

Examining our joy to live with gratitude



MAR. 12: *Sunday* JOY OF NATURE

“For you shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.”
(Isaiah 55:12)

In her book *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Indigenous scientist Robin Wall Kimmerer tells the story of a plant scientist who hired an Indigenous guide to help him explore the rainforest for new botanical discoveries. The young guide is thorough, taking care to point out the most interesting species and surprising the scientist with his capacity. “Well, well, young man, you certainly know the names of a lot of these plants.” The guide nods, then responds with downcast eyes. “Yes, I have learned the names of all the bushes, but I have yet to learn their songs.”

A walk or a hike through nature is oftentimes all we need to calm our nervous system, to clear our heads, to embrace the gifts of beauty and grace God desires to bestow. Venturing into the woods, away from the sounds of human civilization grants us the quiet we need to hear nature’s song — warbling birds, vibrating insects, the call of animals for food or mating or warning or sheer joy. When we take the time to meditate among nature, it’s as if God’s creation stands in applause. Yes! Yes! the trees shout, their leaves whistling and clapping in the wind. Yes! This is the joy that has been here for you all along.

EXAMEN:

Recall the last time you walked among nature. What led you there? What songs did you hear? Breathe. Notice thoughts and feelings that arise.

IMAGINE:

Imagine yourself walking along a mountainous wooded trail far from home, work, all the responsibilities of life. It’s just you alone in nature. What do you hear? What do you smell? What rhythms of nature can you feel outside you? Inside you? Embrace this moment of joy and praise.

PRAY:

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MAR. 13: *Monday* JOY OF CHILDREN

“Unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 18:3)

Over a lunch of hot dogs and mashed potatoes, our 3-year-old son said, “Look Mommy, I’m putting on my sunblock so I won’t get a sunburn.”

“Mmm-hmm, that’s nice, honey,” I responded, lost in my thoughts about work and responsibilities.

He said it again, insisting on my attention. “Mommy, look, I’m putting on my sun block so I won’t get a sunburn.” This time I heard the excited joy in his voice. I looked. My grinning, gleeful child had smeared ketchup all over his face, legs, and neck — the parts of him most likely to burn in the sun.

I couldn’t help but join him in his joy.

God does not desire us to live dour lives. Spending time with children reveals that the potential for joy is all around us. Look! they say, inviting us to share in their joy. If we adults can get out of our heads, pay attention, and become like children, our lives will be graced with abundant joy as well.

 **EXAMEN:**

Remember yourself as a child at play. Breathe. Notice thoughts and feelings that arise.

 **IMAGINE:**

Imagine you have nothing to do today, no responsibilities, no chores. What will you do for play? What joy do you discover when you free yourself to become like a child?

 **PRAY:**

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MAR. 14: *Tuesday* JOY OF LAUGHTER

“Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth.” (Psalm 98:4)

“People crave laughter as if it were an essential amino acid.” Robin Williams said, playing Patch Adams in the 1998 hit movie. Based on the true story of Hunter “Patch” Adams, the movie champions an approach to healing that treats the person, not just the disease. “Remember laughing?” Adams asks in the movie, dressed as a clown as he visits children and gets even the most disgruntled patient giggling. “Laughter releases endorphins and other natural mood elevating and pain-killing chemicals. Laughter boosts the immune system and helps the body fight off disease. Being happy is the best cure of all diseases!”

Laughter is the best, most joyous noise: cackling, uncontrolled snorting, deep belly guffaws, silly giggles, screaming or squealing in delight. Do you remember getting the giggles when you were supposed to be quiet? How hard it was to subdue that laughter? Laughter will seek every means of escape. It’s a joy that’s not meant to be held back. And its release is the most freeing of feelings! So marvelous it might even bring tears to our eyes, a physical cleansing from the inside out. Breaking out in loud, joyous laughter is like taking off a dress or a pair of pants you’ve worn all day that are just a little too tight. Ah, yes! What joy! What freedom! What freedom! Make a joyful noise! Let it out! Let loose with laughter.

EXAMEN:

Recall a scene, a memory, something someone said, that made you laugh out loud in joy. Breathe. Notice thoughts and feelings that arise.

IMAGINE:

Imagine yourself surrounded by your dearest friends, the ones who can always make you laugh. Notice the sensations in your body as you recall the joy of laughter. From where in your body does the laughter come? To where does it travel? What is loosened as you laugh? What is set free?

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MAR. 15: *Wednesday* JOY OF FRIENDSHIP

“Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up the other.” (Ecclesiastes 4:9-10)

When I recently moved to a new state and community, I knew I needed to be intentional about making new friends. I’d left behind a relationship with a mother whose kids and career closely matched my own. We’d meet for long walks with our dogs, circling our neighborhood to let out our frustrations, share our joys and news. I miss this friend and our walks.

Finding and making friends grows more difficult as you get older. Our school years are the best for making friends. I have loved watching my kids find and make friends in school, witnessing them learn how to be good friends — sharing trust, kindness and common interests. I smile listening to my daughter’s silly giggles from her bedroom as she talks to her friends on the phone.

In my new community, I invited an older, retired woman out for coffee. I shared a love of books with this older woman and we made each other laugh — a good sign. We talked for two hours about the books we’d read, our lives and our careers, while ignoring the cold, empty coffee cups before us. Finally, when we decided it was time to part, she teared up. She’d needed and been looking for a friend, as had I. Her tears were tears of joy.

Friendships don’t require that people be in the same stage of life — that’s their beauty. They only require the spark of connection, common interests, a mutual desire to grow in relationship and share joy.

EXAMEN:

Recall a friendship you treasure. Breathe. Notice thoughts and feelings that arise.

IMAGINE:

Imagine yourself walking and talking with a treasured friend. Notice the ease of your relationship. Notice what you share, how you feel with the person, who you are together as you walk. Embrace the joy this relationship offers.

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MAR. 16: *Thursday* JOY OF GIVING

“Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.” (2 Corinthians 9:7)

I’ve attended a number of parties where a gift exchange game is played. Recently, I attended one where we all brought a wrapped book. One person chooses a gift to open. The next person can choose another gift or steal one already opened. No matter who I play this game with – children, grandmothers, Presbyterians, pacifists – it always gets competitive. People strategize, form alliances and steal the gifts they desire. Some bring gag gifts to throw in the mix. The poor soul who opened *How to Win Friends and Influence People* couldn’t get rid of that book no matter how hard she tried. No matter what gift you end the game with, though, joy resounds in the giving and receiving — and even the thieving.

The gesture of gift giving is meant to elicit joy. We watch the person unwrap what we have wrapped, waiting – hoping – for a smile. A little, “Oh!” of joyful surprise and exclamation is especially good. For occasions such as Christmas and birthdays and parties, where gifts might be expected, the surprise is harder to pull off. I love watching talk shows when an unsuspecting-but-deserving audience member is surprised with a gift — a new car! A college scholarship! Joy. Pure joy.

We all have gifts to give. Take some time today to remember how good it feels, how joyous, to share these gifts with others.

EXAMEN:

Recall a treasured gift you received. Breathe. Notice thoughts and feelings that arise.

IMAGINE:

Imagine yourself giving a treasured gift to a friend, family member, maybe even a stranger on the street. How does it feel to have a gift to share? How does the gesture of giving make you feel? Embrace the joy inherent in giving.

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MAR. 17: *Friday* JOY OF DANCING

“David danced before the Lord with all his might.” (2 Samuel 6:14)

Some time ago, a video of the late Congressman John Lewis dancing to Pharrell Williams’ hit song “Happy” went viral. The encouraging voice behind the camera called, “C’m on, break it down, Congressman,” as Lewis shook, swayed, and clapped his hands to the beat. “Mm. This is my song,” he said. Then, “I could do this better if I had a drink.” Ha! What joy.

I admire people who can dance well, who know how to move their body with precision and a kind of coordination for which I can only dream. I watch shows like “Dancing with the Stars” and “So You Think You Can Dance” and marvel at what movement is possible. To the utter embarrassment of my teenagers, I dance — when a good song starts playing in my earbuds, or a small, safe, seat-dance in the car, or at a relative’s wedding. Dancing is joy set to movement, even if you’re not particularly coordinated.

David danced before the Ark of the Covenant (God’s house) as it was carried into Jerusalem, among shouts of joy and the sound of trumpets. The ark had been captured by the Philistines and eventually made its way to the house of Abinadab, the son of King Saul, but remained outside Jerusalem. David succeeded King Saul and, moving the ark back to Jerusalem, restored the city as Israel’s religious center. David’s joy over this move manifested in leaping and dancing as he praised his God.

EXAMEN:

When was the last time you felt like dancing? Breathe. Notice thoughts and feelings that arise.

IMAGINE:

Imagine yourself at your best friend’s wedding where you are pulled onto the dance floor. What would happen if you let go of inhibition and let your body loose? What would that feel like? What music would be playing? What fun would you have? What keeps you from experiencing this bodily joy?

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MAR. 18: *Saturday* JOY OF NEWNESS

“So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” (2 Corinthians 5:17)

Madeline was a precocious, curly-haired 3-year-old who couldn't stand or sit still. I had no idea how her baptism would go. But if the rehearsal was any indication, this sacramental moment would be a challenge. Neither I, nor Madeline's parents, could convince her to stay still long enough to get the water sprinkled on her head. Madeline was more interested in rolling under church pews and running up and down the burgundy carpeted aisles.

When the time came for her actual baptism, Madeline's father brought her forward holding her squirming body tight in his arms — his face determined. We would get this blessed child baptized! I rushed through the liturgy as fast as I appropriately could. Madeline's parents and her church family promised to encourage, guide and nurture her in following Christ. I removed the lid from the font and dipped my hand. Then, a miracle occurred. Madeline, her eyes widening in wonder, stopped wiggling and grew still. Placing my wet hand on top of her head, I recited the baptismal liturgy: “Madeline, I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Child of the covenant, you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked as Christ's own forever.” Madeline, still quiet, gave me a small, affirmative nod, as I concluded, “Amen.”

It is a wonder what happens to us in Jesus Christ. Through the waters of baptism, we die to our old selves and arise as new creations, our lives dedicated to the One who claims and calls us. Our lives transformed by a covenant of love.

EXAMEN:

Do you remember your baptism? Or the baptism of a friend or family member? Recall the scene. The words of liturgy said. The promises made. Breathe. Notice thoughts and feelings that arise.

IMAGINE:

Imagine Jesus leading you into the river Jordan. He leans you back to immerse you, the water closing over your face and rushing past your ears. Jesus quickly lifts you up, out of the water, wet, cold and gasping as you hear the words, “Child of the covenant, sealed by the waters of baptism, you are Christ's own forever.” What does newness in Christ feel like?

PRAY:

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