

## Maggie Swofford's Reflection on Jesus

When I was 15, my pastor said during one of his sermons, "Even in the midst of death there is reason for joy." At the time, I found his words mystifying. I wondered how that could be true. One year later, my best friend died from leukemia, and I continued to struggle with the idea that somehow joy could be brought out of a pain so deep, so irreconcilable, and so seemingly hopeless. After nearly 8 years of pondering his words, I have grown to see the myriad ways God has used that pain to build the woman I am today. I recognize those moments of joy and beauty more acutely than I did before. While obviously those happy moments are not a result of pain and sadness, I've found it profoundly true that those good moments are even sweeter because of the contrast provided by painful times. In fact, since then I am equally just as mystified with how my relationship with God has been more full of love, depth, and passion than before.

All this being said, I think one aspect of Jesus that resonates with this idea is his resurrection. Until that moment when he rose back to life, death was the end. But despite the seeming finality of such unimaginable loneliness and despair preceding his death on the cross, Christ managed to stay strong with his hope for the future: our salvation. In that moment of his death, he was able to cling to the joy that we would be able to participate in endlessly with him as a result of his suffering. To me, this is the ultimate proof that God can draw out beauty and joy from even the most desolate, despairing events that have and will continue to visit our lives.

There's another quote by Kahlil Gibran that says, "The deeper sorrow carves into your being, the more joy you can contain." I think Gibran's words speak to the hope we can carry in our hearts when we are faced with difficult times. Even if in some moments we feel utterly lost, it's encouraging to remember God won't let us end there. In the Complete Jewish Version of the Bible, Psalm 139:11-12 says,

If I say, "Let darkness surround me,  
let the light around me be night,"  
even darkness like this  
is not too dark for you;  
rather, night is as clear as day,  
darkness and light are the same.

This verse means a lot to me because of how the author captures the idea of darkness and light coexisting peacefully; one is not more evil or good than the other. To God, darkness and pain are light, and he can use our terrible circumstances for good. The idea that God can use my despair to develop my character in a way that will make me stronger in the end calms my fears of the future. Because of this, the horrible moments that haunt our pasts don't have to taint our experience of the beauty that's right before us. Jesus died a horrible death on the cross and somehow still feels joy at the idea of relentlessly pursuing sinners like us, so imagine how happy God is when we take part in that joy with him. We can rest knowing that he will do everything in his power to see us through the awful moments of our lives and have us blossom as a result of them.

This poem I would like to share with you now wrestles with the pain of dealing with an unwanted and uncomfortable situation, like the moment when you wade into a very cold swimming pool, but the comfort and joy that can simultaneously be woven throughout that experience, like the warm sun and satisfyingly chilled iced tea. The poem also strives to communicate the pure love Christ has for us, and the joy he feels in loving us despite the suffering he endured on our behalf. This poem is called:

### The God of Balmy Summer Days

How do I love you?  
I love you in the sun—  
golden burning skin,  
slap of feet diving,  
bubbling laughter and  
soft gossip floating.

Even with your eyes closed you can see—  
red to orange to yellow and back again.

I am in the rustle.  
Look—the white.  
It is in the emptiness  
that you'll find me.  
The blue blanket—  
the cold hurts at first but still—

try and wade in, try and wade in.  
I am your loneliness, in those moments

when nothing is all.  
You think lime shadows  
and pink steeped tea  
call me out of the chill—  
but believe. I am here, and  
I love you.