

Advent: Sharing Joy - 19th December 2021

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Preacher: Ruth Edmonds

[0 : 00] Throughout Advent, we've been looking at the candles, hope, love, peace, and now joy. I really recommend that you look at the reflections by Matt and Dave over the last few weeks.

They've certainly given me new insights into those words. Now, initially, when I learned I was speaking about joy, I was really pleased. I like to think I'm quite a joyful person, and Christmas joy is a pleasure.

And the idea that we all come together to rejoice and celebrate this incredible miracle about God coming into the world is a really powerful, interesting message.

And you also get to speak on the Magnificat, which is totally one of the best bits of the Bible. I mean, I know you shouldn't have favorites, but that's definitely one of mine. However, over the past few weeks, Christmas joy has become a little bit more of a complicated idea.

In our community, we've lost a really big, joyful figure, and we're all mourning Keith and working out what joy means while we mourn. It's also been the case that as coronavirus rears its ugly head again, I guess it never went away, really.

[1 : 07] And we look at a possibility of locking down again, and we look at the possibility of not having our Christmas services in person again. And then how we do Christmas and what joy looks like at Christmas also becomes more complicated.

However, I thought, you know, I'm still speaking on joy, and joy is fundamentally a great emotion, and most people love it. However, when I spoke to a couple of my friends this week, there wasn't really a consensus that joy was a good thing.

One of them just flat out said, no, I don't do joy. Joy is too big an emotion. I don't like emotions like that. Another friend tried to explain. She said, I bet if you look at the Google images for joy, you'll see lots of pictures of people with their hands in the air jumping up and down.

I don't like feeling like that. I don't like feeling like I want to jump in the air. I much prefer feeling content and keeping an even keel to jumping in the air, and then having to come down from that moment of exuberation.

And I guess some of you might agree with that. All big emotions are vulnerable. And opening yourself up to feeling really happy risks leaving you feeling really sad when it's over.

[2 : 21] And sure enough, if you were an alien trying to work out what joy is without much guidance, and you were starting with Google images, you do get a lot of pictures of people with their hands in the air.

So from the Google images, you can totally tell you're joyful if you're either on a big mountaintop or a beach. Ideally, the sun is doing something epic.

So it's either dawn, dusk, or just really, really bright sky. You're definitely joyful if you've got your hands in the air and you're jumping up. Particularly this person who seems to be jumping at a really weird angle.

That's definitely joy. It also seems to help if you're grinning or laughing so hard that either your mouth is bright wide open or your eyes are crunch shut.

Balloons also seem to be a relevant factor. It does also seem to help if you've got blue hair. Now, I don't know if it is that people with blue hair are more likely to be joyful, or if you're more likely to be the kind of joyful person if you choose to dye your hair blue.

[3 : 26] But all I know is that in preparation for this morning, I totally tried to dye my hair blue, and it didn't take. I think my hair is just too dark. So against the best of intentions, perhaps that's saying that I am not going to be such a joyful person, because I actually can't dye my hair blue.

And perhaps also, there's a new insight into that piece of folk wisdom, blondes have the most fun. Perhaps blondes have the most joy, because they have the potential to dye their hair blue easily.

Now, this woman with the blue hair and the oversized sunglasses, she is the picture of joy from Google Images. And so that was the aim for this morning. Hasn't quite happened. But admire her and the joy that she's giving off. And if any of you are looking for a quick route into joy, I would totally recommend dyeing your hair blue, oversized sunglasses, balloons, finer mountaintop, and some epic sunlight.

And I guess in the Bible, joy is also a really big emotion. The Hebrew word for joy, *samar*, seems to cover a huge range of situations. It refers to the feeling of unexpected blessings from God and for the anticipation of the bliss of the afterlife.

[4 : 37] The same word is also the word for joy, which the Israelites experience when they become free from slavery for the first time in a really long time in the Exodus. It's also the word for joy, bringing in the harvest and feasting on food when food isn't guaranteed.

The same word joy also refers to dividing up the spoils of war. In the Bible, joy is the emotion used to describe drinking wine or making love.

So I guess between drinking wine, making love, and dividing up the spoils of war, we should see the Vikings as particularly joyful people. And then in the Bible, joy is also this same word that is associated with making love, dividing up the spoils of war, feasting, drinking wine, is also associated with worship.

Joy is said to characterize the way the whole people of Israel worship. So we get that in Deuteronomy 16 and also 2 Chronicles 30. And that kind of joy part of the worship is the part that everyone takes part in.

So it says, I rejoice with those who said to me, let's go to the house of the Lord. We see that in Psalm 122. Now this association between joy and worship might make you feel a bit uncomfortable.

[5 : 55] I guess we can all picture in our mind's eye that stereotype of a happy, clappy church where everyone has to plaster a big fake smile on their face in order to come and take part and pretend that God always feels good, even if God is always good, and that they always feel hashtag blessed and that everything is always perfect and happy.

I think we're really lucky at St. John's not to be one of those churches where you have to put on a big fake smile and pretend that you're having a great time all the time. I think this is a church where you can be really real about where you're at, even if your heart's breaking or you've had a really tough week or you're just really tired.

And I'm absolutely certain that when the Bible says rejoicing is part of worship, I don't think it means that you have to be fake. I think it shouldn't get in the way of being real.

So then we have this question, what is this joy? What is the joy that's present in wine and winning wars and making love and also worship? Now I would say that joy isn't just a mad leap in the air, primarily enjoyed by blue haired people.

For me, it's about being very present and caught up in a small moment of wonder. That's the kind of moment of gratitude where you just say thank you for being here right now.

[7 : 13] A moment where time stays still and all there is is that moment. It's a very bodily feeling, not just a fleeting, oh it's quite nice, but a bright spark.

For me, joy is about being deeply connected to who you are and being alive and present and saying yes to the people you're with and the moment you're in and God.

And saying yes to all of that, even if it's a bit complicated and difficult if you think about it more deeply. Brené Brown says that the perfect metaphor for joy is *twinkle lights*.

Because like sparkly lights, joy comes in moments or flashes, often very ordinary moments. And I think you can get so swept up in what you're planning and striving for, you can miss the *twinkle*. You can miss ordinary joy by endlessly seeking super extraordinary moments. So for example, if you're dead set on being Prime Minister and only that will do, you're going to miss the normal joy of just being at home with your kids.

[8 : 12] Other times we're so afraid of what might happen, we don't let ourselves feel the joy properly. Fear can dampen and prevent us from entering into joy.

And I guess fear gets in the way because joy is a deeply vulnerable emotion. It requires that you're able to accept that moment just as it is and stay in that present moment of happiness.

That can be hard because over time you realise that things that give you joy can pass and fade and go away. And that can lead to catastrophising.

We all do that sometimes. You know that moment where you're happy and then you're so scared of what might happen because you feel so happy that you just kind of lose it. You know that moment when you're holding someone or something tightly and thinking, I love you so much it hurts.

And then you step away from that moment and you think, how will I feel if you're not here anymore? I don't know about you, but there are some times when I'm hugging someone, my mum or my husband, and I think, what would happen if you were to die or to leave or to hate me?

[9 : 25] Would this tiny moment of joy be enough if all those terrible things happen and I'm left feeling so hurt and broken? Will this tiny moment of joy be enough?

And that fear and catastrophising can kill the joy dead in its tracks. I think sometimes guilt can also kill joy. You know that moment where you think, this shouldn't be making me feel that happy. Or I shouldn't be feeling this good or this happy because right now I should be feeling sad or serious. We all get that too. I guess joy sometimes happens. It's not something to be ashamed of. Just one of those moment blessings. A bright moment in a cold morning. And I guess that's why gratitude, remembering that there is enough and that you have enough and that you are enough, is so connected with joy.

Because it's an answer to that slippery voice of fear which takes you in that moment where you're holding your friend, where you panic and think, what if I lose you? And the gratitude voice turns to that voice of catastrophising and says, there will be enough joy to meet and overcome any particular terrible moment.

[10 : 33] The joy won't run out. There will be other moments. So you can enjoy this one. The nativity story is full of joy. And I think part of that is that because Mary is this completely ordinary teenager.

So ordinary, but able to see those moments of amazing sparkling brightness in the depths. And I think you really do see that. She's like some of the teenagers that we have on a Wednesday night at F&F.;

You'll talk about some problem like hunger or the typhoons in the Philippines or the fact that institutionalised sexism means that lots of women experience sexual harassment.

And these teenagers will look at you and they'll say, but why haven't you done anything about it? You know this is wrong. Why haven't people fixed this? And I think we see that in Mary, that pure idealism, that really clean joy.

So let's just briefly look at two stories where we see Mary live and embody this incredible joy. The first is just after the angel has told Mary she's pregnant.

[11 : 36] Now that would probably be an overwhelming moment. And there are definitely thousands of consequences for Mary to think through. How is she going to survive? Where's the food going to come from? Is her marriage going to survive?

And just after the angel has told her that she's going to have this baby, the angel says, by the way, Mary. You're not the only miraculous pregnancy in the country. Your cousin Elizabeth, who couldn't have children, is also pregnant.

Now Mary's cousin Elizabeth is like really, really old, according to the story. And she's married to this priest and she lives in a completely different part of the country. Elizabeth was probably a bit of a social outcast.

Because in that society, not having children had a huge stigma attached. I mean, even today, not having children or miscarrying children or being single still has a ridiculous stigma attached. But imagine how bad that must have been back then. But Mary doesn't say, I don't want to travel halfway across the country to see a distant and not particularly high regarded relative. I don't know that well.

[12 : 39] She also doesn't say, what Elizabeth, she's so old. Mary says yes to the moment and yes to Elizabeth, the amazing blessing of a companion that God has put in place for her. So Mary travels to see Elizabeth.

And when she meets her, there's this really gorgeous moment of connection. John the Baptist, who's the baby Elizabeth is carrying, leaps in Elizabeth's womb. And Mary is caught up in that moment and deeply moved.

Mary is so joyful, her response can't be contained in normal prose. Her noble soul overflows in poetry. And this poetry isn't just religious.

It has powerful social and political overtones. It speaks of a great upturning, a great reversal of social, economic and political revolution. And I think in Mary's day, it would have been really clear what she's talking about.

She's born into a society where the Jewish people are oppressed by the Roman Empire. And so to speak of a king coming who will demote the rich and powerful and elevate the poor and humble means one thing.

[13 : 43] God is moving towards setting the Jewish people free. So Mary sings this incredible song. She sings, My soul lifts up the Lord. My spirit celebrates God my liberator.

For though I am God's humble servant, God has noticed me. Now and forever, I will be considered blessed by all generations. For the mighty one has done great things for me.

And holy is God's name. From generation to generation, God's loving kindness endures for those who revere him. God's arm has accomplished mighty deeds.

The proud in mind and heart, God has sent away in disarray. The rulers from their high positions of power, God has brought down low. And those who were humble and lowly, God has elevated with dignity.

The hungry, God has filled with fine food. The rich, God has dismissed with nothing in their hands. To Israel, God's servant, God has given help.

[14 : 46] As God promised to our ancestors, remembering Abraham and his descendants in mercy forever. And here, Mary's song is the very epitome of joy.

She's in a moment of struggle and difficulty. She probably doesn't know how she'll survive, whether she'll actually get married. And yet she's overcome by this possibility of a better, more godly world.

She remembers with gratitude that God's loving kindness endures and that God keeps God's promises. And she's swept up in this whole moment of blessing and possibility and wonder.

And this is a key to joy. Living forever in the bold character of the blue-haired jumping woman on the beach isn't possible. It might get draining or boring after a while.

But living with this incredible vision of a better world and an assurance that God's loving kindness and faithfulness will ultimately make this irresistible vision of peace, justice and joy possible.

[15 : 46] That it will happen. The kingdom of God, which is justice and joy and peace, a world in which there will be no sorrow or pain, is now and coming and chasing after us and will catch up with us and be realized and flood all of creation.

That is the joy of deep connection with God. Mary's song here isn't a quiet or a peaceful song. It's a raucous rejoicing in a God who sets slaves free and releases all of us from the chains that bind us and keep us down.

Rejoicing in a God who hates to see people go hungry and longs to see them fed. Who dissolves pride and doesn't care about hollow human power structures or achievements.

And offers everybody dignity. A God who cannot bear to see people with too much because they're depriving others of having enough. A God who has no interest in keeping up with the Joneses or getting the bigger, better house.

But who offers a better vision of the world where instead of competing to get on top, you're invited to an incredible feast where everyone has enough and more to celebrate. But I guess, like the twinkle lights, you can't just live in this dream vision of a better world exclusively.

[17 : 06] It hasn't completely been realized on Earth yet. For these dreams of a better world to be possible, it's also important to come down to Earth occasionally, like the wires connecting the bulbs are essential.

The irrepressible dream of a better world needs to be made possible. And that requires being real and present here too. Having your feet on the ground and seeing the world as it is clearly.

I think that means meeting people where you are and seeing what they need and seeking out ways to make their lives better. Seeking to make that better world where there is no sorrow or pain or hunger possible.

It also means just doing some of the drudging work of living and surviving and getting by. I think the other moment that Mary teaches us a lesson in joy is in the stable itself.

Now Mary has just spent a long time desperately trying to find somewhere to give birth, which must have been really very frustrating. She's in a stable or an outhouse, which isn't exactly the most aseptic of environments.

[18 : 14] And she's just given birth with Joseph for company, who as far as we know has never been to a birth before or had any children. I really hope there was someone from the inn there to hold her hand who'd seen childbirth before, or it must have been totally terrifying.

Now Mary survived all of this and is alive, and has this god baby who's definitely going to turn her life upside down. But Mary doesn't worry about any of that. We just see her there being joyful in the moment.

There are angels singing and animals, and there's a moment it seems all of creation is longing to join in with. I've never had children, and from what I've seen, childbirth looks like it can be pretty horrifying and scary.

And yet people tell me it's joyful, because I guess at the end of a messy and difficult situation, which might actually kill you, there is this life and this amazing irrepressible love.

After the stable, Mary and her baby will be forced to flee their oppressive state and become refugees in Egypt. They'll live hand to mouth for years without any family to support them at all.

[19 : 22] There are hard things to come. But there in the baby, there is joy and hope and peace and love all bundled into one. The skies erupt with the songs of angels, exuberant, overjoyed, that the new future promised by God is being born into this world right now.

And this is the greatest secret of Christmas joy, that we are natal beings, not defined by death, but by birth. In death, we are with God.

That isn't the end or the definition of what we are. But we are beings born into struggle and pain and difficulty who offer amazing joy and irrepressible love.

We are all filled with the possibility of love and born to be loved so hard by a God who did not stay distant, but chose to be born into our world, to come close and love us as much and as hard and as bravely as possible.

This is a joy worth stepping into vulnerability for because it reminds us who we really are, that we are deeply, truly loved children of God. The rest, the pain, the struggles, the difficulty, the achievements, the houses, everything pales into insignificance, next to that deepest, purest identity, that we are all born out of love, to be loved children of God.

[20 : 46] And the angels are singing for us too. And the angels are singing for you, who are you so happy? And the angels are singing for you, but you take an hour like a CD, that you and the angels are really bold in the whole world.

And this is actually your ■20, their hearts that we are arriving here, they are the original downpress, there are shadows of the ghosts that play this place. There's such good things as good things, but with people who are taking these days, when the angels are celebrating the games in heaven, the angels are searching for you.