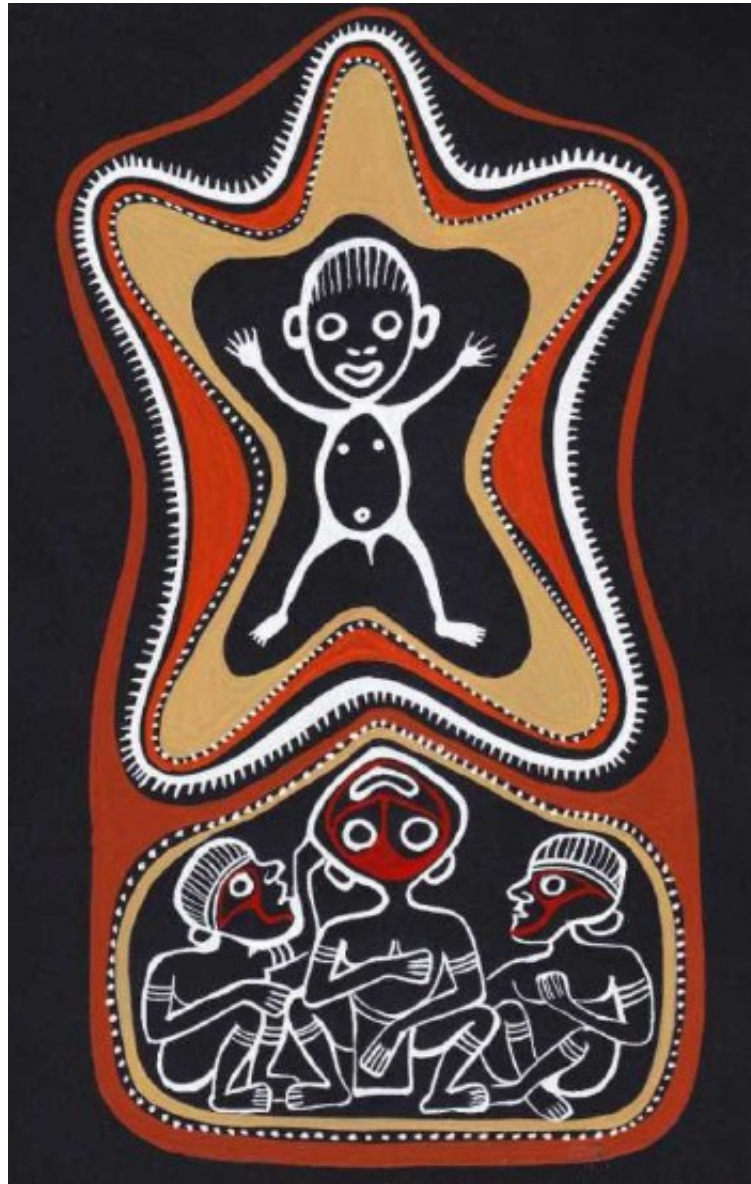


# Overwhelmed with Joy

1/9/2022

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Preaching on:  
Matthew 2:1–12

Overwhelmed with joy! Will you say that with me? Overwhelmed with joy! Our reading this morning says that the Magi were what? They were “overwhelmed with joy” when they saw that the star had finally brought them to the end. I love that turn of phrase, “overwhelmed with joy.”

I love maybe even more the more literal translation of the King James Bible. It says, “They rejoiced with exceeding great joy.” Say that with me: they rejoiced with exceeding great joy. It feels good just to say it, right? Joy in the mouth.

Slightly different emphases in those two translations. “Overwhelmed with joy” sounds like a flood of joy has risen up around you and swept you away. You were taken captive. You lost control. Joy is active, we are rushing down its river. “Rejoiced with exceeding great joy” puts us back in control. We decide that we’re going to glow in the dark, and our light will be joy. We sing, we shout, we high five, we unlock the bands around our hearts and let them free, let them run around in the yard and jump up on the company. It’s a party and we’re letting joy hang loose.

So, that’s an interesting question right there that God offers us just by reading two different translations: What is the nature of joy? Is joy a choice we make, an action of our hearts? Or is joy way bigger than our will—an ocean we’re floating on that can lie flat and still or that can toss us about ecstatically, depending on the weather? Or is it a little of both?

When was the last time you were overwhelmed by joy? When was the last time you rejoiced with exceeding great joy? When have you felt that in your life?

I remember being three-years old and walking with my aunt and cousins down the street. I’d been staying with them a few days, and it had been kinda stressful, and I asked, “Where are we going?” You know how when you’re three, you never really have any idea of what’s going on. And my aunt said to me, “We’re going to your house. Your baby sister is here!” The next thing I remember, my aunt was hollering my name from way behind me, “JEFFREY MANSFIELD come back here this instant and hold my hand, don’t you run in the street!” “But I’m excited to see the baby!” I said. Obviously! You know how when you’re three-years old and grownups don’t ever seem to really understand anything. I was so overwhelmed with joy, I just started running for home, to see the baby I’d been hearing about since I was two and a half. And there was nothing inside of me that could understand why such a joy should walk calmly down the street holding auntie’s hand.

Twenty-three years later, I was hiking up Mt Katahdin in Maine. It was the end of my through-hike of the Appalachian Trail. I had dreamed about hiking the trail since college, I began planning in earnest more than a year before, and I started hiking five months earlier on Springer Mountain in Georgia. After hiking 2,200 miles up and down every hill and mountain along the way, I was climbing the final peak—Katahdin in Maine.

And this hadn’t just been a physical journey for me, it had been something like a Magi journey, a spiritual journey. I had planned the trip as a way to prepare myself for going to seminary which was starting the following month. In a way, my arrival at Katahdin marked the arrival into my whole future and my calling. I was stepping from one world into another—and that’s a very holy thing. So, as I was racing up this incredibly steep and high mountain, I was already beginning to anticipate what it would feel like to stand on the marker at the top.

And when I got there—after hiking more than 2,000 miles through the woods by myself—there was a line. A bunch of day hikers who had woken up at 6 a.m. had gotten there ahead of me. And they were lined up, waiting for a turn to get their picture taken at the sign at the top of the mountain. So, I had to wait. It was a group with a lot of middle school kids in it, so they took their sweet time. This was not the way I had pictured it climbing up the mountain! But when my turn finally came, my aggravation blew away in a big gust of mountain wind, and the joy showed up. It was worth waiting in line for.

My guess is that there's more joy in the world than we let ourselves feel. My guess is that there's more joy in the world than we really have the time or the attention for. My guess is that we could make more room for joy. Joy ain't easy. It's easy to feel annoyed. It's easy to feel frustrated. It's easy to feel outraged. For me anyway. Maybe for you too? But joy? That's a harder emotion to come by. But once it gets going, it floods the whole house—from cellar to rafters! But sometimes you turn the tap, and the pipes just bang and grunt, and nothing comes out.

Maybe the Magi's story is a pathway for finding the source of our great joy, for opening the right door. First, these wise ones were astronomers and astrologers. They look up into the sky—they look up into heaven—with a mix of the left brain and the right brain, a mix of conscious rationality and unconscious mystery, a mix of science and magic. They aren't only one kind of thing. They aren't extremists. They're balanced. They're wise. I think this is about a way of seeing the world—not all good or all bad, not all material or all spiritual. They are faithful, and that means they've got their heads up. And they're looking for anything that moves or blinks or shines up there.

They have open minds about the heavens. Maybe you could say they have an open mind about God. And that allows them to see something that nobody else saw. It allows them to see a star rising, and it allows them to understand that it's a star about a baby, and a people, and a religion hundreds or thousands of miles away. It wasn't their baby, it wasn't their people, it wasn't their country, it wasn't their religion. It was different than they were, but they allowed it to come through the door anyway. They let it into the house, even though it was a stranger. They said to it, "Make yourself at home," and they must have meant it.

Now there are times in life when joy can seem really far away. Tragedy strikes, the floodwaters rise, and they don't stop at the sandbags. They come right into house. The wind blows the grassland fire into your town, and when you finally come back to what was your home, there's nothing left but smoke and rubble. The tornado touches down, the earthquake shatters, the volcano melts, the tumor spreads, the freezing refugee is turned away, the bruised child is ignored, the poor are forgotten, neighbor rises against neighbor, truth is silenced by the noise of lies, and the great powers gather and instead of finding solutions, they declare war. There are times when joy seems really far away.

But let's not confuse happiness and joy. Happiness is a feeling—a very good feeling! But in no life is happiness always on top. In every life there comes sadness and mourning and tragedy and injustice. But joy is different. Joy is a perspective on life that when practiced faithfully can endure that greatest of tragedies. Joy does not need to faint in the face of terrible sadness. In fact, joy knows that the purpose

for its existence is to sustain us in the hardest of times. Joy is the choice we make to endure. It's the choice we make keep going. It's the choice we make not to give up the journey.

Journeys aren't always happy. You don't always want to go, but you realize, at some point, that you've got to go. Or that you want to go. Or that you don't want to go, but something's got to change, and it won't change unless you risk the travel yourself. That's what the Magi did. They said, "Well, this changes everything. It's far away and risky. But we're going." Why'd they do it? I think it's because before they ever started, they knew what joy was. It doesn't always make sense why we decide to finally move. Joy is a power greater than reason. And joy, when we live it, keeps us moving. Aggravation and depression and fear and worry will come get you, and tell you, come hide with me under the bed. But joy's up on the roof of the house somewhere. It's down the road a ways, calling uis. It's a tiger in the grass at the edge of the forest outside town—its stalking you, but it's not going to pounce, until you get real close. So you gotta keep going.

Maybe most importantly of all, toward the end of their journey, these three Magi, these learned ones, allowed everything they had ever known about stars up until that point to be thrown out the window. I mean tell me, really, how do you follow a star? How does a star stop over one specific house? That's not how stars work! It doesn't make any sense. And who better to know it than three astronomers? It was impossible. It shouldn't have worked. They had certainly never seen anything like it before. It didn't make any sense. They let it lead them anyway.

Does joy always make sense? Do you want it to? Or do you want to feel joy even when the world is too ordinary for it to be expected? Do you want to feel joy when you win the lottery? Only when you win the lottery? Or do you want to feel joy when you win the lottery of waking up? Of eating breakfast? Of washing your dishes? Why should joy make sense? Joy is bigger than reason and sense.

And, so, the Magi were overwhelmed with joy. They rejoiced with exceeding great joy. They had earned it, sure. They earned it by paying attention, by opening the door, by accepting the quest. But when joy fell down on them like a star that makes no sense, like a poem leaping with images, like a three-year-old running down the middle of the street, like a baby born in a barn, I think that joy must have felt bigger than anything they could have planned, bigger than any choice they had ever made. It must have felt like grace. It must have felt like all at once coming alive and then disappearing into joy.