusing to eat, crying out to God, Lord, remember me, please give me a child, I will do anything. At the end of this passage, we heard her make a vow that no razor will touch her son's head.

This is a promise to give him to the temple to become what's called a Nazarite. Essentially, she is offering him up to become a priest if God will allow her to conceive. As a spoiler on the Bible, she does keep that promise.

When Samuel is 12, Hannah gives him to the temple, and he goes on to become a prophet. The Bible, as a book or a collection of books, spends a lot of time telling us these really grand stories about heroic men.

So for me, I think it's really meaningful that the beginning of so many of these stories of men like Samuel, Moses, and Jesus start with stories about pregnancy, childbirth, and motherhood.

Before these grand, superhuman, often unrelatable stories about liberty and victory, we get stories of women dealing with very human concerns. Poverty, infertility, grief.

[4 : 43] Of course, today we know that people of any gender can bear children, and even the writers of the Bible knew that people of any gender could parent. But the biblical writers were also giving us an honest account of the societies they lived in, which were societies that described anyone who could become pregnant as female, and also societies where women were treated as though their main calling was to bear and raise children.

We do have some Bible stories about women who are not known for their motherhood, the prophet Miriam, the warrior Deborah, Queen Esther, the preacher Priscilla, and we also have some parenting stories about men who I'll mention in a minute.

But a lot of the Bible does hold to a really strong gender binary. That doesn't mean we have to hold to that binary, but we should know about it when we read stories about fertility and pregnancy, because we do get a lot of stories about both of those things.

In the beginning of the Bible, we read stories about people who desperately want to have children but cannot conceive. People like Sarah and Abraham, who are in their 90s before they're able to conceive. Isaac and Rebecca, who, like Hannah, cry out to God to give them a child.

Rachel, who spends years trying to get pregnant while her husband has 10 sons and some number of daughters by his other wives. A lot of these stories are quite painful. They tell us about how isolating it can feel to work through the experience of wanting to have a child.

[6 : 00] We read about hopelessness. We read about people being really cruel to each other in the midst of these deeply personal experiences. We also read that people have very different reactions to their own experiences.

People like Isaac and Hannah cry out to God. Hannah's husband, Okinaw, finds sadness and loneliness. Aren't I enough for you? Abraham and Sarah laugh at God, a little bold, when God finally says that they'll have a child in their 90s.

Rachel responds with anger and envy. She tells her husband, give me children or I shall die. We also read a second type of story about pregnancy and parenting in the Hebrew scriptures.

Stories about people who do have children in the midst of difficult situations. People for whom parenting and hardship are combined. It's hard to know much about Penina from today's passage and this is the only time she's mentioned in the Bible but traditionally people read this story to say that Hannah is the favorite wife.

So it doesn't sound great to be Penina, the less loved wife who is bearing and raising all of the children. We read about the single mother, Hagar, very early in the Bible. Wandering in the wilderness with her son.

[7 : 08] We read a lot of stories about parenting children who fight each other. The twins Jacob and Esau wrestling even in the womb. The sons of Jacob who throw their brother into a pit and then to add insult to injury, sell him into slavery.

A father named Jesse whose older warrior sons are overlooked and outdone by his younger shepherd son David. We read about Jochebed, mother of Moses, who gives birth to a boy in a world where all of the baby boys are being killed.

So the first few books of the Bible give us some really hard stories about infertility and they also give us some really hard stories about parenting. I know this sermon on joy may not be what you were expecting.

But again, I think it's important to start there. As a number of folks named in today's retreat, during the Christmas season, it's really easy to get used to hearing the same stories over and over about the excitement leading up to the joyful birth of Jesus.

But birth stories in the Bible don't usually start with praise. They usually start with mixed emotions and for me, that's what makes them real. These stories start with fear and anticipation, with pain and love and prayer and loneliness.

[8 : 16] We see people who have been waiting for decades to get pregnant and we also see people who are navigating unplanned pregnancies and unsafe childbirths and dangerous conditions to raise a child, all just like in real life.

So knowing all that, we're going to read from Luke 1 today. As you may have guessed, Luke 1 starts out with the story of a couple who has not yet been able to have children. In Luke 1 verse 5, we read, During the rule of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah.

His wife Elizabeth was a descendant of Aaron. They were both righteous before God, blameless in their observance of all the Lord's commandments and regulations. They had no children because Elizabeth was unable to become pregnant and they were both very old.

It's verses 5 through 7. Suddenly one day, an angel shows up to Zechariah while he's at work at the temple and tells him, Hey, great news. Your prayer has been heard. Your wife, Elizabeth, will bear a child and you shall call him John.

Pastor Toneta talked with us last week about their son, John the Baptist, who would go on to prepare the way for Jesus. So Zechariah and Elizabeth learn about their pregnancy and then the text pivots and we start to read about Elizabeth's cousin, Mary.

[9 : 28] We're using the word cousin in a pretty loose sense here. Maybe some of you will relate to this, but my family sometimes calls people cousins when I'm not exactly sure if they're related to me. We believe that Elizabeth and Mary are cousins.

They're related. We don't have to assume their parents are siblings. Elizabeth and Zechariah are very old. Some ancient sources like the Quran say they're maybe 90. Mary is quite young, 13 or 14.

So about six months after Elizabeth finds out she's pregnant, an angel appears to her young relative, we'll say, Mary, to tell her that she is also pregnant with a son. Who's Mary's son?

Jesus. Took a while, but we did get there. Now we start with verse 39. Mary got up and hurried to a city in the Judean highlands.

She entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting the child leaped in her womb and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. With a loud voice she blurted out, God has blessed you above all women and has blessed the child you carry.

[10 : 32] Why do I have this honor that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as I heard your greeting, the baby in my womb jumped for joy. Happy is she who believed that the Lord would fulfill the promises God made to her.

That's Luke 1, verses 39 to 45. We got some joy. In some ways that feels like a very natural reaction to finding out someone you love is pregnant, but based on what we've learned about the Bible so far, it is also a little bit shocking.

We read about how Penina made fun of Hannah to the point where Hannah is crying to God. In the stories before Jesus, women who are struggling with fertility are not typically friends with women who have children easily.

They're usually treated as rivals. And that's what makes Elizabeth and Mary's story miraculous. Elizabeth could have been bitter. She's probably feeling a lot of mixed emotions, probably some shock, some relief, some worry, some excitement, probably a lot of confusion.

When she finds out she's pregnant, Elizabeth says, the Lord has shown favor to me by removing my disgrace among other people. We can imagine that she spent a lot of her life feeling shame about not having kids in a world where children are one of the main signs of a woman's worth.

[11 : 43] And just as she is finally pregnant in her old age, her teenage cousin shows up at her door pregnant with the Son of God. If Elizabeth were following the pattern we've seen in the Bible, we would expect her to be pretty mean to Mary.

But in the space of shock and worry and confusion, Elizabeth also makes space for joy. When her teenage cousin shows up, Elizabeth blurts out, blessed are you among women, to what do I owe the honor?

Elizabeth allows delight and sows the seeds of joy and Mary responds in kind. Continuing with our scripture reading, we're going to read from verse 46. This translation comes to us from a group called The Community of Christ.

Mary said, My soul proclaims your greatness, O God. My heart rejoices in you, my Savior, because you have showered your servant with blessing. From now to the end of time, all generations will know the great things you've done for me.

Pretty joyful. Mighty One, your name is holy. In every age, your compassion flows to those who revere you, but all who seek to exalt themselves in arrogance will be leveled by your power.

[12 : 52] You have deposed the mighty from their seats of power. You have raised the lowly to high places. Those who suffer hunger, you have filled with good things. Those who are privileged, you turn away empty-handed.

You have come to the aid of your people and fulfillment of the promise you made to our ancestors when you spoke blessing to Sarah and Hagar and all their descendants to the utmost generation. It's a lot of joy.

Verse 56, Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months and then returned home. That is Luke 1, verses 46 to 56, also known as Mary's Song of Praise or the Magnificat.

When I read poems like this, I try to imagine myself expressing that much joy out loud. I have a few friends who make fun of me because I express joy only in writing.

If you text me good news, I will respond in all caps, exclamation points everywhere. Congratulations. I'm so proud of you. This is the best day of my life. If you tell me good news in real life, standing right in front of me, I might nod and say, cool, how are you feeling about that?

[13 : 57] Sometimes it feels like being joyful in public is embarrassing. Even as an adult, I have trouble figuring out how to share joy with other people and when I was Mary's age, when I was 13 or 14, you could not pay me enough.

It is shocking to me that the first words we see Mary say in the Bible are my soul glorifies the Lord. She has every right to show up to Elizabeth's house crying, saying, I'm too young and I'm not married yet and I think people are going to judge me and I definitely don't think they're going to believe me and I don't know how to be a good parent and I really don't know how to afford a child and honestly, I've been feeling kind of nauseated for a while now.

She probably has all of these feelings. Mary is an unmarried pregnant woman in a world where you could get killed for that. Certainly, she knows the stakes. We could have gotten Mary's song of panic, Mary's song of uncertainty.

There are songs of panic and uncertainty in the Bible. She could have said no to God. Thanks, but no thanks. Instead, Mary consents to the pregnancy and goes to the home of her older, righteous relatives, a place where we can only assume that she knew that there would be joy.

We can also only assume that Mary knew that joy is radical. She has spent her life living as an oppressed religious minority under the Roman Empire, living, as Lisa Sher and Harper puts it, physically brown, politically black, and she does talk about her own experiences in the poem.

[15 : 22] We have a picture here by Ben Wildflower, not in spite of, but right in the midst of her own time of vulnerability.

Mary sings this song that is undoubtedly revolutionary. God has brought down the powerful and lifted up the lowly and also fully joyful. The mighty one has done great things for me and holy is God's name.

Mary sows the prophetic seeds of joy and praise in the midst of her own vulnerability and her son, Jesus, will grow up and go on to defend unmarried women whose communities judge and reject them.

It should come as no surprise to us that Jesus befriended marginalized people and spent his career criticizing the empire when we know that this is the woman who raised him. I also want to remind us that in that last verse, after Mary sings her song, we read that she stayed with Elizabeth for about three months, then returned home.

Maybe some of that time she's continuing to sing her song of praise over and over. My soul glorifies the Lord. Guess what? All generations will call me blessed, but most of the time, Mary is helping her older relatives through the third trimester of an unplanned pregnancy.

[16 : 38] She's doing a lot of dishes. She's helping Elizabeth get ready to give birth. I imagine Mary and great-aunt Elizabeth putting together the nursery while Elizabeth is on bed rest.

Just as we can have joy in the midst of confusion, we are allowed to have confusion and worry and work in the midst of our joy. Mary isn't the first person in the Bible to sing a song like this.

Her song of joy echoes a song that Hannah sings about a thousand years earlier, another woman's song of praise in the midst of sorrow. After Hannah gives birth to her son Samuel, as I said, she raises him for 12 years and then she gives him to the temple like she promised.

Then Hannah prays a poem that starts out, my heart rejoices in the Lord, my strength rises up in the Lord, my mouth mocks my enemies because I rejoice in your deliverance.

No one is holy like the Lord, no one except you, there is no rock like our God. This feels familiar. In her poem, Hannah also goes on to sing about God lifting up the poor and supporting the faithful and remembering God's people, just like Mary, and she also sings her song at a time when she's probably experiencing some mixed feelings.

[17 : 48] She's just put her son in someone else's care after she had wanted him so badly. I think the first time I read Hannah's poem, I was a little bit disappointed. I think it felt like it made Mary's poem seem less original, less new, but Hannah and Mary aren't competing with each other.

They don't live in the same century. Instead, Mary is following in the footsteps of so many biblical songwriters, not just Hannah, but also Mary's namesake, Miriam, the judge Deborah, the apocryphal Judith, all of whom write songs of joy and victory.

And following them, Mary also leads the way both for Jesus and for thousands of years of songs of praise. It was tough to do research for this sermon because when I searched for the Magnificat, there were so many prayer lists and devotionals that list Mary's song as a prayer that you too can pray.

We have so many times that people have put Mary's words to music, Bach's Magnificat, Vivaldi's Magnificat, Rachmaninoff's Magnificat, my personal favorite John Rudder's Magnificat. There are so many songs and prayers and devotionals that people have written based on this one poem so that people like us can pray as Mary taught us.

Just as the earlier songwriters paved the way for Mary's joy, Hannah and Elizabeth and Mary paved the way for our songs of joy and liberation, including so many of our Christmas songs. I know a lot of folks right now are getting ready for the holidays.

[19 : 09] I know a lot of people who are excited. Some people are spending the holidays with your families for the first time in three years. Amazing. I also know there are a lot of people at the table who have had babies in the last year and I cannot wait to hear about your first Christmases as a family of three or four.

I also know that not everyone is spending the holidays in a place that feels fully safe and that some folks are feeling nervous about that. I know some of us are grieving. Maybe Christmas won't be the same this year.

I know some people at the table are planning to follow Mary's example and spend some time away from your immediate families. Probably most of us are feeling a mix of all of those things. Some joy, some anxiety, some excitement, some sadness.

However you are feeling, I want you to hear that Mary's song of praise is not a command to be joyful. It's just a poem. It's her song of celebration in the midst of her very real hardship.

When we are faced with mixed feelings this season, we can turn to biblical figures and lean on them. If there are times when you feel lonely or uncertain this time of year, there are people in the Bible who look like you, people like Hagar, Jonah, and Esther.

[20 : 19] If you find yourself feeling like Hannah or Isaac, crying or shouting to God, know that you have permission to do that and that there are people in the Bible who look like you. If you have a tense relationship with your family, I've got great news for you about the people in the Bible.

And when you are feeling joy, there are songs and stories for you. As the Reverend Nadia Boltsweyer puts it, joy, especially joy that is shared, isn't not paying attention to all the things that suck.

It isn't pretending the forces of evil aren't raging around us. Joy isn't delusion. As my friend, her friend, Teresa Thames reminds me, joy is resistance. Joy is resistance to the Western individualism that seeks to isolate us and tell us that narcissism is happiness.

Joy is resistance to the forces that seek to dehumanize our disabled bodies, our queer bodies, our female bodies, our uneducated bodies, our poor bodies, our brown and black bodies.

Joy is the effervescence of the Holy Spirit bubbling up out of the caverns of suffering, saying to the forces that try and keep us in the tomb that no, love is stronger. So as we make space for overwhelm and loneliness and grief and anything else we might be feeling this time of year, we can also live into joy.

[21 : 37] I asked some folks in our table community how they find joy this time of year and I got some really good responses that I'd like to share with you all. If you are going to a big gathering with family or chosen family or anybody else, a few folks gave some suggestions.

Some people told me about creating their own holiday traditions, especially if they'll be spending the holidays away from the people they're used to. One person at the table says she makes sure to wake up at her own house on Christmas morning so that whatever else she might be doing, she is rooted in her home.

Someone else told me about making a tradition of singing and baking cookies together as a family, regardless of where in the country they are. One person said that her family has a tradition of cooking a big breakfast on Christmas morning.

One thing my partner Josh tends to do around the holidays is to take a retreat of silence where he goes to a quiet place like the Basilica near Brooklyn, turns off his phone and spends some time journaling and praying.

This can be a chance to reflect on the year and it can also be a rare opportunity for silence in a very chaotic season. I struggle with sitting still so I tend not to do that.

[22 : 41] Instead, a lot of the time I calm down by walking and so as I plan for big gatherings, I try to plan for going for a walk maybe before or after dinner. Sometimes there's a dog or a cousin who would really love an excuse to go to the park.

This will come as no surprise to anyone here but I'm also a big fan of hanging out with the kids at the family holiday event. I also want to name that sometimes we can get hung up on one specific event.

As a kid, I felt like I had waited all year to open presents on Christmas morning. Now I feel like Christmas dinner has to be the pinnacle of the season but maybe you're not having a big Christmas dinner.

Maybe it's kind of underwhelming. I remember one year I got home by 7 p.m. and then cleaned out the vacuum cleaner for the rest of the night. In those times, I try to remember that I get to choose what I'm excited about.

Maybe you're seeing a concert you really love this week. Maybe you're excited to be celebrating Hanukkah or Kwanzaa or New Year's or your birthday or the World Cup final with a certain group of people. For me, it helps not to put all the pressure on one hour or one day to be absolutely perfect.

[23 : 47] In that vein, some folks did recommend having spaces in the next few weeks where you can share joy with other people. It doesn't have to be Christmas and it may not look the way you're used to. Maybe it's ice skating with friends or having a movie night.

If you want to be around other people, I recommend carols at the National Cathedral up near Woodley Park. Last year, I was feeling very anxious around Christmas and I know that watching the tables Christmas service helped me to feel a little less lonely from across the country.

A few folks also shared that they like to go to zoo lights or see other various light displays around D.C. When I've been alone in D.C. the week after Christmas, I also like to go to museums.

They tend to be open and pretty empty and I don't always make time for them the rest of the year so I really love to make time for them that week. So with all of those suggestions, I want to give you permission if you're looking for joy this season to make it your own.

Maybe you're just decorating your home the way you want. If you live with other people, that can just be a corner of your room with a nativity set or lights that you love. I'd like to give everybody a minute to pause and just think through what joy might look like for you this year.

[24 : 56] I put those suggestions on the screen. You can just take a minute. We don't have to start big with songs of praise. We can start small and sow seeds of joy for ourselves and others with small gatherings and walks through the neighborhood and Christmas carols.

So over the next few weeks, when joy comes, whether in our favorite traditions or in unexpected moments, we are invited to receive it. Mary invites us to allow joy to overwhelm us.

If you can't find the language, Mary invites us to borrow from her and Hannah and Deborah and Miriam before them to share in the joy of generations past. We are invited into the vulnerability and the anticipation and the welcome of joy that has been passed down for thousands of years.

So this December, I'd like to invite us to allow joy on our own terms. Seek it out or wait for it. Sing about it or receive it quietly. Share it with your friends or your family or just with God.

Know that joy doesn't always show up when we expect it to and that's okay. And when we feel joy honestly in a way that is true to ourselves, we sow seeds for others to do the same.

[26 : 06] Like Hannah, when we cry out to God, we give others permission to name what they're going through. Like Mary, when we're honest about our situations and we live in vulnerability, we create space and teach others who come after us to protect the vulnerable.

Like Elizabeth, when we welcome others in, we allow space for their joy, however it looks like for them. When we bring our full, complex, joyful selves to the table, we create space to imagine how others can live and we give others permission to be their full selves as well.

let's pray. God, our souls magnify you. We rejoice in you. We know that you have blessed us whether we see it or not and we thank you for the ways that you love us and the people who came before us.

Lord, your name is holy. We know that you love those who love others and you give your power to those who seek to share power. You lead us to question structures of oppression and lift up those who are overlooked.

Those who suffer hunger, you call us to fill with good things. Those who are privileged, you call to step back. You come to our aid in fulfillment of the promises you made to so many of our ancestors, to Sarah, to Hagar, to Hannah, to Elizabeth, to Mary, and to all their descendants, to the utmost generation.

[27 : 26] And we thank you, God, that we are given so many models to pray from and that we can build on Mary's prayer just as she built on the prayers of the people before her. I pray that in the good times and the hard times this season, we would remember that you are with us and we are not alone.

I pray this season that we would rejoice with those who rejoice and mourn with those who mourn. And I thank you, God, for the ability to do both. In your name we pray. Amen.