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Spirit Life: Joy

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The first time I stepped foot in Minnesota was 1990 to work at a summer bible camp in Alexandria called Luther Crest. The weather was nice. Mild even, by Texas standards. I was well prepared for this kind of weather. The next time I visited MN was winter break for a winter staff reunion right after Christmas. My college classes back in Texas didn't start until February, but a bunch of schools my fellow camp counselors attended started in January, so we stayed up for a couple weeks hanging out mainly in the Fargo/Moorhead area. However, the weather was something I had never experienced and was not prepared for. And my good friend traveling with me from Texas was not either.

One day while our camp counseling friends were in class, my friend and I decided to leave the apartment we were staying in and head over to a convenience store that was a couple miles away that also rented movies. You know the VHS tapes, that you rented and then gave back after a couple of days or so. But we didn't have a car and we decided to walk. No big deal, right? While we could see that this stuff called snow was swirling and the wind was blowing pretty hard, we had no idea of what was going to come. I had a jacket with a hood but no gloves. He had a jacket with no hood but had gloves. Neither of us had snow boots or any item of clothing that you would put snow or winter in front of to describe it. We were not prepared.

So, there we sat, in the convenience store for about 2 hours, thawing out, both reflecting on our lives up to that moment – had we done enough in our young lives? Did we make a difference in this short time we had on this Earth? Would those giving our eulogies... would they be able to capture the essence of who we were, because we were going to die, frozen on the side of the road in a place called Moorhead, MN. And yet we made the bold decision to return to the apartment with our rented movies - Born on the 4th of July and Dead Poet's Society.

We made it to the front door of the apartment. Everything frozen. Ice had built up on our faces like

glaciers in Antarctica. Did I tell you that my friend's jacket didn't have a hood? Well, he did have a collar and he had it up, so it covered only part of his ears and the exposed section of his ears had turned a red that I had never before seen. We made it into the apartment, and he immediately went for a hot shower, and I covered up with every available blanket I would find. After some period of time, I really couldn't tell you, our camp counselor friends came back from their classes and told how stupid we were as the wind chill was 50 below. First of all – what is a wind chill and I had absolutely no context for anything below – below what? From that moment on I had a better handle on what being prepared meant.

But we ask that question a lot. Are you prepared? Prepared for a test. Prepared for any sort of activity. Prepared for college. Prepared for marriage. Prepared for a trip. Are you prepared? In other words, have you done the necessary things to make you ready for the next thing you are about? And usually, it's being ready for things that may not go well. I remember the phrase... Make sure you have clean underwear on in case you got into an accident. What?

But what if there is something else you should be prepared for? What if God is calling you to not just be prepared for something bad to happen? What if God is calling you to be prepared for joy. Prepared for joy?

Over the past several weeks as we've engaged our stewardship appeal worship series, we have been focused on Spirit Life, how living in the Spirit calls us to bear fruit, fruit of the Spirit. And how that fruit of the spirit leads us to more generosity.

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. (Gal 5:22-23 NRS)

And we explored how Spirit Life was lived in various people throughout scripture. Esther, living the Spirit Life of self-control gives her the focus, the preparation, to be ready for generosity. Ruth, living the Spirit Life of patience, was purposeful in her generosity. Zacchaeus, seen by Jesus, restored from destruction, given the Spirit Life of peace, calls for generosity for those who are seeking peace too.

Tabitha, living Spirit life of kindness by stepping into the gap of broken community leading to generous resurrection. Philemon, called into Spirit life of love, generously bringing freedom to the oppressed.

Today our focus is on the Spirit Life of joy and the lens is through the life and story of Miriam. Miriam the middle sister right in between the oldest and more famous Aaron and the younger and the way more famous Moses. You might remember Miriam as the sister that watched Moses' float in a basket down a river in attempt to save his life and the same Miriam that when the Pharaoh's daughter found the basket arranged for Moses' mom to be the wet nurse for Moses, who was her own son. Miriam was a very clever big sister.

What you may not know is that Miriam's name can mean "to see water" and we certainly read that in the baby Moses story, but Jewish tradition also hails Miriam as the one who knew where the water was throughout the Israelites 40 year of travels in the wilderness. The Jewish tradition calls this gift "Miriam's Well". And after Miriam dies the book of Numbers tells us that the water ran out. All that Jewish tradition is quite fascinating, but what really catches my imagination is what Miriam does in between the baby Moses story and the Miriam's years finding water in the wilderness.

In between those two stories is the story of the Israelites being released from captivity in Egypt. Pharaoh lets them go and so the Israelites head south and find themselves backed up to a body of water. Pharaoh changes his mind and sends his army out after the Israelites, the water parts, the Israelites are able to cross and when the Egyptian army tries to cross, the waters come back together drowning the army and the Israelites are safe on the other side. But before they begin their trek into the wilderness there are two moments of song. The first is offered by Moses, thanking God for God's greatness and salvation. The other is offered by his big sister, the water seer, Miriam –

Then the prophet Miriam, Aaron's sister, took a tambourine in her hand; and all the women went out after her with tambourines and with dancing. And Miriam sang to them: "Sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea." (Exo 15:20-21 NRS)

Now the surprising thing for me, what captures my imagination, is not that a group of people would be so filled with joy after being saved that they would break into song. But it is Miriam – she breaks out a tambourine. Now remember... just days before they were slaves... and after being told they could leave they had to pack fast.

They baked unleavened cakes of the dough that they had brought out of Egypt; it was not leavened, because they were driven out of Egypt and could not wait, nor had they prepared any provisions for themselves. (Exo 12:39 NRS)

They couldn't wait long enough for their bread to rise, but Miriam stops in all her quick packing to bring along a tambourine? Who brings along a tambourine during what essentially a forced jail break? Who does? Someone who is prepared for joy. The tambourine is joyful instrument. You play a tambourine at joyful times. Miriam – while preparing for all kinds of things to happen on their trek Miriam was also prepared for joy. Prepared for joy. This is a far cry from making sure you are wearing clean underwear.

This is being prepared because no matter what you have had to leave behind, no matter what army is coming after you, no matter what you're backed up against, be prepared for joy.

As I said earlier, we've been through a stewardship appeal process where we've been asked to be a bit like Esther and think how our own self-control can prepare us for generosity... to reflect like Ruth, be patient with ourselves and the process because at times generosity needs time and space to breath... to take the story of Zacchaeus seriously, to understand our generosity can actually bring peace to those who are seeking... to understand like Tabitha, that our kindness leads to generosity that bridges all kinds of gaps in our community... to be challenged to love so like Philemon, our generosity leads to freedom. And here we are, left, left with joy, the Spirit Life of joy. Pack your tambourine... plan for joy. No matter the weather, no matter the swirling wind and below temps, no matter how quickly you pack, no matter what army of doubt may be sent after us... plan for joy. Where is your tambourine?