

I want you to imagine with me a scene from a movie. No particular movie—just a movie. It is Christmas Eve. A family of four is driving somewhere together. They are bundled up in fuzzy hats and warm coats. Snow is falling outside. Christmas music is playing. They are singing along, laughing, teasing one another. The camera moves from face to face—the children laughing in the back seat, the parents exchanging one of those glances that says, without words, *This is good. This is exactly where I want to be.* Maybe the camera even slows down for a moment. Snow falling. Music playing. Everyone laughing. Now let me ask you: What happens next?

Brené Brown, the researcher and author who has spent years studying vulnerability, shame, courage, and joy, has used some version of this exercise with hundreds of audiences. And when she asks what happens next, one answer comes up again and again: Car crash. Something terrible happens. Brown calls this phenomenon **foreboding joy**. Just when life feels almost unbearably good, we begin preparing ourselves for something terrible to happen. Joy makes us feel vulnerable, and vulnerability frightens us. So instead of surrendering ourselves to joy, we protect ourselves from it.

You may know the feeling. You look at someone you love and suddenly imagine losing them. You watch your children or grandchildren laughing and, almost without warning, begin worrying about their future. Everything is good, and some little voice whispers, *Yes, but for how long?* We rehearse sorrow because somehow, subconsciously even, we think that dress-rehearsing tragedy will protect us from sorrow....inoculating us from anticipated pain. But it doesn't. It only keeps us from fully experiencing joy.

I've been thinking about that this week because there is so much in our world that gives us reason for sorrow. Wars continue to devastate Ukraine and the Middle East. The humanitarian catastrophe in Sudan has displaced millions. Around the world, people are driven from their homes by violence, hunger, and fear. And right here, in the shadow of our own steeple, there are people struggling to pay rent, buy groceries, find stable housing, or simply make it through another month. There is no shortage of sorrow.

Today our thoughts turn toward Mary. Mary knew something about sorrow. Centuries ago, St. Ambrose reflected on Mary standing at the foot of the Cross. The disciples had scattered, but Mary remained. She looked upon the wounds of the child she had carried in her own body. Ambrose says that she looked upon those wounds with a mother's love and yet somehow saw within that terrible moment the salvation of the world. What an extraordinary image.

Mary does not look away from suffering. She does not protect herself from it. She stays. But today we meet Mary at another moment in her life. Today she sings. "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior." The woman who will one day stand at the foot of the Cross is now overflowing with joy. And perhaps those two images of Mary belong together. Because Christian joy is not the opposite of sorrow. Christian joy is not pretending everything is fine. It is not optimism. It is certainly not closing our eyes to suffering.

Christian joy is the confidence that suffering can be real without being ultimate... and Joy can exist even in the presence of injustice, pain, need and imperfection. Just listen to what Mary does with this kind of joy.

She has been told that God has chosen her, that something extraordinary is happening within her. But almost immediately, Mary understands that this blessing cannot possibly belong to her alone. Her joy becomes larger than herself. God has looked with favor upon the lowly. God has scattered the proud. God has brought down the powerful and lifted up the lowly. God has filled the hungry with good things. Mary's joy becomes joy for the poor. Joy for the hungry. Joy for the forgotten. Joy for everyone who has ever wondered whether God has noticed them. That is the remarkable thing about the Magnificat. Mary receives a blessing personally, but she interprets it communally. She does not say simply, *Look what God has done for me.* She says, in effect, *Look what God is doing for us.* Her joy connects her more deeply to the world rather than separating her from it. And I think that is something we desperately need to recover.

We live in an age in which we are exposed to more suffering than perhaps any generation before us. We carry the sorrows of the world around in our pockets. We can open our phones and, within sixty seconds, see images of a bombed-out neighborhood, a starving child, a political scandal, all juxtaposed with advertisement for shoes, someone's vacation photographs, and a video of a golden retriever clumsily falling off a couch....And then we keep scrolling.

Tragedy. Advertisement. Outrage. Joke. War. Recipe. Grief. Vacation.////All of it passing before our eyes at exactly the same speed. And The danger to me is not that we inoculate ourselves to sorrow by placing next to the mundane, and it's not that we just get completely numb either... so used to things that we simply stop caring. The danger is that we begin to feel everything just a little—and nothing very deeply.

Mary offers another way. She allows herself to be vulnerable enough to feel deep and wounding sorrow and likewise vulnerable enough to experience abounding joy. She stands at the Cross

when it is time to grieve. And she sings the Magnificat when it is time to rejoice. She is not so defended that she misses either one. Writer and priest Richard Rohr has written that spiritual joy is more than an emotion; it is placing our happiness where it ultimately belongs—in the fulfillment of life's deepest purposes. And perhaps that is what Mary discovered.

Her joy was not dependent upon everything going well. Everything did not go well. Her life would include uncertainty, displacement, fear, misunderstanding, and eventually the unimaginable grief of watching her son die. And still she sings. “My soul magnifies the Lord.” Not because she believes nothing terrible will ever happen. But because she believes that whatever happens, God is still at work.

That is very different from foreboding joy. It is expectant joy. Defiant and resistant joy. Hopeful joy. It is the joy that can look honestly at the world—with its wanton cruelty and stirring beauty, all its suffering and possibility—and still say: *God is not finished.*

So perhaps the invitation today is not simply to *feel* more joyful. It is to risk joy. To find the balance of the Blessed Mother. To stop imagining that rehearsing every possible tragedy will somehow protect us from heartbreak. To love people enough that losing them would hurt. To care about the world enough that its suffering sometimes breaks our hearts. But also To rejoice so deeply in the goodness of life that we become determined to share that goodness with others.

Because Mary's joy was never hers alone. And neither is ours. Our joy becomes Christian joy when it spills outward—when someone is fed because we have rejoiced in God's abundance; when someone lonely discovers that there is a place for them because we've joyfully acknowledged our own “acceptedness” ; when someone who has been pushed down is lifted up

because we know that when some suffer all suffer and when someone who has nearly given up discovers through us that God has not given up on them.

In a cynical age, someone must still believe that the hungry can be filled with good things.

Someone must still believe that the lowly can be lifted up. Someone must still believe that mercy is stronger than cruelty, that love is stronger than fear, and that death itself will not have the final word. Can we, together, be those kind of people, that kind of church?

May we may have the courage to grieve what must be grieved, to rejoice in what must be celebrated, and through it all to trust in the Son of Mary, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.