

Spark Joy
Psalm 126
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A recent article on the website Ministry Matters reflected on all the recent tragedies in the news and came to this realization, “Too often there is neither meaning nor order nor justice in that chunk of cancerous tissue, that patch of ice, or piece of faulty wiring. Everything can just... happen.”

From this realization the author pivoted to our current worship season,

Lent is the right time to sit with these darker truths. This is the time to reflect on our limitations and to remind ourselves that none of us is immune to the universe. We are all one errant organ, limb, or joint away from losing that sense of freedom in our own bodies, and even the fittest of us inhabits a faulty body, designed to wear out and perish. From dust we were made.

I’ve been preaching from the liturgical texts assigned for this season, and one thing has surprised me this year—how many of them speak of joy. This is a solemn season, when we do often examine ourselves, explore darker truths, confess our sins, strive to overcome our weaknesses, and reflect upon suffering and evil, particularly as Good Friday approaches.

But our worship this year hasn’t gotten very far into that territory. We’ve been focused on the idea of a sojourn—taking a rest in the midst of our busy lives, to be attentive to the spirituality of our ordinary routines.

And time and again the scripture we have preached from every week has talked about joy. Including this one which encourages us to laugh and to shout joyfully. This Psalm, like all the other readings, also acknowledges the dark truths—the suffering, the pain, the exile, the hardship, the loss of fortune, the wickedness and violence that surround us, the tears.

But this text, like the others for this season, also reminds us that God is faithful to God’s promises. Our fortunes will be restored. We will come home again and with abundance we will rejoice.

So what in your daily lives brings you joy and connects you to God?

At the beginning of January my social media feeds were full of comments about the Netflix series *Tidying Up* with Marie Kondo. The show was a follow-up from her 2014 bestselling book *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up*. There were also plenty of articles, including in religious newsletters and magazines, on how Marie Kondo’s cleaning and organizational methods resonated with spiritual practices. She had clearly connected with some social need, as Thrift Shops around the country began to report increased donations from the people decluttering after watching the show.

One article I read said, “[Marie] Kondo talks about how tidying orders the mind, and I’d argue that’s a spiritual practice — an internal ordering based on priorities, health, and ethical considerations. It frees up space to think about things that are truly important to us.”

In my Ash Wednesday sermon I made this connection between the popular TV show and our worship season:

Lent is a season of personal examination. A traditional Lent includes the activities of fasting, eliminating, purging, confessing, facing our own mortality. So, you could understand Lent as a season of spiritual tidying up.

The most recognizable phrase from Marie Kondo’s books and television show is “Spark joy.” The phrase has now become so common it’s also used as a mocking joke.

For Kondo, it is the essence of her method for tidying up. When you are cleaning, rather than looking for what to eliminate from all the accumulated clutter of our lives, we should focus on what we want to keep in the future. Here’s what she writes in her book:

I had been so focused on what to discard, on attaching the unwanted obstacles around me, that I had forgotten to cherish the things that I loved, the things I wanted to keep. Through this experience I came to the conclusion that the best way to choose what to keep and what to throw away is to take each item in one’s hand and ask: “Does this spark joy?” If it does, keep it. If not, dispose of it.

This is her simple method. We should rid our lives of the things that no longer spark joy. “Keep only those things that speak to your heart,” she writes. “Then take the plunge and discard all the rest.”

And she entices with this thought, “Now imagine yourself living in a space that contains only things that spark joy. Isn’t this the lifestyle you dream of?”

Like I said, this idea has now moved into the realm of parody and joking. But there is something to this idea, I believe.

I believe it because scripture tells us again and again that God intends us for joy. God wants us to rejoice, to be happy, to delight in the good things God has given us.

So, is there anything to this method. Can you examine the things in your life, and I don’t just mean your possessions, your accumulated clutter. I mean also your ideas, values, behaviors, beliefs, etc. Can you examine those with this question of what sparks joy?

Now, I know that ridding ourselves of irritability, anxiety, fear, guilt, shame, weakness, vice, or sin is not as easy as getting rid of old clothes or half-used shampoo bottles. Those are often lifetime projects that require moral discipline, spiritual direction, character formation, and often therapeutic assistance.

But maybe a way to begin is to acknowledge this—that we have personal traits that are holding us back from the joyful life God has intended for us.

And a second step might be to then examine our lives for what does bring us joy. And then to develop those things, to focus on them.

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Another article that pointed out the spirituality of Marie Kondo's *Tidying Up* concluded:

Decluttering space and our minds, learning to hope in visualizing optimistic possibilities, ritually connecting with our things and with people around us, and surrounding ourselves with things, people, and events that spark our joy can profoundly change the quality of our lives. Even when times are tough, these practices help us embrace the best in life and help us become healthier humans.

In the days that remain to our Lenten season, I invite you be attentive to what sparks joy for you.

Let me close with my favorite e e cummings poem:

i thank You God for most this amazing
day: for the leaping greenly spirits of trees
and a blue true dream of sky; and for everything
which is natural which is infinite which is yes

(i who have died am alive again today,
and this is the sun's birthday; this is the birth
day of life and love and wings and of the gay
great happening illimitably earth)

how should tasting touching hearing seeing
breathing any-lifted from the no
of all nothing-human merely being
doubt unimaginable You?

(now the ears of my ears awake and
now the eyes of my eyes are opened)