

Joy in Grief

As Mary ended with the magnificat, a song of praise, in our Biblical text for today,
I begin with a poem.

I remember the times when it has felt like I'm suffocating
Desperately grasping for breath
But taking nothing in

When all I want is an escape
All I want is to breath
But everything around me seems to be smoke
Choking me to death
All I want is it to stop

Lost in my midnight sorrow
The loss of myself is too great for me to bear

My flesh no longer feels like a temple
But of a covering
Something I need to scratch myself free from

And when it feels like there's nothing left
For me in this word
And in this life

I see a light
Nothing bigger than a match
So far away, but it pierces the darkness
Nonetheless

It becomes something to hold on to
Something I hardly recognize
Because I haven't seen anything like it in so long

Something that tells me
Maybe if I wait just a little bit longer
I might just learn how to breath

And as time goes on, the light begins to shine a little brighter

And it's possible I'm not alone at all
Maybe I never have been

As the flame grows into a fire
It unveils a new identity
An excellent identity
Gifting wholeness that's desired by all
Who even experience even just a glimpse

It's something I can't quite understand
And I am certainly not worthy of
It's an identity that still tries to convince me
Time and time again
That it is actually my own

I resign
Finally internalizing what is truth

And I begin to believe that even when I forget how to speak Their Holy names
I will always be called beloved

Tears caress my cheeks as I smile and turn my eyes to God,
Somehow, even beginning to believe in joy.

I first wrote a version of this poem when I was a freshman in college. In my growing and formative years, I watched both my sisters struggle with their mental health and each slip into a deep depression. It wasn't too surprising then when I realized that the family narrative of mental illness and depression did not end with them, but was a gene that was also passed onto me.

When I began to seek help for my depression, I worked hard with my doctors, therapist, and family to combat this illness, and eventually I got to a place where I was content. I was living my life, even enjoying it sometimes, I had friends, I had family, I knew God. But I didn't have joy, not really. And I knew that I didn't have joy. Joy seemed like a foreign concept. Something I would hear about and sometimes see in others, but I hadn't really experienced myself.

That fall of my freshman year of college, I was passing the chapel at St. Olaf one evening. All the lights were dim, and it was empty. I'm not sure what, but

something drew me in, so I entered and sat down in a pew. I knew that the presence of God was near, and I took some deep breaths. I was in a new place - I had just moved away from home for the first time, I didn't have any close friendships yet, I wondered if my depression was going to worsen, and I felt overwhelmed, alone, and scared.

When I was sitting there, just breathing, a word kept coming to me. Joy. I thought it was ironic that in my fear and loneliness God would be telling me about something I didn't believe was made for me. It wasn't in my identity to be joyful.

I went back to my dorm room after that night in the chapel and began to write the poem I read for you today. It wasn't until about two years later that I experienced joy for the first time of my adult life. It was joy that surpassed my understanding. It didn't make sense. But I was joyful. Because of the deep friendships I had developed through vulnerability and honesty. Because of the ways that facing my fears had led me into confidence. Because I was able to find a home in my own identity.

The passage from Luke that we heard today depicts the beginning of Mary's pregnancy with Jesus. After the angel appears to Mary, she leaves to visit her cousin, Elizabeth, quite suddenly. When they are together, the babies are filled with joy, Mary and Elizabeth are filled with the Holy Spirit, and Mary bursts out in joyous song saying, "my soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior!"

How wonderful is that? But, my first thought when reading this text is how on earth did we get here? Just verses earlier, Mary was greatly troubled, filled with confusion, and fear. She even questions Gabriel the angel saying, "How can this be?!" Not to mention being pregnant at her young age and the conversations that surely were to follow with Joseph, her family, and the rest of their community. I can only imagine, if I was in Mary's shoes, emotions of anger, frustration, fear, and grief would be present in my mind.

In Elizabeth's case, she and Zecharia had tried for children for years. They had passed the age where it was possible and accepted their life without children. While excitement came, I imagine their initial thoughts were of disbelief, fear, and sadness that they might not get to experience the fullness of their child's life because of their old age.

But that's the thing about joy. It can come unexpectedly and in community with other emotions. Joy is not mutually exclusive. To be joyful does not mean to forget

about your fear, dismiss your anger, or let go of your grief, but it is to rejoice in the goodness that surrounds us and the goodness that is to come.

And Mary's magnificat, her song of praise, is not idle praise. She sings, "God has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant." Time and time again, God takes the unexpected route, choosing the weak and the oppressed.

Mary's situation was less than ideal, but God works through situations of loss, fear, frustration, discomfort, and grief. Without these intense situations and emotions the full joy of Jesus Christ could not be known.

Back in college, I remember clearly the first time I experienced joy. It was when I was outside, surrounded by the trees and listening to the birds. The warmth from the sun was shining on my face. There was community around me. I knew that I was loved.

As humans, it is our nature to resonate with and dwell on the bad that is in our world and our lives. And it is important for us to recognize the bad that surrounds us, but we cannot let our grief be paralyzing. We must move forward in joy.

As we saw first hand at the beginning of the service, there is an endless list of grief and loss. But is there not a more expansive list of goodness, a list of joy? If not, could there be?

Our relationship with grief is in communion with joy. Desmond Tutu writes in *The Book of Joy*, "Discovering more joy does not, I'm sorry to say, save us from the inevitability of hardships and heartbreaks. In fact, we may cry more easily, but we will laugh more easily, too. Perhaps we are just more alive. Yet as we discover more joy, we can face suffering in a way that ennobles rather than embitters. We have hardship without becoming hard. We have heartbreak without becoming broken."

Joy is a powerful thing. It is joy that allows us to carry on through grief, depression, and despair. What happens when we are present in joy? Fully present? We are able to find the strength to work towards a new and better day. Joy allows us to see the good, and run with it. We are to rejoice in the good, but we cannot be satisfied with it. We need to fight for more by allowing grief and joy to come alongside each other and inspire us. In our scripture, Mary was able to fulfill her role: through the pain I am sure she faced, she also saw and chose joy.

Joy is a glimpse of the Divine and even in the heartache of grief, sorrow, depression, and death, joy is still present. The question we continue to face today is how can we have joy when the world is as it is? Filled with violence, war, and global warming? We are able to have joy because it comes from God. Mary and Elizabeth were filled with the Spirit which led them to rejoice. Being present in joy is also being present in Christ and looking for the Divine that surrounds us.

It is the gospel of joy in grief and loss that Jesus brings to us, encouraging us to find joy to liberate and bring justice to the suffering. While we hold our grief, let us go forward in joy as we approach a new day to celebrate the promise of joy that Jesus Christ brings in Christmastime.

As we've seen in the story of Mary and Elizabeth and as I've experienced in my own life and struggles with depression, though we may feel overwhelmed by our emotions, nothing is impossible in Christ. That day back in college when God met me in the chapel, joy was stirring in my heart. Whether you feel it today or not, joy is possible for each and every one of us, and joy is present here in our midst.

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