

Finding Joy When Everything Feels Terrible

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Preacher: Heidi Mills

- [0 : 00] Good evening, everyone. Good evening, Heidi. Thank you. My name is Heidi, and I am the director of community here.
- If you would, please pray with me. Dear Lord, I thank you so much for gathering us in this space, for allowing us all to share with each other in music, in worship, in conversation.
- I pray that no matter how people are entering the room, that we will find ways to tap into the presence of joy in this space, Lord. I pray that you will speak through me.
- In Jesus' name, amen. Another morning, and I wake with thirst for the goodness I do not have.
- I walk out to the pond, and all the way, God has given us such beautiful lessons. Oh, Lord, I was never a quick scholar, but sulked and hunched over my books past the hour and the bell.
- [1 : 09] Grant me, in your mercy, a little more time. Love for the earth and love for you are having such a long conversation in my heart.
- Who knows what will finally happen, or where I will be sent. Yet already I have given a great many things away, expecting to be told to pack nothing, except the prayers which, with this thirst, I am slowly worrying.
- These are the words of Mary Oliver in her poem, Thirst. And last week, Pastor Tanetta opened her sermon by talking about her love for words, and specifically her love for poetry.
- If you haven't gone back and listened to the first two sermons in this Advent series, I would highly recommend it. I related to Pastor Tanetta's love for words, but I wouldn't say I'm a poetry person.
- My attitude towards words tends to be, the more the better. Sometimes I find it difficult to find an entrance into poetry. I can more easily sink into a long novel rather than a slim collection of poetry.
- [2 : 22] But there is something about Mary Oliver's poetry that has always stood out to me. When I first heard the opening line of this poem, it felt like a perfect summary of so many of my feelings lately.
- Another morning, and I wake with thirst for the goodness I do not have. I have been thirsty lately for a better world, a world that in some ways feels further away than ever.
- Like Mary Oliver, I often feel this the most when I am on my daily walks to work. It is one of the few moments of my day that is wholly my own, no obligations, no expectations.
- And it is during those daily walks that I have sobbed, ruminated, celebrated, lamented, and struggled just to make it to the next destination. These walks are where I have those long conversations about my love for the earth and my love for God.
- In this Advent season, I want to name that there are so many reasons to lament and grieve. And the idea of accessing joy and hope can seem almost impossible.

[3 : 33] For me, I always enter the Advent season with a certain amount of difficulty because I have a very strange relationship with my family. I don't often see them during the holidays. So there can often be a gap between what everyone is saying the holidays should be and what my reality is. And then on the other hand, I kind of compensate for that by being very busy.

I have a lot going on at work, and it gives me very little time to think and rest. And so my walks to and from work or to and from church or the metro are often where I feel that loneliness and longing more acutely than ever.

And in this community, I know that there are deep griefs that defy our ability to put them into words. The political climate from the election to the unrest and violence across the globe have plunged so many of us, myself included, into a renewed state of uncertainty.

But then there are also the painful and personal wounds of dreams deferred, relationships shattered or lost, expectations dashed, rest thwarted.

[4 : 52] There's grief and loss everywhere. And sometimes embracing joy feels like deliberately ignoring the darkness of the world. It's like we're covering our eyes, sticking our fingers in our ears, and singing to drown out reality.

And in some ways, it can feel selfish. There is so much evil in the world, so much that's not going right, that maybe lament is the only response to pain, oppression, genocide, and violence.

Experiencing joy sometimes feels like it is negating the importance of looking evil in the face and doing all that we can to stop it. Other people don't have the luxury of turning off their traumatic experiences, so maybe we shouldn't look away either.

And of course, there's the joy of an unseasonably warm day that gives way to existential dread about climate change. Joy can feel dangerous, because it leaves us vulnerable to the next wave of grief and despair.

But it is because of these reasons that I still desperately thirst for an encounter with joy. The Advent season is an opportunity to learn those prayers that, like Mary Oliver says, will help us on this long walk with God.

[6 : 10] And I take great comfort in the fact that another Mary, Mary the mother of Jesus, deeply felt both the risk and necessity of joy in her life. And she found that joy in the everyday reality of her life and in the future to come.

In Luke chapter 1, verse 26, we are introduced to Mary in a very precarious situation. The angel Gabriel appears to her and declares that she will conceive and bear a son.

She will name him Jesus, and he will be the son of God. And understandably, Mary is a little alarmed because she is unwed, single, and young, all vulnerable positions in the society, but especially for a pregnant woman.

In a patriarchal and hierarchical society where women were dependent on the men in their lives to protect and defend them, unwed pregnant women were especially vulnerable to ostracism, oppression, poverty, and death.

There were no safety rails. And as a Jewish woman living under Roman occupation, she lived in awareness that the might of the Roman Empire could come to harm her and her community at a moment's notice.

[7 : 25] And it is against this backdrop that Mary goes on a long walk of her own to visit her cousin Elizabeth, who was pregnant with John the Baptist. And I wonder what was going through Mary's mind in this journey.

She was probably traveling with others because, as I said, traveling alone as a single woman was probably unlikely. But she probably felt alone, torn on the precipice of fear and hope.

She was probably having this long conversation with God in her heart. Would God provide for her? What would Joseph end up doing? What would the baby in her womb be like?

And how could she bring a child into the world with so much injustice? But when Mary reaches the end of her journey, we encounter the joy of this moment for the first time.

The child, John the Baptist, leaps in Mary's womb and Elizabeth declares that Mary is blessed among all women and recognizes that she is carrying the Lord.

[8 : 31] It makes me so happy whenever I read this story because the first celebration of Jesus' birth took place among women. Just like they will stand by Jesus at the cross and at the resurrection, they also proclaimed the goodness of his incarnation as a baby born to Mary.

And Mary's response to Elizabeth's joy is another poem. In Luke chapter 1, verse 46 through 55, Mary declares, My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.

And surely from now on, all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me and holy is his name. His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.

He has shown strength with his arm. He has gathered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. 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.

[9 : 57] This poem, which is also known as the Magnificat or Mary's Song, reveals something important about the nature of poetry. The word poetry was derived from an ancient Greek word poesis, which means creation.

So poetry is this act of creation, a way of bringing into existence something that did not exist before. Mary dared to speak this poem into existence.

It is deeply joyful, deeply prophetic, and deeply brave and vulnerable. It dares to speak about a world that does not yet fully exist, but is even now coming to pass.

And there's a lot I could say about Mary's Song. Could probably preach on it every single Sunday for a year and still not come to the end of it.

But for the purposes of tonight, Mary's Song teaches us two things about how we can encounter joy in our daily walks through this thirsty world. First, we encounter joy by recognizing who we are to God.

[11 : 08] Mary's Song is bold and joyful. It holds nothing back. when she praises God for calling her blessed and doing great things for her, she is speaking the truth of her identity in a world that in many ways reflects the exact opposite.

The society in which Mary lived wanted her to remain small. As an unread, pregnant woman, every message she received by those in power told her that she probably would never amount to anything, that she was the lowest of the low, and she would never see a better world.

And Mary does not deny the reality of the injustice around her. She acknowledges that there are power structures that remain in the world. There are the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

There are the powerful on their thrones. There are the rich who take from the poor. But those in power cannot steal her joy. As one of my favorite worship songs says, the enemy can take many things, but it can't take my worship.

What Mary is doing here is exercising what Walter Brueggemann calls the prophetic imagination. She is able to critique the existing injustices in the world and propose an alternative vision for the future.

[12 : 26] She dares to push back against this world that tells her that she will never amount to anything. Instead, she defiantly celebrates who she is in God's eyes. God has called her blessed.

God has done great things for her, and her very being, her very soul, everything she is, is full of joy at the knowledge that God has seen her, told her not to be afraid, and affirmed that she is celebrated in God's sight.

And Mary's example of joy adds resistance to the messages of the world is an example we can all follow. All of us in this room have at some point or another been told that we don't measure up.

There are always competing messages that tell us who we are. For example, I was told that women were not allowed to be pastors and queer folks were not permitted to be in ministry.

But celebrating the truth of my identity is a form of joy the world cannot take away. And the same is true for each of us. There is nothing more joyful than someone who has learned to see themselves as God sees them and revel in that truth.

[13 : 40] You are loved, you are valued, you are celebrated by God. And that is a truth the world cannot take away and that is worth celebrating even in the darkest of times.

And second, we encounter joy by anticipating God's future and recognizing what God is up to here and now. And this goes back to the idea of prophetic imagination.

Mary critiques the powers that try to tell her who she is and finds joy in her identity. But she also proposes the sweeping alternative vision of the future, a deeply joyful future reality that is even now coming to pass.

One of my preaching professors once told me that we can't create a better world unless we can imagine a better world. God is working to lift up the lowly, to fill the hungry with good things, to turn upside down the forces of injustice.

God is not content for the world to remain as it is. God defies the forces that deny the dignity of anyone and is even now working to bring about a new creation.

[15 : 03] And Mary is so enamored by this vision that she can't help but celebrate. For some, Mary's joy might seem naive. After all, the realities of pain, death, oppression, and loss don't just go away because we pretend the glass is half full.

One difficult thing about joy is that it doesn't automatically erase all the bad things that we experience. But joy does encourage us to look past our present reality and see what God is up to.

It's like there's this present reality that we can't deny, that is full of pain, death, and oppression, and loss that we know so well. But superimposed above that is God's vision for the future where the last will be made first and the first shall be made last where God is working to bring about a new creation.

And even now, that new creation is breaking through. And Mary is able to celebrate this reality because she sees it happening. Her pregnancy, seen as something suspicious by the rest of the world, is precisely the sign that God is with her.

She celebrates what God is doing for her here and now at the same time that she anticipates what God is going to do in the future. The way God shows up in her life is only the beginning of how God plans to bring about a new creation.

[16 : 31] And God longs to partner with us in all of it. So joy, in this sense, is not just some high-in-the-sky hope that one day everything is going to work out.

Instead, it is about knowing and seeing that God is always at work. God is always making a way out of no way. And Jesus' birth is the advent of our joy, the first sign that a new creation is on its way.

But I would be remiss if I didn't acknowledge that finding this joy can often be difficult. If you are in a space in your life right now where joy feels elusive or impossible, I want to name that there is nothing wrong with that because I have been there.

And I encourage you to go back and listen to Shay's sermon from this morning. She really talks a lot about the importance of not negating pain on the way to joy.

And she talks about pain as often a portal into joy. So I would encourage you to go back and listen to that. But joy is not some fleeting emotion.

[17 : 43] Joy is a powerful act of celebration and hope. It is a belief that God is faithful even in the darkest of times. And a better world is even now coming to pass.

And that joy can begin like a mustard seed. If all you can summon is the tiniest glimmer of joy in this season, that's okay because God is still with us.

In these small moments, are too often a way to see what God is up to. Mary Oliver talks about this perfectly in her poem, Mindful. Every day, I see or hear something that more or less kills me with delight, that leaves me like a needle in the haystack of light.

It was what I was born for, to look, to listen, to lose myself in this soft world, to instruct me over and over in joy and acclimation.

nor am I talking about the exceptional, the fearful, the dreadful, the very extravagant, but of the ordinary, the common, the very drab, the daily presentations.

[19 : 00] Oh, good scholar, I say to myself, how can you help but grow wise with such teachings as these, the untrimmable light of the world, the ocean shine, the prayers that are made out of grass?

in this poem, Mary posits that joy is more of a discipline or a practice and I invite us today to instruct us over and over again in the practice of joy and sometimes that doesn't begin by looking for those mountaintop experiences where all of a sudden the sky clears and everything is blazing in glory.

That can be our ultimate hope, yes, just like Mary, but joy is so often more like a sliver of sunlight slanting just right through the blinds of a window.

Like Pastor Anthony said at the beginning of this sermon series, opening ourselves up to joy begins with paying attention. Each small moment of joy in our lives sustains us in the fight to keep going in a world that often seems dark.

Our faith does not require us to crawl on our knees for a hundred miles repenting as one of my ultimate favorite Mary Oliver poems says and that I quote all the time.

[20 : 24] It does not require us to lose ourselves to misery, despair, and cynicism. Instead, our faith empowers us to see the small ways that God is even now bringing a new creation into existence.

When I began to prepare for this sermon, I asked myself a very simple question. What has been bringing me joy lately?

And I found very quickly that there were very few large, life-altering events that made it onto that list. Here are just a few things that I mentioned.

My morning cup of coffee with a good book, annotating my favorite books, laughter with friends around a dinner table, baking, Taylor Swift, of course, fun mugs, journaling, my super comfy couch, or over coffee, worship, deep conversations, women's soccer, yeah, especially the Washington spirit.

kittens, clumsy panda videos, which I am very excited to have some on my phone when they are actually open to the public.

[21 : 50] Puzzles, and singing in the shower. These are all small things that on their own don't erase the realities of pain and suffering in my life, but each of these small moments taken together make life worth living.

They are glimmers of joy that cannot be taken away, and they sustain me even when the rest of the world seems dark. And finding joy in these small things doesn't mean that we remain ignorant or we close our eyes to the pain of the world.

Instead, it is so necessary to find greater strength in those moments of joy so that we can, like Mary, declare that a better world is on its way.

The arrival of Jesus reminds us that our hope and our joy are never futile. So, in a moment, I am going to conclude my sermon, but I want to invite us to a moment of contemplation.

On the table in front of you, you will probably see something a little unusual, a note card and pen. So, in the next couple of minutes before communion, I just encourage you to take the time to write down five to ten things that are bringing you joy right now.

[23 : 06] and they don't have to be big things and I would say that the smaller, the better. And I invite you to keep this list somewhere that you can see it.

You can pull it out of your wallet or your bag or see it on your bathroom mirror and it can remind you on those dark days that there is still joy to be had. And these are the things that allow us to celebrate that God has looked with favor upon us and a better future is on its way.

These small moments empower us to participate in and celebrate the advent of God's better future. So, I will end with one of my absolute favorite poems that reminds me that the simple things like the hungry being filled are often the source of greatest joy.

It's called The Orange by Wendy Cope. At lunchtime, I bought a huge orange. The size of it made us all laugh.

I peeled it and shared it with Robert and Dave. They got quarters and I had a half. And that orange, it made me so happy as ordinary things often do just lately.

[24 : 21] The shopping, a walk in the park, this is peace and contentment. It's new. The rest of the day was quite easy. I did all the jobs on my list and enjoyed them and had some time over.

I love you. I'm glad I exist. You love you.

I love you. It's just a matter of all. You know, I love you. You're not you're not going to get into it.

I love you. You're not expecting me to be all gesund, a fucking heyboom. Thank you.