In Your Presence There Is Fullness of Joy

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Text: Psalm 16

The Zoom link to Andrew’s sermon is [here](https://us02web.zoom.us/rec/share/I9n84BApaTnrbsfv16pAqhk052iBswK72AB00RxxaxTj5JvIwYcQ37VTrQATIFWc.F5Kd9fUyWUDHiRMV?startTime=1656252847000).

Good morning and welcome.

Land Acknowledgement - Ancestral lands of the Nacotchtank (or Anacostans)

Dedication to Arlene Crews who experienced the depths of sorrow when she lost her husband in a tragic accident three years ago this week, leaving her a newly pregnant widow. She has taught so many of us, through her loving motherhood to her children how to live life with deep joy after deep loss.

May these words of my mouth and this meditation of my heart not be spoken by me but rather through me, and thus be a balm to all who have lost and wish to find joy again.

Today I felt called to speak on: Psalm 16:11 **You show me the path of life. In your presence there is fullness of joy**.

When I was working at the liver transplant unit at a hospital in San Francisco, I met a wise teacher who showed me the path of life, the fullness of joy.

To protect his privacy and honor his legacy, let’s call him Aurelius. I remember when I first met him, I did a visible double-take. By that time in residency, not much could shock me. But his first impression did.

Aurelius was a middle-aged, white American man with a cheery but exhausted smile. He reclined in his hospital gown, holding hands with his wife, a Cantonese woman who was distraught and restless at his bedside. (Let’s call her I-Ching)

He has a slender build, not too different in size and shape from my own body, but two things stood out immediately: First, his belly, pregnant with ascitic fluid protruded to the point of tension, his umbilical veins engorged like a pile of snakes, a sign we in medicine have given the name *caput medusa*. Even the extralarge hospital gown could not cover it.

Second, Aurelius had golden skin. I don’t mean metaphorically; it was actually the color of gold. I had never seen jaundice so advanced that his skin glimmered in the light, unlike the usual dull yellow hue carried by most of the other patients on that liver transplant unit.

Aurelius glanced up at me and said without a change in his cheery smile, "I'm quite a site, huh, doc?"

I smiled back, sat down next to him and his wife.

“That must be really uncomfortable,” I said, pointing to his swollen belly, “Would you like some of it drained?” He sighed, “Oh my goodness, yes please.”

So we sat and continued to speak as I went on to drain fifteen liters of straw-colored fluid from his belly. He kept on his cheery smile, telling tales of his life: how he met his wife here in San Francisco, the time he flew to China to ask I-Ching’s family for her hand in marriage, his career as a mechanic, his favorite movies — spaghetti westerns. His wife inconsolably sobbed what seemed like a near-equal volume of tears during this procedure.

It’s not fair, she said. Aurelius never drank. He never used drugs. He was a good man. The fluid just started building up a few months ago and his skin kept getting yellower and yellower. It’s not fair.

I had no words for her. I knew that feeling well. I had lost four dear friends in recent years — Mark, Kozo, Yong, and Ellynn. None of them lived to see the age of 40. It wasn’t fair.

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Let us turn back to our verse from Psalm 16:11 — “In your presence there is fullness of joy.”

It’s hard to read a verse like this, especially when we are in a life circumstance where sorrow has become the primary emotion and numbness the primary defense mechanism. How can we read this to someone in times of tragedy, crisis, and injustice? What can we glean from a pollyannish passage from a psalm written thousands of years ago, speaking about some sort of seemingly ungraspable fullness of joy?

I know for me when I hit tragedy or anxiety or loss in my life, my first instinct is to close off, to dull my emotions, to protect myself from feeling the fullness of sorrow. In the aftermath of my friends’ deaths, I had not allowed myself time to grieve. Residency had not allowed me time for grief. And in that state of burnout, I chose numbness. I would rather numb myself to the highs of life so that I would not have to feel the lows of life.

Does this defense sound familiar to people?

One of our wisdom teachers, Jim Finley, calls this “depth deprivation.” Through a pattern of traumatic retention, we dull ourselves to the world and live in a protective shell, simply skirting over the superficiality of life.

And sometimes, there might be wisdom in that protection. It might not be safe to feel our feelings fully in an inextricable situation of abuse and injustice.

Arlene taught me we might need to care for a toddler and newborn child in the midst of our grief.

For healthcare providers like me, working hundred-hour workweeks during the pandemic, we might need to go run the next code blue in the immediate aftermath of pronouncing three deaths in an hour.

Those of us who quarantined alone during the pandemic might feel so isolated and lonely in the pandemic that we become captive to a pattern of fear — thinking that if we truly allowed ourselves to feel  depths of emotion without anyone around us to hold us, we might not make it through.

That is all real and valid.

But once the danger is gone, it can be tempting to simply sit in that protective zone of numbness. By the time I finished residency during COVID, I was tempted to sit on the stack of unprocessed grief of the hundreds of deaths I pronounced, and the deaths of my friends, deluding myself that I was “above that,” “spiritually mature enough” not to have to process it.

I conflated equanimity with apathy.

But little did I know that*by* my numbness I was also depriving myself of joy. It may seem paradoxical, but we must go *through* our sorrows to experience our joys.

Henri Nouwen says, “Joys are hidden in sorrows!”

We need to remind each other that the cup of sorrow is also the cup of joy, that precisely what causes us sadness can become the fertile ground for gladness.

Indeed, we need to be angels for each other, to give each other strength and consolation. Because only when we fully realize that the cup of life is not only a cup of sorrow but also a cup of joy, will we be able to drink it.

So the challenge here is to *sit with* and get to know our sorrows. To invite it into the abode of our hearts for a cup of tea.

To look deeply into its eyes like a dear friend. There is beauty in not averting our gaze.

No matter how hard it is, no matter how heartbreaking it can be.

It is about bearing witness to this fullness of life, so that we might unlock the fullness of joy.

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Back to Aurelius:

 Several days after I first met Aurelius and I-Ching, his biopsy results returned. I took a deep breath before I walked into their room to explain the terminal diagnosis of gallbladder cancer and before I spoke, I could see in both of their swollen and teary eyes that they had spent the past several days looking deeply into the eyes of sorrow, into their own mortality and powerlessness, bearing witness with a *transformative*bravery.

“Cholangiocarcinoma, huh?” He repeated back to me.

We held silence.

Then Aurelius spoke again.

"Well, doc I have lived simply. I was not wealthy.

But I flew on a plane once or twice.

I have rewatched my favorite films.

I have had many meals from my wife’s native China.

Even the kings of old could not have imagined flight,

personal entertainers at their beckon,

or food from a faraway land.

 My life has been gold."

At that moment, the three of us wept. Aurelius, I-Ching, and me, sitting on an inflating-and-deflating hospital bed, recognizing the power of what he just spoke.

He had dived into the depths of his sorrow and seen that God is there. That while facing the tragedy of his impending mortality, he discovered gratitude for his present life beautifully lived. He unmasked sorrow and found joy.

The Lebanese-American poet Kahlil Gibran says:

Your joy is your sorrow unmasked...

The deeper that sorrow carves into your being, the more joy you can contain.

Is not the cup that holds your wine the very cup that was burned in the potter’s oven?

When you are joyous, look deep into your heart and you shall find it is only that which has given you sorrow that is giving you joy.

When you are sorrowful look again in your heart, and you shall see that in truth you are weeping for that which has been your delight.

For the remainder of his hospital stay, Aurelius' room emanated with joy. Every nurse, CNA, custodian, food service worker, phlebotomist and doctor who walked out of that room, walked out glowing with joy and with a newfound perspective on life. He challenged each person to bravely live the fullness of their lives.

For me personally, his bravery in facing his own sorrows gave me the courage to start facing my own grief. I began seeing a therapist for the first time in my life and to my surprise, I discovered that in finally mourning the loss of my dear friends, I could open up to rediscover joy in other seemingly unrelated areas of my life where I had lost interest. I started writing poetry again, backpacking again, laughing again.

This was a joy given not by external circumstances of the world but rather received by facing the full presence of God, in which both sorrow and joy coexist.

I found out Aurelius passed on a few months later. His wisdom and radiance still live on in the hearts of all who cared for him that week. In fact, *he*is the one who cared for us. A true mystic in his own right, he showed us the path of life — to live simultaneously in the fullness of sorrow *and* in the fullness of joy.

So to close, I want to extend to you all an invitation, the same invitation that Aurelius extended to so many of us during his hospital stay. I invite you to make two dates this week — one with sorrow and one with joy.

One date with a sorrow that you have been afraid to face. Something suppressed or repressed or ignored. Light a candle, or draw up a bath, or play some soothing music and just sit with it. Invite it in and gaze deeply into its eyes. One caveat on this date … when to invite a third wheel. If you are working through trauma or a mental health condition, please invite a therapist or spiritual director or trusted friend on this date with you.

Then set up one date with a joy that you have not given yourself permission to experience in a while, a lost joy. Maybe because you are numb or burnt out. Maybe because you’ve internalized some narrative that you don’t deserve it yet. Or maybe because it seems like the troubles of the world have *stolen* it from you.

Put it in our calendar. Just 30 min each. And if you can only bear five minutes of it that’s okay. You just show up for however long you can and that’s what matters. Look deeply into both and you will see their shared essence.

May each of us find the courage to step outside the protective zone of our numbness. May each of us find the strength to bear witness to the messiness of life. And thus, may each of us choose to walk in the fullness of life.

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Resistance Revival Chorus - This Joy

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1TbDPwA09Bc>