



Joy Is a Discipline

Youth & Family Minister Jen Gruendler

Sunday, Oct. 4, 2020

Sermon Series: Searching for Hope During Turbulent Times

Exodus 15:19-25 NRSV

¹⁹When the horses of Pharaoh with his chariots and his chariot drivers went into the sea, the LORD brought back the waters of the sea upon them; but the Israelites walked through the sea on dry ground.

²⁰Then the prophet Miriam, Aaron's sister, took a tambourine in her hand; and all the women went out after her with tambourines and with dancing. ²¹And Miriam sang to them: "Sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea."

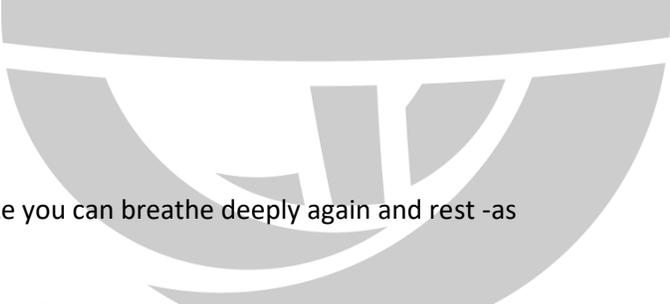
²²Then Moses ordered Israel to set out from the Red Sea, and they went into the wilderness of Shur. They went for three days in the wilderness and found no water. ²³When they came to Marah, they could not drink the water of Marah because it was bitter. That is why it was called Marah. ²⁴And the people complained against Moses, saying, "What shall we drink?" ²⁵He cried out to the LORD; and the LORD showed him a piece of wood; he threw it into the water, and the water became sweet.

There the LORD made for them a statute and an ordinance and there he put them to the test.

I have read the Exodus story, like probably many of you, hundreds of times. It's wholly captivating in every way, and I have always loved the few spots where the story mentions Miriam – or I should really call her by her title: Prophetess Miriam. I love the few verses that describe her dancing with her tambourine after her people are delivered from slavery and survive the crossing of the Red Sea.

I always imagined her suddenly slightly out of breath from the Red Sea experience having something swell inside her. As if there is nothing she can do but beat her hand drum in rhythm and move her voice and body for God. And then, as any good dance party, others just join in. Other women join in with tears running down their faces, as they realize that their deliverance has come. And pretty soon hands are thrown up in the air, bodies are moving to the beat, and the trauma and grief and fear that was once harboring deep in their bones starts to release. The shoulders relax. Their jaws unclench. Their stomachs settle. Like a weight being lifted from their souls-an energy fills their body and joy takes over. There is shouting and laughter and weeping. Can you picture the scene? Can you feel it even as I describe it – joy – in your own body?

Joy is a feeling and something we experience. The way it feels when you laugh so hard-after you haven't laughed in a while. The laughter that is felt in your gut and brings tears to the eyes? Or the feeling



when you feel totally safe and secure and content and you realize you can breathe deeply again and rest -as if someone lifted a weight off your chest?

The rush of joy as you hold your baby or grandbaby for the first time and you're not sure if you're laughing or crying or both? The euphoria of being in an insanely beautiful place or making the game winning touchdown or goal or basket or being in love for the first time or finishing something challenging like a degree or long hike or marathon or 1000-piece puzzle. We know joy when we feel it. Joy is embodied. You can't force someone to be joyful.

I remember a specific night – hour really – I was a junior in high school and I had just found out the night before a friend had died from suicide. Our group of friends gathered together-many of our parents and pastors lingered in the other room ... grieving themselves, worrying about us, trying to manage this unimaginable moment well as the grownups tasked to care for us.

We all just sort of huddled together in grief and shock and exhaustion. Hours went by and someone (I don't remember who) started telling funny stories about our friend. He was a larger than life, hilarious guy and friends with everyone. So, there were plenty of stories ... and I remember listening to one of the stories and remembering that sweet moment. And all of a sudden I, and several of us, began to laugh – full on belly laugh – and I remembering trying to control it, but the whole room broke into laughter. And for about three minutes that day, our mourning turned to laughter. The joy amid such intense grief surprised my teenage self in a way that is still hard to articulate.

A couple years later, I was talking to the mom of my friend who had died, and she said she still remembered the sound of us laughing in the room that day and how that night in the darkest night of her soul and life – the sound of kids laughing saved her life.

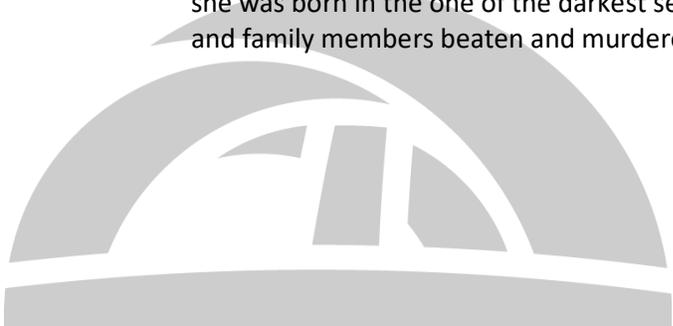
Joy does something to us, right? It proclaims victory and cultivates life.¹

Friends, we're tasked with talking about joy today ... the power of joy proclaiming victory over darkness and death. Maybe speaking of joy sounds ridiculous or gutsy for you in a world like this right now. If this is true for you, I see you and know this text from Exodus is for you. If you are feeling so ready to talk about joy – so ready to lean into that wellspring of life in you – know I see you too. And this text is for you too. It is why I picked the story of the Prophetess Miriam dancing ... if the text was just about a woman in the Bible dancing or about just about suffering or just about joy, it wouldn't be enough for right now. It wouldn't have the same sting, but it is Miriam and her people's story that remind us what joy really is about. Let me explain.

¹https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/248870/jewish/Miriam-Tabourines-of-Rebellion.htm

Miriam wasn't just any Jewish woman. The prophet Micah identifies Miriam as one of the three leaders sent by God to bring Israel out of Egypt (along with Moses and Aaron) and in The Talmud, which are a collection of rabbinic writings on the Jewish law and theology, it too shares a lot about Miriam's story.

It is believed that Miriam, even as a child was a prophetess for God's people, the story goes that she was born in the one of the darkest seasons of exile for the Jewish people. She would have seen children and family members beaten and murdered under Pharaoh's rule. She would have known what it felt like to





have your family separated. Her family were devout Jews – followers of the God of Abraham and Sarah and Isaac and Rebecca. She would have known (and lived) God’s promises and law.

She must have felt a call early from God. It is said when she was about 6-years-old she prophesied to her dad that one of her brothers would save the Jewish people and that this new generation of Israelites had to be born even in this darkest season. It is even believed the child Miriam was the one who watched baby Moses floating down river to Pharaoh’s house and that she made sure the baby was cared for safely by a servant in the palace.

Eventually, Miriam grew up and she continued to watch her people suffer under oppression and slavery. She and her people survived agony and loss like most of us cannot imagine. Her name meant rebellion, and it was said Miriam was known as a model of leadership, faithfulness, and courage among the women in her community. They looked to her for how to live faithful in this midst of such agony. She was known as gentle and compassionate but also fierce and full of grit. She would remind the woman, even as they endured the hardest of hard things, that they could not lose hope and that God would in fact deliver them and free them.

Ultimately, the time came for God to fulfill Miriam’s childhood prophecy and deliver the Israelites out of slavery and oppression-and so the Prophet Miriam joined God and her brothers Moses and Aaron in that work.

Chana Weisberg, a Jewish feminist scholar put it this way: *“After hundreds of years in bitter exile—after witnessing acts of utter barbarism, after weeping rivers of tears for the babies torn from their arms, after seeing their children cemented alive into brick walls to fill missing quotas—what did these women prepare while still slaves in Egypt? What was on the minds of these women who had seen affliction beyond the human breaking point? What was on the hearts of these women who bore anguish too much to fathom? What did their worn, tired, tortured, and beaten bodies carry out of Egypt? Tambourines ... Certain beyond a shred of doubt that their G-d would remember them, their only concern was being adequately prepared to sing with the appropriate expressions of joy for the miracles that were sure to occur!”*

And, of course, Miriam and those women did, in fact, get to use those tambourines and express that joy – that God was victorious, God did free them, God did remember them.

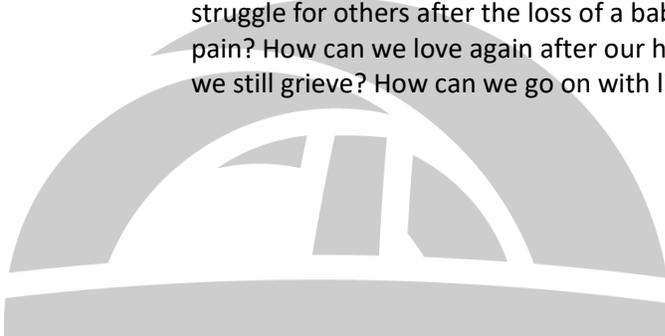
So, what can we learn from her story about the discipline of joy? What things can we claim and cling on to as we seek to practice joy in the most turbulent moments and seasons? Consider three things ...

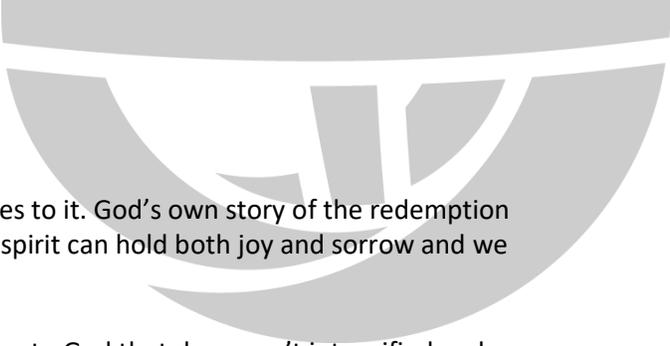
First, we can claim the truth that humans can hold both joy and pain at the same time.

Seeking and experiencing joy doesn’t mean the world or your life is without pain and suffering. You can hold both at the same time.

I remember feeling guilty the night my friends and I laughed out loud just after my friend died. Guilty for feeling joy Guilty that we were laughing when our teenage worlds felt like they were nearly ending.

I, of course, have come to know, as an adult, we can hold both. Joy and pain. I have heard this struggle for others after the loss of a baby or child or spouse. How can we feel joy when we still feel so much pain? How can we love again after our heart is still so broken? How can we celebrate our rainbow baby while we still grieve? How can we go on with life while still never forgetting the former? These are real feelings and





experiences, right? Our lives testify to this truth. Scripture testifies to it. God's own story of the redemption of creation tells of us. Both goodness and pain exist. The human spirit can hold both joy and sorrow and we can do it at the same time.

There is no way Miriam's dancing and proclamation of joy to God that day wasn't intensified and informed by her own grief and lived pain. She had lived in darkness; she endured grief. And, when you know what death tastes like, freedom and life and joy only taste sweeter.

Yet, so often, I think we settle for toxic positivity instead of joy. We try, or have been conditioned, to buck up and make lemonade out of every lemon handed to us.

Let me just say. it's okay to be really sad and feel terrible and be angry. There is no need to make any lemonade. There is no reason to pretend you're ok. Don't rush through the negative feelings to say you're happy.

But joy. Joy is different. Joy is what God's Spirit gifts us when she is making us whole bit by bit, again. Joy is the reminder that God- is victorious even over death. Joy is not pretending to be happy and fine, but soaking up God's goodness and grace while also taking seriously the pain.

Second, let's commit to packing our tambourines.

I never thought about this small detail in the story of Exodus until this summer when a devotion pointed it out.

Miriam and the other women were sure God was going to deliver them. So sure that they created victory tambourines and in the frenzy of the few minutes they had to pack and leave their homes and whole world, they threw the instruments in their bags.

Can you claim that for yourself today? That whatever challenging season you're in ... whether it is the pandemic blues or financial hardship or the challenge of a diagnosis or a struggling relationship or stuff at work or or or whatever it is ... can you pack your tambourine knowing somehow and somehow God is going to deliver you from it? Can you be ready to say thank you when God does?

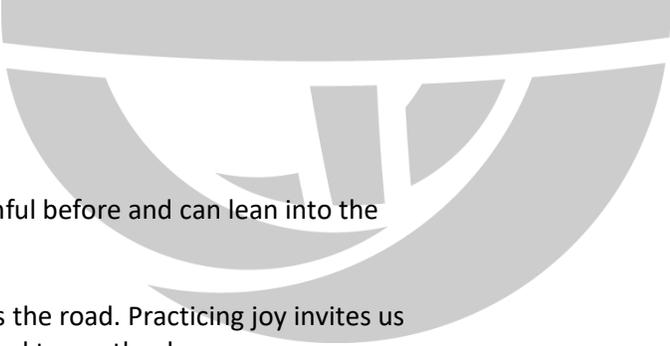
One way you can practice this discipline of joy in your life is to practice gratitude. Every day find things your thankful for and give thanks to God for them.

Friends, there are days you might have to dig deep for them. But do it – even if it seems trivial. Perhaps it's a hot cup of coffee, an hour of quiet, or a call from your grandchild. Or maybe it's a negative test result or a good grade on an exam or a long walk on a sunny day or a productive and energizing day at work or a new game to play. Goodness is all around us.

Study after study shows practicing gratitude leads to a more joyful life. Remembering to acknowledge good and beautiful things and to say thank you for them creates joy.

Packing our tambourines, anticipating that God's goodness and faithfulness will show up, is one of the ways we practice our faith It can be hard. I get that. Claiming God's faithfulness sometimes before we even get to actually see how God is going to show up is really gutsy and hard disciplined work. But, we





can do this because we can look back and see how God was faithful before and can lean into the promise God will be faithful again.

This is what faith asks of us. This is where the rubber hits the road. Practicing joy invites us to acknowledge God's goodness, anticipate God's faithfulness, and to say thank you generously. And so pack your tambourine and get ready to dance knowing it's not if – but when – God will deliver you.

Lastly, claim Joy as a tool of resistance.

This is not a new idea, of course. Historically, communities who have survived trauma and lived under systems of oppression have learned how to do this and taught us this truth.

Joy is an act of resistance. We remember that Miriam's name meant rebellion. She pushed boundaries, spoke truth to power, refused to be broken by systems and circumstances that were made to crush her and her spirit. And she taught and led other women to do the same.

I recently read a story by a pastor describing his experience of being at the funeral of a teenager murdered by an off-duty customs agent in 2016 in California. He asked himself this question:

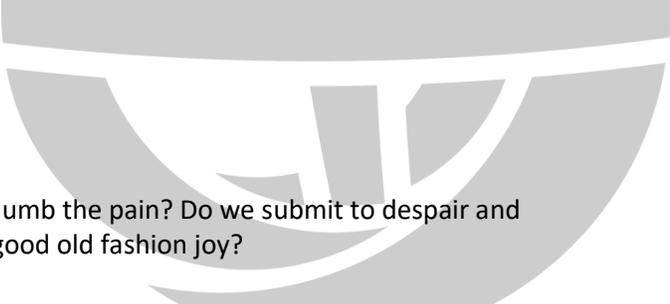
How on earth is anyone to find solace in the midst of such overwhelming grief? How in the world is anyone to eek out an ounce of hope to press on? What does a life of healing, flourishing, and joy even look like for communities that are constantly riddled with deeply traumatic pain?

At the funeral, though, he got a glimpse of an answer to his question. He talked about hundreds of grieving people and protestors filling the church for the funeral and, as he looked up to the front of the altar, he saw the child's mom dancing. And yet still, as everyone exited the church and made way to the cemetery, people lined the streets and cars turned up music, and the pastor describes all of a sudden everyone began to join her dancing. And he says this...

At that moment, I witnessed the joy of a community that, even in mourning, knew that it had access to one of the most powerful tools of resistance to a system of state sponsored violence and oppression that seeks to crush the joyful spirits of vibrant communities like these. As a Christian pastor, I could not help sense that I was bearing witness to the embodiment of Isaiah's prophecy that "you have turned my mourning into dancing, my sorrow into joy" We are a people that has born witness to and embodied the miraculous ability to dance on the head of the enemy of our souls and press on to create a future that we do not yet see, and to do it with defiant joy ... This is the joy of the Lord that is our strength..."²

I am not sure, if you agree or not, but I think we could all use some tools for resistance right now. We are in so so many ways living through turbulent times. The world is grieving millions of deaths. Our country is plagued by division and political chaos. We're are being forced to face century old systems of oppression and hate that are harming our neighbors. Our climate is laboring in pain. People are hungry and without homes and committing acts of violence to themselves and to others. Our neighbors, our own children, our elderly are suffering loss and isolation and ever worse we can't fix it. There is plenty of turbulence, friends.





And so the choice becomes for us, do we suppress and numb the pain? Do we submit to despair and hopelessness? Do we ignore reality? Or do we resist with some good old fashion joy?

Christian Joy resists the powers that tell us death has the last word. Joy resists the voices that tell us our country is broken beyond repair. Joy resists the hopelessness that strips away peace. Joy resists the lie that people can't heal. Joy resist the structures and systems that exist to oppress and silence people. Joy resists the anxiety that can become crippling. Joy allows us to claim in the face of every evil and darkness that the Joy of the Lord is our strength and that one day we will sing and dance and shout hallelujah together again.

Friends, truly it has been my daily prayer for you (for us) since mid-March that everyday God's spirit would surprise you with joy. That you feel a stirring and hear a small voice in you inviting you to choose joy. Deep joy – joy that leads to thanksgiving and endurance of faith and hope. Joy that leads you to swell with an overwhelming

² [https://huttpost.com/entry/joy-is-an-act-of-resistnace b 594cb975e4b0c85b96c6584b](https://huttpost.com/entry/joy-is-an-act-of-resistnace-b-594cb975e4b0c85b96c6584b)

desire to sing and dance and chose life. Joy that is sweeter because of what pain and loss you have endured. Joy that reminds you that even right now, in This exact moment.

God Spirit is beginning to mend and make whole all that is broken, again. May that gift of joy be yours today and every day in this wilderness.

