

Unspeakable Joy

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[0 : 00] I'm really happy to be here today. I'll be preaching about unspeakable joy, and I want to examine sort of what it looks like to pursue unspeakable joy in the midst of lived experiences with trauma.

When I think about unspeakable joy, I think of a joy that's not contingent upon circumstances, a joy grounded in the knowledge of a victorious, risen Christ who embraced the suffering of crucifixion, but also a Christ who is exalted because he has overcome everything that hinders love.

It is this belief that is the root of unspeakable joy to me. Yet unspeakable joy feels like a controversial subject at our church sometime. I honestly get it.

We are a community where many of us have seen the real harm that comes from false joy. We have seen invitations to joy be weaponized as an avoidant mechanism to really confront real pain and real trauma.

I know I have. I was in my late 20s when I received a call early one morning that my dad had passed away suddenly at the age of 59. I was living in New Orleans at the time, and I flew back to Oakland for his funeral scheduled for a Monday.

[1 : 19] The Sunday before his funeral, I went to my Bay Area church, and I saw many of my old friends. And instead of being met with consolation, I was met with a sea of questions.

Was your dad a believer? Did he know Jesus? Was he saved? And upon answering yes, I was told to rejoice because he was now in heaven.

As the service started and the worship music began, I said to myself, Yes, Jesus holds the key to death and hell, but I am still a son without his dad.

Why should I rejoice in this loss? I know I am not alone. Many of us have experienced real pain and real trauma, creating barriers to experiencing unspeakable joy.

For some of us, it could be the pain and trauma from churches and societies where we experience racism, sexism, or homophobia. For some of us, it could be the pain and trauma from growing up in abusive or dysfunctional families, feeling misunderstood by loved ones, struggling with chronic illness or disability.

[2 : 27] So how do we pursue unspeakable joy when many of us have histories of unspeakable pain and trauma? For me, it's through considering the example of the Pentecostal Black Church and the story of Miriam and Exodus that I believe we can learn how to cultivate an awareness of unspeakable joy in the midst of pain and trauma.

Like so many of my enslaved foreparents, I have found unspeakable joy in the Black Church. In the book that we're looking at this series, *Liberating Church*, we have a beautiful depiction of the presence of unspeakable joy in a religious community of enslaved.

It says, for Africans in bondage in the Americas, joy unspeakable is that moment of mystical encounter when God tiptoes into the hush arbor, testifies about divine suffering, and whispers in our ears, don't forget, I taught you how to fly on a wing and a prayer.

When you're ready, let's go. As a descendant of enslaved Africans, I too can testify of this God who tiptoes into our churches and testifies of our pain. However, God didn't stop there.

God also reminded us that we are created to be a people to take flight and soar. I think about the experience of unspeakable joy I had in the Pentecostal church my grandparents founded in Los Angeles.

[3 : 53] We had a community of mostly elderly Black folk who fled states like Texas, Mississippi, Louisiana, during the Great Migration to find havens from Jim Crow racism.

Yet these refugees arrived in California only to live in impoverished neighborhoods while grappling with real struggles like anxiety, depression, chronic illness, and disability.

Yet in the midst of these challenges, God would tiptoe into our services. As one pastor described, But when you come here, you are likely to get prophesied over. Experience the Holy Spirit.

You'll see people speaking in tongues. So there's this interesting relationship between life in the Spirit and the work of liberation. For me, they're one in the same. Growing up in these communities, inflamed by unspeakable joy, elderly Black people living paycheck to paycheck will prophesy words of destiny and hope to communities of the world called forsaken.

Single moms struggling to make ends meet would speak in heavenly languages, charging the atmosphere with hope that fueled their day-to-day.

[5 : 04] Our Jesus gave us a sense of liberation in the midst of difficult circumstances. Unspeakable joy did not evaporate our pain or trauma. Yet God did something even more powerful.

God reminded us that trauma could not clip our wings. God reminded us of who we are in the midst of difficulty. These experiences remind us that we were made to soar no matter what the world told us.

However, I want to be clear. The presence of these experiences was not intrinsic to us being Black or living in poverty. You see, our church would oftentimes quote the latter part of Acts 10 and 34 in the King James Version.

It says, God is no respecter of persons. This phrase meant that God didn't show favoritism or partiality, that there is not a different Holy Spirit for wealthy people or white Americans.

God's Spirit, as we believe in this church, has already been poured out on all of us without measure. However, I do believe that we always have a choice. At the table, we talk about this non-coercive God who loves a partner with us.

[6 : 11] And I believe that God lovingly gives us a choice. Our pain and trauma can be used as a springboard onto an increased sensitivity to the omnipresence of unspeakable joy.

Our pain and trauma can make us callous to feeling the presence of God who would promise never to leave us or forsake us. In the book of Exodus, Miriam, similar to my childhood church, made the choice to allow God to use her pain and trauma to serve as a springboard into an increased sensitivity to the presence of unspeakable joy.

I don't know if it says on the screen, the Prince of Egypt. This is a great summary of the book of Exodus. That movie's anointed. Y'all need to check it out. Well, for those of y'all who have not seen it, I'm going to give a brief synopsis that sort of sets us up for today's text.

In the book of Exodus, the Israelites enslaved for hundreds of years faced ethnic cleansing because Pharaoh feared their population growth would lead to rebellion. Pharaoh issued an edict to murder all Hebrew newborn boys through drowning in the Nile River.

To avoid killing him, Moses' mom put him in a basket on the Nile. His older sister Miriam followed the floating basket and watched it land at the feet of Pharaoh's daughter.

[7 : 29] Miriam approached Pharaoh's daughter and convinced her to let Moses' mom serve as a wet nurse to the child. Moses was raised in Pharaoh's palace. Fast forward, Moses grows up and God uses him to release signs and wonders, convincing Pharaoh to liberate the Israelites.

However, Pharaoh had a change of heart and decided to chase the Israelites out into the desert to kill them. The Israelites were trapped between Pharaoh's army and the Sea of Reeds when God used Moses to part the sea.

And after the Israelites were able to flee into freedom, God also used Moses to unpart the sea, killing Pharaoh and his armies. Today's passage arises as Miriam celebrates their deliverance.

And it reads, Then Miriam the prophet, Aaron's sister, took a timbrel in her hand and all the women followed her. With timbrels and dancing, Miriam sang to them, Sing to the Lord, for he is highly exalted.

Both horse and driver, he is hurled into the sea. Interestingly, Miriam was a sort of unlikely candidate for this type of unspeakable joy. In Hebrew, her name actually means sea of bitterness.

[8 : 45] And honestly, Miriam had a lot to be bitter about and was well acquainted with pain and trauma. You see, Miriam grew up in a broken home without her sibling Moses because of oppressive policies of the Egyptians.

Miriam watched the Egyptians steal the right to be a parent from her own mom. Miriam watched her mom suffer the indignity of having to pretend to be a wet nurse to her own flesh and blood.

Miriam watched her own sibling grow up without their culture because of the discrimination of Pharaoh's empire. Miriam's people endured over 400 years of enslavement while Egypt gained prominence on the backs of their stolen labor.

An entire generation of Israelite men were lost to state-sanctioned murder. Miriam's people suffered violence because Pharaoh feared a multiracial country where her people, perceived to be disloyal and unpatriotic, grew too numerous.

In many ways, as a Black American, as a civil rights lawyer, I can see similarities between Miriam's reality and the challenges my people face today. I think of how laws and policies have broken up Black families and separated parents and siblings through mass incarceration and the war on drugs.

[10 : 00] I think of the wealth gap between Black and white Americans, despite how the labor of enslaved enriched this nation. I think of state-sanctioned violence against Black boys and men because the ferals of our land fear what we will become if we grow to maturity.

I think of the attacks on Black voting rights and diversity, equity, and inclusion programs and how some Americans have grown fearful of demographic shifts and allegedly disloyal and unpatriotic minorities.

However, I believe in following the example of Miriam and making the choice to allow my people's pain and trauma to make me sensitive to the presence of unspeakable joy.

Like Miriam, I believe in prophetically declaring liberation is coming. You see, the writer of Exodus refers to Miriam as a prophet. She is actually the first woman in the Bible to be given that title.

Yet the text does not explain why. However, Jewish tradition provides insight. It says that the Holy Spirit came to Miriam when she was a young girl and she actually prophesied to her parents that they would have a son who would free her people from bondage.

[11 : 08] I believe like the prophet Miriam, not even seeds of bitterness can extinguish our ability to carry divine sparks heralding liberation. The seeds of bitterness that come from growing up in an abusive home will not impede our ability to prophesy healing through our relationships.

The seeds of bitterness that come from feeling misunderstood will not stop us from being sources of clarity to a world in need. The seeds of bitterness that come from feeling like an outsider will not stop us from being beacons of hospitality to those on the margins.

The seeds of bitterness that come from disability and struggles with mental health will not impede our ability to demonstrate what true wholeness looks like. Miriam's unspeakable joy after unspeakable trauma reminds me of one of the promises God made to us in scripture.

God says to us, those who sow with tears will reap with songs of joy. Maybe Miriam's song stands for the proposition that God will even redeem seeds of bitterness in our lives, no matter how deep their fountains.

I think about how God could have permanently dried up the sea of reeds that stood as a barrier to the liberation of his people. Instead, God redeemed the waters and used them to destroy the enemies of liberation at the root.

[12 : 28] Just maybe God will redeem our waters, our tears, our barriers to unspeakable joy. God is not a respecter of persons. What God did for Miriam, I believe God will do for us.

Our God doesn't cause trauma, but is quite good at using that to liberate us from anything that holds us in captivity if we invite her. However, practically, how do we invite God to use our pain and trauma to increase sensitivity to her presence?

Through looking at the story of Miriam, we see she used musical worship. In today's passage, we see Miriam lead a group of women with tambourines and singing and dancing.

Yet these worshiping women likely lost sons and siblings to the violence of Egypt. And their promise then was still afar off. And they still carried 400 years of enslavement on their backs.

Yet these women lifted their voices. These women lifted their hands. These women exalted the God who was so much higher than generations of trauma.

[13 : 30] But this act of worship was not a way to evade pain. It was a costly offering to God. An offering made in the midst of pain. An offering which defies reason and logic.

Many of us are faced with a similar opportunity. I remember worshiping in church the day before my dad's funeral. I remember going to the front and singing a song we actually sang today called King of My Heart.

And as you remember, the lyrics say, you are good, good. And I made a choice that day like Miriam to make a costly offering. I remember kneeling down during worship and the Holy Spirit whispering to me, it is okay to cry.

The spirit who raised Jesus from the dead became the first person in that room to invite me into mourning. Like God did to my enslaved ancestors, the Holy Spirit testified of my pain and suffering.

However, the Holy Spirit did not stop there. She whispered to me, you were not alone. She whispered to me that I will always be loved. Through musical worship in that moment, unspeakable joy prophetically struck down the idol of false joy that my church was trying to offer me.

[14 : 44] An idol which tried to exalt itself against the knowledge of a Christ who was okay with our grief and mourning. I made a choice that day to not allow unyielded trauma or a false joy even to steal the costly offering I could only rightfully give to Jesus.

Through worshiping on the eve of my dad's funeral, I beckoned unspeakable joy to tiptoe into the room. And when she came, she affirmed the reality of my pain and reminded me of who I am.

As I closed, inviting the presence of God which carries unspeakable joy is not a panacea for pain, but a prophetic exercise to remind us of God's coming kingdom.

I want to end with a beautiful passage which points us to the coming kingdom of God from a liberating church. It says, when you know that this world is not your home because you are deemed to be inferior by virtue of your color, gender, sexual identity, or class status, you must look beyond what can be perceived by the natural eye to find solace.

Moses Berry describes this lived transcendence as always looking beyond the blue. The blue sky was not a roof over their oppression, rather it was a permeable point of reference for prayer and entreaties.

[16 : 01] Joy unspeakable envisions and embodies a God that is able to do all that joy unspeakable envisions and embodies all that God is able to do, which is immeasurably more than all we could ask or imagine.

It draws us in and entices us to make things right, to tear down walls built to keep people out and status created to keep people down. Joy unspeakable turns our eyes beyond the blue to a place where repair is made and justice is sought.

It dares us to play and pray. It causes us to practice freedom and sing deliverance even in captivity. Please join me in a moment of prayer to end.

Jesus, we invite you into our lives. May every moment of trauma and every moment of pain be redeemed in the nail-pierced hand of our risen King.

May we invite Holy Spirit into seas of bitterness and may she ignite divine sparks heralding the liberation of our spirits and souls.

[17 : 12] May the fire of God consume our community with joy. Jesus, our great rabbi, teach us to worship. Teach us to be sensitive to your presence.

Teach us that you are worthy of our costly offering. May your presence, may your unspeakable joy reign in this place. In Jesus' name we pray.

Amen.