

Pastor Jamie's Sermon

Good Shepherd Church, December 10, 2023

"How Does a Weary World Rejoice? We Find Joy in Connection"

"Young at Heart" Message

Are you all familiar with Winnie the Pooh and his friends?

Well, today we're going to start our message with a short video from Disney's Winnie the Pooh. This short is called "Eeyore's Tail."

<https://video.disney.com/watch/eeyore-s-tail-4bb39d8237f68a8833003b15>

In this video, we see that poor Eeyore has lost his tail, and Christopher Robin puts it back on for him.

Eeyore is, by today's standards, perpetually clinically depressed. He's always "down in the dumps" and most often sees things in a more negative light than his friends.

If left to his own devices, Eeyore would likely isolate himself from his friends. In fact, he sometimes even believes he is a burden on his friends.

Despite his depression, his friends always include him. They always invite him, and if he seems like he may decline the offer, they encourage him to tag along nonetheless.

In the video we just saw, Eeyore's disposition doesn't really change, but I do believe he finds a moment of joy in this situation!

When he successfully swishes his tail, after significant encouragement from his friends, they laugh as he flops down, but then they cheer at his success.

And, in that moment, Eeyore manages what can only be described as an "Eeyore smile," as he makes a little joke about being attached to his tail which was, just moments ago, not attached at all.

This short video illustrates so much for us about how a weary world rejoices through finding joy in connection with others.

Eeyore, on his own, would struggle to find any joy in this situation. But, with the encouragement of his friends, he manages to find joy in this little moment of swishing his newly re-attached tail!

The Message

Today, we continue our Advent sermon series in which we ask the question, How Does a Weary World Rejoice?

Last week, we talked about acknowledging our weariness.

Today, we are going to talk about finding joy in connection.

In our scripture passage today, we read about Elizabeth and Mary, two miraculously pregnant women.

In Elizabeth's case, we heard last week that her husband Zechariah was approached by the angel Gabriel and informed that despite their years of infertility, Elizabeth was going to become pregnant.

And in Mary's case, we heard today that the angel Gabriel approached her directly to inform her that she would become pregnant through the Holy Spirit.

It is worth imagining for just a moment what this must have been like for these women.

Pragmatically, Elizabeth had been married for years and had never become pregnant. And, Mary was not married yet and became pregnant.

What might people think if a long-married woman suddenly became pregnant after years of not being able to become pregnant? Likewise, what might people think about an unmarried woman becoming pregnant?

In the ancient world, both of these situations are unique, and there is an element of judgment that would come from people who were not familiar with their stories.

Even those who were familiar likely had questions for both women.

And, in a world where women's expectations were primarily to bear children, but also to be faithful wives, the unusual circumstances of both of these pregnancies may have caused both women to become isolated from the rest of the world.

Today's scripture tells us that Elizabeth had not left the house for five months.

I can only imagine how isolated and alone she must have felt, because we must also remember that her husband Zechariah had been silenced completely during the pregnancy.

So, with no one to talk to for five months, we can imagine that Mary's visit was a welcome surprise.

Together, these two weary women found joy in connecting with one another. They also found joy in the movement of their babies in their wombs.

Despite their weariness, their isolation, and their uncertainty about their futures, they were able to rejoice together through connection with each other and with their unborn children.

Their stories beg the question: how do we find joy in connection, despite our weariness?

I recall during COVID, when precautions were high and we were doing things to try to distance ourselves from other people, that there was an almost immediate sense of isolation and separation.

It was almost as though people were afraid of each other.

My friend and I walked together frequently during COVID because being outside together was "safe."

Even as we distanced ourselves from the world, we found significant joy in connecting with each other.

We were each other's connection to the outside world – to some level of normalcy in an abnormal and uncertain time.

And even as the world gradually returned to some level of "normalcy," the isolation that many people felt remained strong.

We interacted with people differently. We didn't touch each other in the same ways – we stopped hugging or shaking hands, so physical touch was diminished, which is, for many people, a very important part of human connection.

This past summer, when I went to the Provincial Synod for the Moravian Church – which was one of the first large gatherings I'd attended since COVID hit – I realized just how much I missed human connections and physical touch.

The gathering was the first opportunity I'd had to see colleagues I hadn't seen in a very long time, and it was also the first opportunity I'd had for many hugs!

Historically, I haven't been one to be a huge fan of hugging lots of different people.

But during that Synod, I realized just how much I needed that type of interaction with people, and just how weary I was of not receiving it regularly.

There was so much in this type of connection for many of us. And, there was a very sudden realization of all that we had been missing during the years of social isolation that we'd experienced during COVID.

We are made for joy and we are made for connection.

This is an important thing for us to remember because there are many lonely, depressed, or otherwise isolated people in the world.

Eeyore's friends recognized that even though he was chronically depressed, he still needed their support and encouragement, and he could still find joy in that connection, even when it might not have seemed like he ever fully came out of his depression.

In what ways can we support those who are feeling lonely, isolated, depressed, or sad this holiday season?

How can we find our own joy in connection with others?

Now that we have acknowledged our weariness and, hopefully, encouraged others to do the same, we can turn toward focusing on finding joy in connecting with others.

And, on recognizing that we all come to that joy through our own weariness.

So, be gentle and kind to one another and to those you meet.

May you find little ways to connect, creating a safe space for those who need time, space, or healing before they can find joy in connection.

May you connect with those who are grieving, or who might be missing a loved one this season, or who are weary for so many other reasons.

May you create joy out of weariness, and welcome God into your hearts as you cultivate and maintain those connections. Amen.

Let us pray:

God of compassion, God of love, we come before you today to rest our weariness at your feet. In doing so, we acknowledge our weariness, and we ask that you help us to find joy in connecting with others.

We recognize that when we are weary, or depressed, or lonely, or feeling cut-off from the world, it can be hard to connect with others.

And, in those moments when we do manage to connect with others, we can sometimes find it difficult to find joy in those connections.

But God, we need connection to find joy, so we ask that you would take our burdens from our shoulders so we can rest and start to experience joy. Thank you, God, for helping us feel safe and loved in these moments of weariness. All of this we pray today in your holy name. Amen.