

Pain as Portal to Joy: Reading Mary's Magnificat with Nikki Giovanni | The Poetry of Advent

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[0 : 0 0] Good morning. Good morning, table. It's good to be with y'all this morning. My name is Shea Washington. I use she, her pronouns, and I'm one of the elders here. A few things about me, if we haven't gotten a chance to meet yet. My favorite color is purple. I really feel strongly about that. I have two siblings, of which I'm the oldest. I love musicals. I've already seen *Wicked the Movie Version* twice. I'll be there for the sing-along on Christmas.

And when anyone ever asks me what my favorite holiday is, I say Advent. Now, you know, we know Advent is more of a season and less of like a single holiday, but I still mean it just the same.

Advent is my favorite. I love it. I didn't really grow up celebrating it, but at some point in my adult life, I connected with this time of waiting and ever-increasing darkness, this time of anticipation and preparation and ultimately, you know, stretching Christmas out longer.

I even queried it for myself, taking these different colored rainbow vases that I had, they were narrow, turning them into candle holders and creating my own rainbow Advent wreath. And I hashtagged this time, rainbow Advent. So when Pastor Toneta asked me if I wanted to preach during this series, I said, I'd love to. And then she said, I'd be preaching on joy. And I thought, this might be a setup. Not because joy isn't, you know, great, but it's just a hard thing to talk about, to define, to unpack, especially right now during this time of political terror, climate catastrophe, and genocide.

Not to mention the individual struggles that we all have going on in our lives. I mean, we know that this time gets marketed as the most wonderful time of the year. And for some, that might be true.

[2 : 2 4] But for others, it's the exact opposite. Often this time surfaces and magnifies otherness and isolation and loneliness. And to truly get in touch with joy, I think we actually have to connect with pain. We can't just jump over or ignore or numb or bury these very real realities.

I think they actually might be portals. That what they say is true, that the way forward is actually through. Through seeing and saying what is and what isn't. The yes and the no that we talked about during the first week of the series in connection with Mary Oliver's poem, *Yes, No*. In it, she inspires us to have opinions, to use our imaginations, to slow down and pay attention.

How important it is, she says, to walk along, not in haste, but slowly, looking at everything and calling out, yes, no. But also it's in the how we do it, the posture that we take as we call out the yes and the no.

What would it mean if we took a posture of joy? Last week, Pastor Toneta talked about poetry being a spiritual practice and a resource for re-enchantment. She noted that poetry can be a way of seeing that looks at things and through things that are not just as we are going to be able to see God. And so we're using poetry throughout this Advent series from in and out of the Bible to help us see anew and be re-enchanted during this time of holy darkness.

This morning, we're going to look at two pieces of poetry. The first from a contemporary poet known for writing about Black joy. And the second piece from, let's say, a biblical artist giving us a song that has become foundational to this Advent time and the story of Christmas.

[4 : 45] Each of them revolutionary in their own way, each using pain as portal to joy, each given who they were, taking this posture of joy, being examples of resistance. Would you pray with me?

Creator God, thank you for this day. Thank you for each of us here in this moment right now. Thank you that your hope, your peace, your joy is alive, that you are alive and here.

Speak to us today. Give us the ability to sense your spirit, to notice when you're at work, to receive this message and let it move us. We love you. Amen.

A poem by the recently late and longtime great Nikki Giovanni. I was born in the Congo. I walked to the fertile crescent and built the Sphinx.

I designed a pyramid so tough that a star that only glows every 100 years falls into the center, giving divine perfect light.

[6 : 08] I am bad. I sat on the throne drinking nectar with Allah. I got hot and sent an ice age to Europe to cool my thirst.

My oldest daughter is Nefertiti. The tears from my birth pains created the Nile. I am a beautiful woman. I gazed on the forest and burned out the Sahara Desert with a packet of goat's meat and a change of clothes.

I crossed it in two hours. I am a gazelle so swift, so swift you can't catch me. For a birthday present when he was three, I gave my son Hannibal an elephant.

He gave me Rome for Mother's Day. My strength flows ever on. My son Noah built new ark and I stood proudly at the helm as we sailed on a soft summer day.

I turned myself into myself and was Jesus. Men intone my loving name. All praises, all praises. I am the one who would save.

[7 : 20] I sewed diamonds in my backyard. My bowels deliver uranium. The fillings from my fingernails are semi-precious jewels. On a trip north, I caught a cold and blew my nose giving oil to the Arab world.

I am so hip, even my errors are correct. I sailed west to reach east and had to round off the earth as I went. The hair from my head thinned and gold was laid across three continents.

I am so perfect, so divine, so ethereal, so surreal, I cannot be comprehended except by my permission. I mean, I can fly like a bird in the sky.

The series is described by the Bronze Canyon on the Sun, I find VOICE DUR outside the affine do■r of ultrablest and notation mierde. I understood the vaccination era at the bias of biologists.

I touched my mind, but IIZED AB stations 2 learned that I. and who was known for writing about the Black experience through the lens of joy, first published this poem in 1972 during the Black Arts Movement.

[8 : 37] The movement was led by artists creating artistic work and cultural institutions lifting up Black pride and promoting self-determination and liberation in the face of ongoing racial oppression.

This poem has been called a song of praise to Black female agency. It's a poem in which many a young Black girl grew up performing at school.

I first saw this poem performed as part of an episode of the beloved 90s show, A Different World. A Different World was a sitcom that followed the lives of students attending a historically Black college called Hillman, and it was everything.

I was around 11 when the episode featuring Nikki Giovanni's poem first aired, and I watched it, eyes glued to the screen, as Kim, one of the main characters of the show, performed this poem to the beat of African drums with African dancers moving around her.

I won't go into all of the details of the episode. It's deep, and I encourage you to watch it. I will tell you that it's called Mammy Dearest, and that we watch the characters Kim and Whitley move from being ashamed of parts of themselves and their ancestry as Black women, to standing in their power, embodying joy, and celebrating the beauty, strength, and resilience of themselves and their people.

[10 : 07] This poem is an example of pain as portal to joy and of joy as an act of resistance, which is a term that was first coined by Toy Derricotte.

I will tell you that. You see, to someone on the outside of the experience of being systemically harmed, discriminated against, and oppressed, to someone whose experience is one of being lifted up as the norm, and in a way that is so ingrained that you don't even notice it happening, a poem this bold can come across as arrogant, offensive even, and maybe unnecessary.

But Nikki Giovanni was intimately connected with the pain of being a Black woman in this society. She knew the affronts on our looks, and in strength, she said, I am a beautiful woman.

She knew of our abilities constantly being doubted, and in power, she said, my strength flows ever on. And she knew of the ways our dignity, our worthiness, our connection to the divine was weaponized.

And with joy, she said, I turned myself into myself and was Jesus. What truths do we need to speak over ourselves today?

[11 : 33] What do we need to remind ourselves of as the days grow shorter and the nights so long? I moved from Cleveland, Ohio, to Northern Virginia when I was almost seven.

And for the first time, I was surrounded by white people. And I was noticing my difference in relation to them. And I began internalizing the messages I was receiving about who and what was better.

And I wanted hair like the little white girls around me. Hair that moved. Hair that when you took it out of a ponytail holder fell to your shoulders.

And I would often walk around the house with a towel wrapped around my head, hanging down my back behind me so that I could pretend to toss and swing my head.

Toss, toss. I hadn't yet learned of the crown that we carry as black women that flows from our head.

[12 : 44] But Nikki Giovanni knew. And she said in her poem to me and other black girls and to anyone who doubted, the hair from my head thinned and gold was laid across three continents.

Pain as portal to joy and joy as resistance. In this poem and in so many others, Nikki Giovanni takes what is considered lowly. She raises it high.

And in doing so, subverts culture. There was another young woman who lived in a much earlier time, also on the underside of power, who spoke subversive words of praise, even causing great offense at various times in history.

Mary, the mother of Jesus, and her poem, her song, also known as the Magnificat, isn't always presented through this lens of strength.

Mary, at least in my experience, has been presented as meek, powerless, only a person something is happening to, rather than someone aware of what is and willingly participating to help make what could be.

[13 : 54] But German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer understood the subversive nature of Mary's song. Of it, he offered these words in a sermon during Advent in 1933.

The Song of Mary is the oldest Advent hymn. It is also the most passionate, the wildest, and one might almost say the most revolutionary Advent hymn that has ever been sung.

This is not the gentle, tender, dreamy Mary as we often see her portrayed in paintings. The Mary who is speaking here is passionate, carried away, proud, enthusiastic.

There is none of the sweet, wistful, or even playful tone of many of our Christmas carols, but instead a hard, strong, relentless hymn about the toppling of the thrones and the humiliation of the lords of this world.

About the power of God and the powerlessness of humankind. This is the sound of the prophetic women of the Old Testament, Deborah, Judith, Miriam, I'll add Hannah, coming to life in the mouth of Mary.

[15 : 12] So let's take a look at it in Luke chapter 1. Mary is newly pregnant with Jesus. She's come to visit her relative Elizabeth, who was also pregnant, carrying John the Baptist.

The one whom the angel Gabriel said would make ready a people prepared for the Lord. And when Mary enters and greets Elizabeth, the baby in Elizabeth's womb leaps for joy, and Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit.

She offers a blessing over Mary and says to her in verse 43, But why am I so favored that the mother of my Lord should come to me? So let's read Mary's response, her song.

It'll be on the screen, or if you'd like to, you can turn to it. And let's perceive it, either for the first time or again, with the same or similar power and joy as Ego Trippin'.

And as Bonhoeffer called it, the most revolutionary Advent hymn that has ever been sung. This is Luke chapter 1, starting in verse 46.

[16 : 22] And Mary said, My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant.

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

He has performed mighty deeds with his arm. He has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones, but has lifted up the humble.

He has filled the hungry with good things, but has sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as he promised our ancestors.

Why was this so revolutionary? Why was Mary saying, From now on, all generations will call me blessed, such a major thing?

[17 : 37] Mary was a young girl on the margins of her society. She was a teenager, unwed, pregnant, impoverished, and Jewish within a Roman imperial society.

According to Jewish law, given that she was pregnant and not married, she could have faced being stoned and certainly would be ostracized by her community.

Have any of us been there? On the outs of our communities, feeling pushed aside, made to leave, had people leave us?

Anyone felt judged or had assumptions made about you? About your integrity and your devotion to God?

She was there. And her people, Mary's people, were being unfairly taxed. They were being exploited and mistreated by those in power.

[18 : 37] Suffering and the fear of more suffering loomed large. And she didn't know what was going to happen. Are any of us there? Unsure of what's to come?

Struggling to not be consumed by fear or overcome by the what-ifs? Having trouble getting a sound sleep? Whew!

Feeling emotions of anger, of sadness, of skepticism, wondering what God is doing. I've been there. And yet, during this time with Elizabeth, Mary is caught up in this moment of joy.

In this unplanned, spontaneous way, like every good musical, Mary seems to randomly burst into song.

And it is revolutionary because of who she is. Because of the lowly way that she is seen and has been positioned in her society. There's nothing revolutionary about people in power talking about their power.

[19 : 48] It's boring. It's expected. There's nothing transformative about a man saying, I am man. Hear me roar. Right? Like, quiet down.

We get it. But when a woman, a non-binary or a trans person, asserts who they are, there is power in that because of its resistance to oppression, to empire.

When queer folks demonstrate their pride, when black folks stand in their joy, when poor people redefine and upend the understanding of wealth, that is transformational and there is joy there.

So when Mary says, from now on, all generations will call me blessed, for the mighty one has done great things for me, it is because of who she is and how she has been situated in her society that makes it so powerful.

But it's also what she is saying. Mary is pointing to a Messiah coming to subvert culture. A Messiah coming to raise what has been deemed lowly to places of honor.

[20 : 59] To topple empires displaying a different form of power, which fills the hungry and sends the rich away empty. This song is Mary's moment of lifting herself and her people and praising her God.

She sees what is and what isn't, the yes and the no. And she takes a posture of joy. This joy is her strength. It's her resistance.

It's her posture on the road of struggle and heartbreak and oppression toward change and toward liberation. And so too can be ours. The Magnificent is pain as portal to joy and joy as resistance.

Y'all, I found out that it's the longest set of words spoken by a woman in the New Testament. And that in the past century, there have been at least three separate instances of governments banning its public recitation out of fear that people would actually think liberation was possible and go for it.

Wow. Wow. During this song, Mary recognizes who she is. She recognizes the power literally within her.

[22 : 20] Jesus, the coming Messiah, the mighty one, the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end, our Emmanuel, our God with us.

And she reaches back to lean on the messages and prophecies of her ancestors to claim what is to be. He has brought down rulers from their thrones.

He has filled the hungry with good things. He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as he promised our ancestors.

Could these three things, the recognizing who we are, the power within us, the messages of our ancestors, be the secret code to the portal of joy for us?

Because in this moment, her circumstances haven't changed, right? That isn't what joy is about. It's not really a mood like happiness that can kind of come and go based on what's happening.

[23 : 25] It doesn't only show up when things are good. On the contrary, I think it can run parallel to the hardest times.

That joy and grief, they're not competing with each other. Joy, at least in part, is a deep knowing that there is more. More than what this time and space is right now.

More than what can feel so looming and prominent. It's moments that we find ourselves caught up in like Mary did in that visit with Elizabeth. And how do we get there?

And how do we get there? I think it requires slowing down and looking closer with fresh eyes to see the things that can be harder to see.

The small miracles, the fractals of change, the helpers, the love. It is all there. And poetry is helpful in that.

[24 : 24] In Mary Oliver's poem, Mindful, she talks about looking and listening every day for something ordinary that kills her with delight. She talks about joy almost as a discipline, saying that it is something that she instructs herself in over and over.

What is being made in the midst of so much destruction? Where is the hope, the peace, the joy? What are our roles in bringing them to be?

Be on the lookout. And finally, I think joy requires community. It requires positioning ourselves close to people like Elizabeth.

People we trust. People who will hold space with and for us. Who will bless us and offer us reminders of hope when the pain feels too much to bear.

I was at an event a couple of weeks ago on grief. And one of the speakers said that the losses, the painful things that we go through, that that is the tragedy.

[25 : 34] But that the loneliness is what does us in. That that's the trauma. And it just rang so true for me. So may we find the strength to lean into community.

And may we also do the work of being safe places of love that others can seek refuge and reminder in.

Joy is remembering both our smallness and God's bigness, but also of our significance, God's divinity in each of us.

Our pain can be portal to joy. And we can hold on to joy as our resistance. There's an incredible song of resistance called This Joy I Have.

And I'd love to close this message with that. The words are on the screen. And so I invite y'all to please sing it with me if you know it and are able.

[26 : 40] It goes, This joy that I have The world didn't give it to me This joy that I have The world didn't give it to me This joy that I have The world didn't give it to me The world can't take it away Sing with me Sing with me This joy that I have The world didn't give it to me This joy that I have The world didn't give it to me Oh, I said this joy that I have The world didn't give it to me I said the world didn't give it The world can't take The world didn't give it And the world can't take it

The world didn't give it The world can't take it away Amen, y'all.