

Joy in Connection

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[0 : 00] Hello, my name is Anthony Parrott. I get to serve as one of the pastors here at the Table Church, and my son tested positive for COVID. He just has a runny nose. He doesn't feel that bad, but he's COVID positive. And if you are annoyed about coming to church in person and watching a video of someone preach, let me join you in your annoyance.

I've been scheduled to preach three times now, and each time either I have been sick, or in this case now somebody in my family has COVID, and so out of an abundance of caution and wanting to make sure that I don't get anybody else sick, here I am.

I'm back in my basement office. So, here goes. We are in a series about the season of Advent.

Advent is a word that means coming or arrival. It is about Jesus showing up in the world.

It also has something to do about the Christian hope that Jesus will one day return and set all things right. And in the meantime, we are a people of anticipation and hope. And how do we find hope in a weary world?

The world is weary. I am weary. You are weary. The world is exhausted. And yet, we dare find something to rejoice about. So, that's what we're going to explore today. We're in the book of Luke, the Gospel of Luke, exploring the classic Christmas Advent stories about the first coming of Jesus.

[1 : 14] And today, we're talking about joy and connection. And I will be the first one to admit that I am often the last person to find joy and connection.

I like my alone time. I'm an introvert. I like reading and books, as you can see. And sometimes, finding joy and connection is often hard for me.

Vulnerability and transparency and being with others who may have things that annoy you is really hard for me. I was homeschooled growing up. And when I went to college, I had this really rough transition for about a year of knowing how to be around people.

And not just in sort of like the dorky, like nerdy way that homeschoolers can struggle with it, but just like emotionally of like dealing with other people can be hard. And yet, there is this big idea throughout scripture and throughout church history, we find joy in connection.

And we see that in the Christmas story. My brother passed away, tragically, in a car accident a little over five years ago. And when that happened, I remember being in sort of the, you know, grief and despair about the unfairness of the world.

[2 : 22] And my brother was only a couple years older than me. He didn't deserve to die. And at the time, we had a small group at our old church. And I remember one of the first times hosting them again.

And in general, though I cognitively knew I was a pastor, I was a pastor of community formation. My whole job was about helping people connect with other people for the sake of spiritual formation and finding joy in connection.

And I just remember dreading having to sort of restart our small group. And they came over and, you know, there's sort of the awkwardness about naming the grief that me and Emily were going through having lost somebody.

And then we watched this really stupid video, really funny video, of a grandmother reading a baby, a children's book called *Wonky Donkey*. And I'm actually, we're going to pause and you're going to watch the first 90 seconds of this video.

So, here it goes. The *Wonky Donkey*. I was walking down the road and I saw a donkey, a bee, a donkey, hee-haw, and he only had three legs.

[3 : 37] He was a wonky donkey. I was walking down the road and I saw a donkey, hee-haw, he only had three legs and one eye.

He was a winky wonky donkey. I was walking down the road and I saw a donkey, hee-haw, he only had three legs, one eye, and he liked to listen to country music.

He was a honky tonky, winky wonky donkey. I think I like this book. Better than the men.

I was walking down the road and I saw a donkey, hee-haw, he only had three legs, one eye, he liked to listen to country music. He was quite tall and slim.

He was a lanky honky tonky, winky wonky donkey. He was a lanky honky. He was a lanky honky.

[4 : 40] He was a lanky honky. He was a lanky honky. The silliness of that video, shared in a living room space with friends, was deeply healing and reminded me of the point of joy and connection, of sitting in our living room laughing with people.

And actually, that book, we got a copy of that book and shared it with everybody in our small group. And when we still read it to our kids, it brings me back to that moment of rediscovering a little bit of joy while being with other people.

So with that in mind, I want to bring our attention to the Gospel of Luke, Gospel of Luke chapter one. And last week, Aaron shared with us the story of Elizabeth and Zachariah and the announcement of their son, who's going to be born, who's going to be John the Baptist.

And we're picking up the story there. So we're just going to read, it's about 20 verses of scripture. I hope you don't mind. You came to church. We're going to read a little Bible today. And then I'll share some observations about what we notice about connection and joy in this Advent season.

So this is the Gospel of Luke chapter one, starting in verse 24. After those days, Zachariah's wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she remained in seclusion.

[5 : 51] She said, This is what the Lord has done for me in this time, when he looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people. In the sixth month, the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph of the house of David.

The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, Greetings, favored one, the Lord is with you. But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.

And the angel said to her, Don't be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.

And now you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and he will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David.

He will reign over the house of Jacob forever. And of his kingdom there will be no end. Mary said to the angel, How can this be, since I am a virgin? And the angel said to her, The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.

Therefore the child to be born will be holy. He will be called the Son of God. And now your relative Elizabeth in her old age has conceived a son. And this is the sixth month for her, who is said to be barren.

[7 : 00] For nothing will be impossible with God. Then Mary said, Here am I, the servant of the Lord. Let it be with me according to your word. And the angel departed from her. In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth.

When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.

And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.

That's our gospel reading for today. Now, I want to point out a couple things. Let's begin with Elizabeth's story. The scripture says something that I did not notice until this year, thanks to a commentary that pointed this out to me.

And it says this, verse 24, After those days, the days that Zechariah went to the temple, he's confronted by Gabriel, saying, Hey, you're going to have a son. And Zechariah is kind of dubious.

[8 : 10] And the angel says, You're not going to speak for a while. After those days, verse 24, Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she remained in seclusion. One translation says she hid herself.

And this is a fascinating reaction, because in the very next verse, we get Elizabeth's reaction. All of this is, What the Lord has done for me. He looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured. And, you know, in those days, and unfortunately sometimes still in our day, the idea of a woman not having a child or a baby or being considered a mother was looked down upon. It's a cultural thing. I'm not saying that's the way it should be. The Bible doesn't say that. It's just what was expected. And so Elizabeth is being sort of set free from the cultural baggage. She now is going to be a mother and have a child. And her reaction is to hide. To put herself in seclusion. Now, we have to read between the lines. We're not told exactly why she hides. But I wonder if Elizabeth has some guilt about something good happening in her life. And that may sound a little counterintuitive, but I think it's a fairly common reaction with folks.

[9 : 17] I've known quite a few LGBTQ people who have to come out twice. They come out once to often their parents as a teenager.

And the parents doesn't believe them or tries to convert them out of being a gay or lesbian. And everybody sort of pretends like it doesn't happen. And then the child has to come out later in adulthood.

And the parent will be like, you never told me this before. So there's this coming out twice thing that happens. And in the in-between, everybody sort of pretends like it doesn't happen.

You go back into the closet and you hide yourself because you try to become this more full version of yourself as a queer person. And it's not received well. It's rejected in some way.

And so then you close back in, perhaps even smaller than you were before. There are other instances. When you come out of a bad relationship or a bad work situation or any sort of bad environment, and then you begin to encounter something good.

[10 : 16] And then you're struck by guilt. I've known this to be true of people who have gone through divorce. And they end a marriage that was harmful or abusive or wrong in some way.

And then they enter into a new relationship that's blossoming and flourishing and is bringing out the best of themselves. And they feel bad about it as if they don't deserve something good.

And I wonder, again, we're reading between lines. Scripture doesn't exactly say this. We're doing a little midrash together. Some interpretive dancing with the words of Scripture. I wonder if Elizabeth is having some of those same feelings.

She was barren most of her life. And then in her old age, she's given a child. Does she feel guilty? Does she feel like she doesn't deserve it? Are there other people in her community who are saying, you're 80 years old.

You're super old. What are you doing having a child? This is not going to work out well for you. Maybe it was a hard pregnancy. I don't know. But she seems, whatever is happening, she's hiding herself.

[11 : 10] She's putting herself in seclusion. And she's not allowing herself to experience the full joy of what is happening. So Elizabeth hides herself. And then Mary has her encounter with the angel, Gabriel.

And the angel says to her, rejoice, you are favored. And Mary's reaction is being confused. She's confounded. She's befuddled. Which, again, is kind of relatable, I think.

When someone can tell us to rejoice, hey, here's good news. And we're like, I don't believe you. So that's Mary's reaction. She's not so sure about this good news. And there's so many things we could say about Mary.

Unfortunately, we don't have time to say everything there is to say. But what I love about the, this is called the Annunciation in Christian history. The Annunciation. Gabriel announces Mary's pregnancy of the Son of God, of Jesus.

And what I love about this is that, yes, Jesus, Son of God, Messiah, coming to redeem Israel and the world. Fantastic. And Mary, you should also know, your cousin Elizabeth is pregnant too.

[12 : 14] And I love that these are in the same announcement. That the angel decided that it was just as important to let Mary know about her relative who was also going through a pregnancy. I love that because it's preparing the way for Elizabeth to experience community and relationship and to be brought out of her seclusion.

And it's giving Mary a refuge. Because Mary is a young, unmarried or betrothed woman who is about to have a bunch of controversy thrust upon her because of her pregnancy.

And the angel, I assume, predicts that this is going to happen and gives her an out. Hey, you should know you have a relative who is also going through an unusual pregnancy. It might be a good place for you to go while Nazareth is all a Twitter with your controversial pregnancy.

I love that the angel does that. Now, let me say just one or two more things about Mary because we can't spend too much time, but there's so many things I want to say. There's a couple phrases that the angel uses.

The angel says, The Spirit coming upon you is a well-worn Hebrew phrase that you'll find in the Old Testament, the Hebrew Scriptures.

[13:23] And when you see that phrase, the Spirit coming upon you or coming upon someone, it's the same language used in the Hebrew Bible about leaders coming into power in Israel. Prophets and judges and monarchs have the Spirit come upon them and then they take charge.

When the Spirit comes upon someone and empowers them to speak the words of God and to lead the people of God. And the first person in the New Testament to have the Spirit of God come upon them is Mary.

It's a young, unmarried woman. Overshadow is also an important Hebrew word. The wings of the cherubim, so these golden sculptures of angels, overshadowed the center of the Ark of the Covenant, which was in the most holy place in the tabernacle and temple.

And so these cherubim wings overshadowed the lexus, the epicenter of God's presence in Israel. And now the angel is saying to Mary, the Spirit of God has come upon you, oh, leadership language, prophecy language, and overshadowed you.

The center of God's presence will be found in you. Found in a young woman in an occupied territory who is about to be the center of a bunch of controversy.

[14:41] I think there's something to this. So Mary leaves with haste, goes to Elizabeth, hides out for a while. Mary shows up and pulls Elizabeth out of her seclusion and pulls her into joy.

The child within Elizabeth's room leaps for joy and Elizabeth is overjoyed to see her cousin Mary. Mary's action to go and find refuge with her cousin is what brings Elizabeth out of her hiding-ness and into community and fellowship and joy.

Author Cole Arthur Riley of Black Liturgies on Instagram, she also has a book. She writes this, she says, joy, which once felt frivolous as love to me, has become a central virtue in my spirituality.

I'm convinced that if we are to survive the wait for justice and liberation, we must become people capable of delight and people whom have been delighted.

There is so much that is worthy of lament and rage, but joy doesn't preclude those emotional habits. It invites the lament and rage. Joy situates every emotion within itself.

[15:46] It grounds them so that one isn't overindulge while the others lie starving. Joy doesn't replace any emotion. It holds them all and keeps any one of them from swallowing us whole. Society has failed to understand this.

When society tells us to find joy in suffering, it's telling us to let it go, move on, smile through it. But joy says, hold on to your sorrow. It can rest safely here.

And so Mary and Elizabeth, they come together and there is no sort of like, ah, you know, everything's just fine. No, that's not what's happening. There, I am sure, over the months that Mary is there, the admission of the weirdness and the oddness of all this and that Mary's life is not going the way that she planned and that probably all the people of Nazareth think that she's a floozy and Elizabeth, all the people in her village think that she's weird.

Like, there's all of that. And yet, there's joy in their being together. Biblical scholar and theologian Willie James Jennings says joy is an act of resistance against despair and all of its forces.

Joy can be a really hard thing to find in the midst of our own personal weariness and in the weariness of the world. But joy can be an act of resistance. Joy is not a denial.

[16:56] It's not a denial of what is true. It's not a denial of the pain and all there is to lament and rage against. There is plenty to lament and rage against. Joy is about finding that deep, deep happiness and connection even in the midst of all of the pain.

And those two can live together. Those two can be together. You can have the turmoil and the ache and the weariness as well as the joy and the laughter.

When I was sitting in the living room watching an Irish grandmother read wonky-doky while grieving the death of my brother, those two mingled together. And so my invitation and my challenge for you today is to find places of connection in the search for joy.

Now, connection can look a lot of different ways. Connection is not just, you know, a nuclear family, two parents and 2.3 children. No, that is not the definition of connection.

Connection is not, you know, living in a residential college and being able to stay up till 2 a.m., drinking Mountain Dew and, you know, doing whatever you do when you're in college.

[18:02] And then once you all move apart, then you never see each other again. No, connection isn't that. Connection can be found in connecting to ourselves, connecting to others, friends and family, chosen family, connecting to nature, connecting to God.

And this all takes intentionality. It's really hard to accidentally stumble your way into connection. Connection takes time and effort and it can be a challenge in a culture and a world that wants to pull us apart from each other that gives us all of the tools of the ghosts of connection or the illusion of connection while all we get is just a shallow imitation of it.

We deserve better. We deserve actual connection, which means bringing our full selves into a relationship. It means being able to say no to the illusions of connection and say yes to the real thing. And the real thing is hard, but the real thing can bring joy.

I love that Mary and Elizabeth are cross-generational, an old woman and a young woman finding something to connect about. It's not just about finding people who are similar to you. It's not just about finding people with the same story as you.

Even though affinity is important, it's not the only way to find connection. It is sometimes across our differences that we find the things that hold us together. God is a God of connection.

[19:18] The very concept of the Trinity is one of an infinite, eternal God that has always been in community. And then the divine dance in the Greek, the perichoresis, this idea that God is inviting fellow dance partners with them so that we can all participate in this community and connection and joy together.

Dallas Willard says that God is the most joyful being in the universe and what increases God's joy is for the rest of God's creation to join them in that joy.

Grumpiness is not a fruit of the Spirit. Now, fighting against injustice, raging against the systems of evil, yeah, I think that's probably part of the fruit of the Spirit. But doing it while in connection with others, in connection to our deep joy.

Joy that is not shallow, it is not a denial of weariness, but joy that is a form of deep connection and a way of saying, all of this evil, all of this death and pain and suffering will end.

I think that's where the good stuff is. Would you pray with me? Trying God, you are a God of connection. You are a God who invites us into relationship with you, with each other, with ourselves.

[20:34] God, may we be more and more willing to bring our full selves into every relationship that we are in and where there are folks in relationships who are not ready for that. May we know when to take a step back and find the relationships that are.

God, may we be willing and able and capable and empowered to find joy in a weary world. May we find a connection when there is so much loneliness to be had.

And may we see joy as a form of resistance against despair. Despair will not have the last word, God. We will make sure that that is the case through your power and your grace active and alive in us.

Thank you, God. Amen. For more information, please follow me and give us time.