Some might say that there is a formula for finding joy in the pain.
Some might find comfort in that because it gives a foothold,
 a place to stand when the world is crumbling all around.
It gives a charted course for never-sailed before waters.

Some might say that it is as simple as smiling.
As doing a little dance in your kitchen.
As bursting out in laughter at a funeral.
As carrying a keepsake in your pocket.
As returning to that bench you once shared.

Some might say that it is in the quality of your prayers.
Try harder.
Get on your knees.

Some might say this is what happens.
Especially to those without faith.
To those who have lost their way.
When was the last time you went to the Lord?

Some might say that it is impossible.
Why try?
It is too soon.
My grief is not yours.
Some might say.
And to this, I say: there is no formula.
There is no linear, logical roadmap.
There is no claim I can make for you,
    no answer I can give you,
    no definitive thing but this:
Weeping lingers for the night.
And night can last for days and months and years.
And tears do not always fall upon our face,
    but can well up inside,
can make us feel like we are drowning in the pit of Sheol.

I can say no definitive thing but this:
Joy comes in the morning.
And morning can look like the brightness of dawn or the one light in the sky.
And laughter does not always leave our mouths
    but can tickle our throats
and awaken us slowly until the sun is at high noon.
I can say no definitive thing but this:
Bidden or not,
God is present.
Whether as clear as a church bell greeting the day
or as hidden as a crocus deep in the cold earth.
Whether you have been to church every Sunday you’ve had breath
or whether you shudder at the thought of a sanctuary.
Whether your voice has lifted to the heavens until your throat is parched
    or whether God’s name never crosses the threshold of your lips.
Whether as desired and searched for and held fast to -
    held in the palm of hands never seen
or denied and ignored and holder of all -
all your anger and frustration and doubt.

God is present.

When the psalmist lifts her voice in song 30, it is a narrative of her working through pain. We know not the fullness of her story but glimpse in it our own threads of truth. Times when we have “gone down to the Pit” or times when we wonder why “God hid God’s face.” It is also a narrative of need - “Hear, O Lord, and be gracious to me!” and a narrative of thanksgiving for the ways that need was met through a rescue effort only made viable by the Holiest of Holies - “You have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, so that my soul may praise you and not be silent.”

My friend Rob, a pastor in the Bay Area, writes that “the need [found in Psalm 30] is the result of the human condition. It just is. it’s not a necessary evil, but a potential occasion for good. Need has the potential to keep us in touch.” Let me be clear here - as he was in our paper from our preaching group, By the Vine, our suffering does not come in order to make us more reliant on God. Why would God inflict pain upon the precious ones created in God’s own image? Not the God I love or live for. “Instead,” he writes, “we recognize the reality that our need naturally compels us to reach out in search of relationship with others and ultimately God.” It is the human condition. It just is. Pain is part of it.

I learned photography like most of you did - taking a roll of film out of the canister and stretching it a few frames out across the back of the camera body, clicking it into the reel so it would advance. You open the shutter once with the back still open to make sure the film glides as it should and you close the back, listening for the lock to click and ensure all is secure, that no light can leak in. My favorite film camera - of my eight - is this one, my Holga. Holgas were created the year I was born, 1982, in mainland China as a mass-market option for working class families to be able to photograph family events. It requires 120 film - that’s the wide film - but it also requires tons of electrical tape. If you can look closely at mine, I have every crease and corner covered in black electrical tape. If I don’t seal the edges, light gets in and the film is exposed.

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1 Rev. Rob McClellan, By the Vine paper, May 2018.
Now, you will also remember that in order to actually produce a photograph, to capture an image and a moment on film, you need light. That’s where the shutter comes in. You engage the shutter for but a split second so it opens and records the instant, fleeting and fast. The longer the shutter is open, the more light comes in, the brighter the image. But if you open the camera, if you let all the light in, the film is ruined. Or rather, nothing is recorded.

So often, when we are down in the pit, finding tears to be our food day and night, we long to be yanked up from the depths as soon as possible. We want a quick fix. A switch to be turned on that awakens the dawn of a new day. But pain, suffering - it just is. Our religiosity, our faith is not a whitewash of all that is bad and ugly and hard in the world. We can’t rinse it away. When we try to, when we are knee-deep in the ashes of our suffering - that weeping that lingers for the night and the night and the night - and we grasp for the morning to come fully and exactly how we want it to right then and now - it is like opening the back of the camera. We have nothing to show for it. The false paradigms we’ve set up - I am good and so nothing bad will happen to me. I love Jesus so I am safe. I pray and so I will be happy. - they fall apart. And we fall apart. The formula failed.

It isn’t that we don’t need the light. The light comes. It comes because it is already there, ready to be recorded in those fleeting, fast instants, exposing the dawn that breaks after the long night. The joy is all around, even in the darkness. Even in the pain. Even in the suffering. Bidden or not, God is present.

I heard a story a few months ago on the radio that I cannot find again in all of Mother Google or my notes but it goes something like this: during the Nazi occupation, Jewish families would hide their children within the life and homes and culture of Christian families. It is thought that thousands of Jewish children survived the Holocaust because of these courageous and symbiotic interfaith relationships. I heard a survivor tell a story of how she was learning what Christmas was like, following in the habits of her new siblings. Her foster parents took the children to a typical holiday gathering - treats, lights, music. There was a figure there she was told was “Santa” and that it was tradition that you go and sit on Santa’s lap to declare what you’d like under the Christmas tree. She abided and
climbed up on to the red velvet lap. She said she looked down at Santa’s feet which she expected to be that of a man only to find her mother’s dress shoes and white stockings. Bewildered, she swung her head around to see soft and familiar eyes glistening behind a pair of gold-rimmed glasses.

If we wait for the morning to fully come, if we expect the sudden grand fixing of all that is wrong and terrible and painful, we might miss the ways our shuttered hearts are opening all the time to try and let the light in.

Some might say that there is a formula for finding joy in the pain.
But some might know that God is the one who breaks forth the light.
A light that shines in the darkness.
A light that the darkness cannot overcome.
A light that comes as joy in the morning
and as a glimmer to lead you out of the darkness of night.

God is here.
God was there, too wherever that pain and suffering shadowed your world.
And God will be there when that which just is happens again.

Bidden or not,
God is present.
What a joy.
Amen.