

Tragic Optimism

December 15, 2024

Toxic Positivity

Are any of you familiar with the term “toxic positivity?” What might be some examples? Maybe a definition will help.

Toxic positivity is the attempt to always appear positive, even when it means dismissing or invalidating negative emotions. At its most extreme, it would be the woman being interviewed by a TV crew as her house burns down who answers the question, “How are you?” with “I’m blessed.”

What might be some other examples?

Toxic positivity includes always telling people to look on the bright side. It includes the subtle shaming of telling someone to be grateful amidst hardship or that negative feelings don’t help. Toxic positivity will often lean on the idea that “it could be worse.”

One of my old bosses had a greeting card framed on his desk. It read, “The barn burned down. Now I can see the moon.” While a beautiful sentiment, the rush straight into optimism can be toxic if it doesn’t also allow time and space for grief and pain and heartache and struggle.

Today we read the Magnificat, that glorious song from the Gospel of Luke in which we hear Mary, Mother of Jesus, singing: “My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my savior,” and we light the pink candle of Joy on our Advent wreath.

Joy

I know a lot of folks, including a lot of you, who don’t feel very joyful right now, and to tell you that you should feel like toxic positivity. It feels like the scene in Planes, Trains, and Automobiles where John Candy, after having suffered struggle after struggle, accidentally burns out the car he and Steve Martin are driving. This car is the only means of transportation they can find to try to get home for the holidays. One calamity after another has befallen them, and then he says, with a giant grin, “Look at this! The radio still works!”

“The radio still works!” is toxic positivity.

This year, rather than toxic positivity, rather than telling you all it could be worse or to count your blessings in the times that you’re being faced with difficulties, I offer you instead “tragic optimism,” a concept championed by Holocaust survivor and psychologist Viktor Frankl. Truthfully, I wish he’d come up with a better term than tragic optimism, but we can’t always get what we want. Tragic optimism is maintaining hope despite life’s struggles, hardships, and pain.

Now, remember, Frankl was a Holocaust survivor. Although he survived Auschwitz, his wife, parents, and brother did not. This is a man who, by all accounts, had every reason to be cynical, had every reason to be without hope. Instead, his research led him to this idea of tragic optimism.

“Tragic optimism means acknowledging, accepting and even expecting that life will contain hardship and hurt, then doing everything we can to move forward with a positive attitude anyway. It recognizes that one cannot be happy by trying

to be happy all the time, or worse yet, assuming we ought to be. Rather, tragic optimism holds space for the full range of human experience and emotion, giving us permission to feel happiness and sadness, hope and fear, loss and possibility — sometimes in the same day, and even in the same hour.”

(Brad Stulberg, NYT)

The Scriptures

All of this came to mind as I was studying and praying with our Gospel this week. Our Advent scriptures are always a little tricky because we don't read them in chronological order. Last week, we read of John the Baptist's ministry on the Jordan River, which probably happened in the late 20s C.E. Today we read of Mary running off with haste to visit her kinswoman, Elizabeth, and singing this magnificent song, even though we won't read of her interaction with the Angel Gabriel, which is what spurred her journey and song, until next week.

Nonetheless, let's pause and think about the context of the passage we read today. Mary, a young, unmarried, Jewish woman, has had an encounter with an Angel who tells her that even though she has never had sexual relations she will conceive a son via the Holy Spirit, and that this son would be holy. This is scary stuff. If you want proof that it's scary, the Angel Gabriel tells her, “Do not be afraid,” a classic sign that something's scary. Even the other Gospel accounts of the birth of Jesus hold up the notion that Mary's predicament was scary. In the Gospel of Matthew we read of Mary's pregnancy from Joseph's perspective, how, when he learned that Mary was pregnant his plan was to divorce her quietly.

As if being a pregnant teen isn't scary enough at any time in human history, being a pregnant teen in first century Palestine whose fiancée has decided to get out of the picture would be terrifying. Mary is in a really tough, scary, even dangerous place when we pick up the part of her story we read today. After hearing from Gabriel that she will conceive a child via the Holy Spirit, Mary makes haste to her older kinswoman Elizabeth's house, where we hear that she sings this powerful song of joy.

In my email to the congregation on Friday I described today's Gospel as the first Christmas carol. It's interesting to note here that what Mary sang is profoundly similar to the song that Hannah sings in the First Book of Samuel when, after years of being distraught over being childless, Hannah conceives and gives birth to Samuel. Hannah's song is a song praising God for personal reversals, offering praise to God that her personal situation has changed, which then transitions into foretelling of cosmic reversals. That is, telling of the ultimate defeat of God's enemies.

Similarly, in the Magnificat which we read today, Mary starts out offering personal praise to God, but then the song shifts to a joyous litany of the reversals that God is going to accomplish.

“God has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts, has brought down the powerful from their thrones, has lifted up the lowly; has filled the hungry with good things and has sent the rich away empty.”

(Luke 1:51-52)

Scripture scholars note that this passage serves as kind of an overture for the Gospel of Luke, giving us a taste of the recurring themes and melodies that will weave their way in and out of all of Jesus' ministry. Mary's song, rather than being an example of toxic positivity, rather than

being an example of denying that she should be afraid or that there won't be more suffering to come, is a song that really fits with Viktor Frankl's notion of tragic optimism, being realistic about the hardship and struggle that is out there, but not letting those things have the last word, not letting those things so hamstring your existence that their pessimism becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Conclusion

In the movie "The Life of Brian," the 1979 Monty Python classic, we find the example of toxic positivity taken to its most absurd extreme when we see the titular character, Brian, crucified and yet whistling, "Always look on the bright side of life." That's not what Mary's doing here. She's not putting on a brave face all the while denying that what she's facing is huge and scary and dangerous. No, she's honest about her situation, but refuses to give up hope.

Brad Stulberg, who is on the faculty of the University of Michigan's School of Public Health, recently wrote of tragic optimism in the New York Times. Stulberg says tragic optimism:

"comes down to a few core factors: leaning into community, being kind to yourself, finding small routines to support your mental health, and allowing yourself to feel sadness and loss and yet maintain hope at the same time. It requires a commitment to taking productive action."

I see all of those things in Mary's response to her experience with Gabriel. She leans into community by rushing to be with Elizabeth. She finds small routines to support her mental health when she sings. The fact that her song includes both praise and reversals exhibits allowing herself to acknowledge sadness and brokenness while maintaining hope at the same time.

Friends, whether you're in a positive psycho-spiritual place right now or if the state of the world or the state of your own life has you in a state of struggle, we would be wise to follow Mary's lead and Viktor Frankl's analysis and lean in to tragic optimism. Rev. M. Jade Kaiser, who writes quite a bit for the LGBTQ writers' group called enflashed, has a poem that starts out, "Now is not a time for rushing past joy," and they're spot-on. Now is not the time for rushing past joy.

When we root ourselves in God and Christ and Christ's ways, when we lean into community, when we practice self-kindness and supporting our mental health, joy becomes a pillar, a cornerstone, of our existence. Happiness is fleeting, but joy is bedrock.

And so, as we round the corner on Christmas, I add to my prayers for you. May you be hope dealers. May you find the courage to break toxic cycles and may this lead you to peace. And now, may the joy of tragic optimism be yours. Not the toxic positivity that denies the realities of life, but the joy that transcends, the joy that is rooted in the promise of the Gospel, the joy that we are preparing for as we await Emmanuel, God With Us, not just in Christmas but throughout our lives.

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Isaiah 40:1-11; Luke 1:39-55
December 15, 2024