

It all started with a little book called *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*. My years of therapy, that is.

When I was growing up in the nineties there was movement going through Christianity called the purity movement. This movement sort of began and ended either a book called *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* that advocated courting instead of dating to protect one's purity and avoid temptation. Like most damaging movements, it started off with good intentions. It was based on Biblical mandates to reserve sexual relations to between a married couple, saving people from the heartache and pitfalls that comes from less committed arrangements. People soon took it an extreme, with things such as kissing and hadn't holding being seen as grounds for severe church discipline.

Further, the movement contained a lot of false promises. It promised a near Disney quality perfect marriage if you but waited for the one. As someone now divorced, you can guess that that particular promise did not always work out. In fact, many people have now expressed the hurt they carry from believing the movements promises that all would be well if they simply waited for the one. Former adherents faced divorces, infidelity, and other issues just like everyone else, and for reasons I don't have time to explore today, at an often-higher rate.

And the language was terrible. People were compared to toothbrushes, and told that if someone brushed their teeth with the toothbrush, no one else would want them. They were dirty. Similar exercises were done where Oreos were passed around that no one wanted to then eat. This left people feeling a deep sense of shame, which often leads to problems in their marriages, body image issues, feelings of worthless and so on. Let me be clear, if someone is dirtier because you touched them, look to your own hands, not theirs.

The ultimate sin of this movement was the unmarried pregnant woman. Such women were shunned in the movement, made to publicly repent and speak about their sins, told they had little future because no man would ever want them, sometimes pressured into bad marriages if the father, who seemed to fare much better, was willing.

All this to say, if that sounds bad, Mary's culture was far, far worse. Mary would've dealt with basically all of these same problems, though no one was likely to stone her in 90s. Remember that this young woman, a teenager, is engaged to Joseph, and in her culture that's essentially as serious as marriage. It cannot be easily broken like it is in modern times. To turn up with child, and with Joseph denying fatherhood, makes her an outcast, a sinner, the girl people don't bother to whisper about, they just disparage her in full hearing. All sorts of terrible things would be said about her. I can't even imagine what the rest of her family

did. Did they disown her like the families of pregnant teenagers in the nineties? Did they tell her she'd be alone forever? Did they call her names?

All this to say that as happy as this time may be for the rest of us, Mary was facing unbelievable adversity. She goes to her cousin Elizabeth, perhaps to seek some refuge, perhaps to be shoved away out of sight out of mind, and what happens next?

Mary sings. Not a song of grief, not a song about how unfair her lot is, but a song glorifying the Lord. Mary rejoices. "My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me—holy is his name."

Hardly anyone else would've thought Mary blessed. Even if they believed she was pregnant by the holy spirit and still a virgin, it would be hard to see this completely as a blessing. Yes, to be chosen to be the mother of the savior is an honor beyond all others, but did it have to be so dangerous? So heart wrenching?

And yet Mary rejoices in the midst of her storm. She sees her present condition as well in God's hands, as part of God's redemptive plan, and she is surrendered to it. And we are all blessed by her.

Christmastime is never all lights and hot cocoa, at least not once you're past the age of about 4. Many of us are in personal storms, or have been in the past. Trinity is in a storm right now, as we try to revitalize and grow. Some of us are grieving people who passed, or people who never came. Some of us are sick or sad. Some of us are poor in purse or spirit. Some of us fear the future, and what, if any role we think we will have in it. What then, should we do?

Rejoice. Rejoice if for no other reason than God sits on God's throne. Rejoice that the savior was born. Rejoice that all will be made right in the end. Rejoice in whatever you can, as often as you can, and it will change your heart, even if not your circumstances.

When I was in Bible college one of my professors wrote a story about a time in his life he was sick with something sounds like autoimmune kind of thing and he was always feeling poorly and he kept asking for prayers to no avail. One day he decided by the spirit to do a gratitude prayer fast, where we would only give thanks and rejoice for thirty days. It changed his entire life. His circumstances did not immediately change, but he learned contentment and peace and joy in

deeper ways. And yes, eventually his disease went into remission or was resolved.

Are you stressed? Unsure? Facing a storm? Yeah, me too. Know that you are deeply loved by your brothers and sisters here, and that God is still for you and never against you. Let us pray for you, but also try to rejoice in anything you can. Rejoice that you woke up this morning. Rejoice that God has a plan for your life. Rejoice in the littlest of things if that is all you can find, the decent cup of coffee, the ray of sunshine, the smile of a stranger. Soon, you may find you're able to rejoice about even more as your heart changes, until you are singing even in the hardest of times. Like Mary, may we learn to sing even in troubled times.

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