

Transcript for the podcast “Worthy: Celebrating the Value of Women.”

Hosts: Elyse Fitzpatrick and Eric Schumacher

Episode 9 — Guest: Melanie Penn

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Elyse Fitzpatrick 0:06

Welcome to Worthy, a Christian podcast that celebrates the value of women. Each week, we'll bring you conversations with women and men on the value of women in the church, home, and society. We won't always agree on everything, but we do agree that God is glorious, the Bible is true, women are valuable, and respectful conversation on this topic is essential in our day.

Welcome to the Worthy podcast and again, I'm Elyse Fitzpatrick, and I am here with my coauthor and cohost, Eric Schumacher. Eric and I have a friend on that actually, if you listened to our last podcast, you hear her story, but in case you didn't hear about her, let me just introduce her to you. And then we'll have a conversation, which I'm quite sure many of you are going to find very interesting today about life in the real world. Melanie Penn is our guest and she's a singer-songwriter and worship leader based in Brooklyn. For many years she was a mainstay in the New York City theatre scene and an award winning musical theater actress primarily touring with the Broadway musical "Grease." She transitioned to songwriting and released three songwriter albums to critical acclaim. Aside from being a song leader at Redeemer Presbyterian Church, Mel is the Director of Development for City to City, over 450 new churches in global cities. She's in the process of releasing her fifth album. So welcome back, Melanie,

Melanie Penn 2:26

Thanks so much for having me. It's good to be back.

Eric Schumacher 2:29

Melanie, we're just gonna jump right in today. We ended last time talking about your songwriting, and we ended talking about just unexpected things in life. And you wrote an album that is very unique, "Immanuel," and it is one of--I think I've said it's one of my favorite top three Christmas albums. I listened through it straight through every year. Tell us what "Immanuel" is and how it came to be.

Melanie Penn 3:04

Well, I'm so glad you like it. "Immanuel" is a songwriter album that tells the Christmas story in the first person through original songs. So it's a concept album, essentially, and the first song is written from the perspective of Isaiah foretelling the birth of Christ. And then the second song is sung by the angel

Gabriel as he visits Mary and tells her that she'll have a son, and the collection of songs goes on like that through Simeon, actually, is the last character who has a song in the "Immanuel" collection. And, I mean, I I have just loved that project. I never thought I would write a Christmas album. It kind of dropped on me out of nowhere. And I think we'll probably keep going with it and write more songs for more personalities within the Christmas story, and we'll see what happens over the years with "Immanuel."

Eric Schumacher 4:06

How did you think it up? How did it come to be?

Melanie Penn 4:09

I have no explanation. So it was 2016, and I had come to the end of a very painful year. It was so painful actually, that I didn't go home to Virginia for Christmas like I usually do. So I stayed in New York by myself, really pathetic. I stayed in New York by myself to be pathetic through the holidays. And out of nowhere, I wrote a song about someone following a star. And it was one of those times where you like pick up a guitar and you start singing and you're like, what is this? And I realized, the song told me that it was about one of the wise men following the star on the road to Bethlehem. And in the weeks that followed, I got really activated by it. Like, "Oh my gosh, I wrote a song from some of the Christmas story. That's so weird." And in the weeks that followed, I wrote more songs from characters in the Christmas story. And overall, I think the entire project took me about eight months to write, but the bulk of it happened during the holidays of 2016.

Eric Schumacher 5:19

I read somewhere that I think as you were recording it, there was not a song about Mary.

Melanie Penn 5:28

Yes.

Eric Schumacher 5:29

Which is an unusual thing for a Christmas album. Why not?

Melanie Penn 5:32

Yeah, she's pretty prominent in the Christmas story, actually. She's like a bit unforgettable. Yeah, she's kind of an unforgettable part of it. Well, so I have a very long-time producer in Nashville named Ben Shive--

Eric Schumacher 5:46

Who is amazing.

Melanie Penn 5:49

--well and he's attached to a lot of artists that your listeners might love, like Andrew Peterson and Sara Groves, and people who have really contributed a lot of music to this space over the years. But anyway, we had gotten to recording these Christmas songs, because Ben had heard the demos and really loved them and then was like, "wow, I think you have an album here." And I hadn't thought that at all. I mean, I thought this was just this random exercise I was doing on the side. But fast forward, and we were recording the songs and he was like, "Whoa, where's the song for Mary?" He's like, "You got a song for Joseph, the wise man. You've got a song for the Star of Bethlehem, like what's going on? There's no Mary." And I was like, "Oh, well, I'm not gonna, I'm not gonna write a song for Mary. She's really well represented in art through the centuries, and I'm just not even gonna bother. And he then, of course, sent me packing back to New York and was like, "You're definitely writing a song for Mary because this album can't not have Mary on it." And Mary's the only character in the Christmas story who actually sings a song anyway. And this is just intellectually dishonest to not include her. But I kind of had to put it together in myself, why I was dodging it. And it was really like her role as a mother that I couldn't connect with for like very many reasons that I just was like, pushing away trying to tell her story.

Eric Schumacher 7:24

Can you unpack those reasons?

Melanie Penn 7:25

Yeah, I mean, that is really--I mean, the "Immanuel" project is in the first person, so as I wrote it, it felt important to me to relate to all of the characters in some way. But 2016, what kind of led me to having such a bleak year is that in 2016, I ended a very painful two-year journey with endometriosis and fibroids. And that ended with an emergency hysterectomy in the summer of 2016, where my future really changed, and my options changed. And, and I didn't know how much it impacted me, or how separate I felt from any birth experience until I went to try to write Mary's song. And I was like, I can't do this. I don't have the right even to imagine what she could have gone through. And I had to really

wrestle a very conflicting experience to the ground and invite myself into her experience as a mother and someone who had a divine conception. I mean, maybe not, I don't know, just pregnancy in general, pregnancy in general. So there's a lot of layers there. And, spoiler alert, I did write a song for Mary. And it's great.

Eric Schumacher 7:25

Yeah, it really is. In fact, why don't we stop right now and we'll listen to the song. And then we'll come back and talk a little bit more.

Melanie Penn 9:05

(Singing) Magnify Him, oh my soul

. Glory be to God alone.

Holy, holy is He

.

You will free and redeem the world.

And you have seen this servant girl

, and you said blessed, blessed is she.

I will sing my song, sing my song.

Magnify Him, oh my soul. Glory be to God alone, for the Mighty One, He has done great things for me.

Oh my people, Israel,

your long-awaited help will come

from our God, the Mighty One.

I will sing my song, sing my song.

Magnify Him, oh my soul. Glory be to God alone. For the Mighty One, he has done great things for me.

All of the lowly lifted up

. All of the hungry more than enough

. Be born in me.

Let your kingdom come

.

Magnify Him, oh my soul. Glory be to God alone. For the Mighty One, He has done great things for me. Magnify Him, oh my soul. Glory be to God alone. For the Mighty One, he has done great things for me. He has done, he has done great things for me. He has done, he has done great things for me. Great things.

Elyse Fitzpatrick 13:17

Thank you so much for that, Mel, and for openness, your transparency. You know, it occurs to me that perhaps in one way you didn't have, you don't have Mary's experience but in that song you're giving birth to something else that's so precious and so necessary for people of faith, for women of faith to really walk through. I know a lot of times when I do creative things, when I write, the thing you said about, you know, it sort of dropped on me. It took on a life of its own. You know, every time I sit down to write a book, I think I know where I'm going. The book takes me there. And I think that that's what Mary has done for you. You know, with this song, she's taken you to where she wants you to be to speak of her.

Melanie Penn 14:23

Mm hmm. I mean, it's so powerful, almost kind of transcendent to think about. And I do, I mean, when you think of who Mary was also it's like, God could have even brought man--even if God wanted to send a God-like representative to earth, God actually could have done that in many, many ways, like many ways. So why did He kind of honor this womb, this womb process. Why did he do that? And then, I had to think like--gosh, I don't know if this is getting too grisly for anyone--but for me as someone whose womb was literally gone, yeah, literally gone. But do I still have that? Like, do I still have a womb in me? Because of my femininity, or just because of my humanness? That is an actual portal to the other side because the only portal we have to the other side is a woman's womb. That's it. It's like we don't know, we don't know where else life comes from. And so I had to think like, no, I still have this mantle on me as a co-creator. And yeah, maybe it's songs, maybe it's, I don't know, maybe it's other endeavors. Maybe it's something else and not children. But I really had to kind of get under the hood. And it was, it was grisly.

Eric Schumacher 15:59

Hey friends, this is Eric. Elyse and I are so thankful for the responses that we have received to the Worthy podcast. We've heard from so many of you who have told us these conversations are helpful, thought-provoking, and even refreshing. The episode that you're listening to today was recorded before the nationwide coronavirus outbreak and response. And as you know, this time has brought a few changes to how the world works. One result has been the cancellation of many speaking engagements because people can't gather. And those cancellations have resulted in the loss of important income. And while we are not suffering in the ways that so many may be, we do pay the costs associated with the production of this podcast. And while those expenses are not excessive, they are significant in a time of lost income and uncertainty. We have another 14 episodes left to record, and we have the funds to produce those. However, we feel that if we're unable to raise consistent funding for future episodes, we may need to suspend the podcast. That said, if you would like to support us at any amount, we've set up a Patreon account so that you can do so. Visit it at patreon.com/theworthybook. And there you can schedule recurring donations of any amount from \$1 to \$50. And you'll also find some gifts and rewards at various amounts of donation as our way of saying thank you for your generosity. Again, that's patreon.com/theworthybook. You can also find a link to it on our webpage, worthybook.org, or in the show notes. Thank you again for listening, for being our friends, and for joining us in these important conversations.

Elyse Fitzpatrick 18:12

And, you know, to think about, to think about that place where we cross over to the other side, you know, in Celtic lore they call it a thin place. It's like a place where you can almost reach through, right? And to think about Mary's body as being a thin place. It was a place where, you know, we're reaching through and Mel, that's what you're doing. You're reaching through in that place. So you know, perhaps, yeah, maybe the physicality of it is different. But the spirituality of it is the same thing.

Melanie Penn 19:04

Well, and to think, anyone who's creating at all it's like, where does the spark come from? Yeah. I mean, even y'all's book. It's like, it's like a book that didn't exist. It's like things that literally didn't exist until you "created" them. So this whole birth process, this whole life-giving process, like maybe we take it for granted, or maybe we look at children, and we're like I mean, of course there's nothing like having a child. I mean, it's unbelievable. But perhaps we actually have this creative privilege in all sorts of ways and it's just as divine even when it's different. I think it is. I don't think it's too far of a reach.

Eric Schumacher 19:51

You said something earlier that really caught my attention. You said my womb was lifted out of me.

Melanie Penn 19:59

I said it was taken. Lifted is a little more elegant. Let's say that.

Eric Schumacher 20:05

Yeah, it was taken out of you. But so and then you said, "Do I still have a womb?" And so as a woman who doesn't have the ability to have children biologically, how does that affect how you think of yourself as a woman? What would you say to a listener who--you know, sometimes I think in Christianity, we can really identify womanhood with childbirth.

Melanie Penn 20:41

Yes, yes, I agree. I mean, first of all, I think it's worth acknowledging in this conversation that even women who haven't suffered through hysterectomy are still having a lot of trouble having children. I mean, I mean, there's just like grief around all of this for a lot of people, for men and women. And I, you know, I really never looked at myself, like, suddenly a second class citizen, ever. And I think I'm just not that way. I kind of have like a healthy self esteem, I guess, but I did have a conversation with an older woman in the church. We were unpacking something, I forget what it was, but it wasn't even really about this health issue. And she said, Oh, and Melanie, I just, I know you think you're damaged goods now.

Elyse Fitzpatrick 21:37

Oh wow.

Melanie Penn 21:38

And I was like--

Elyse Fitzpatrick 21:39

Wait, what?

Melanie Penn 21:40

Yeah! I was like, why? And I realized she did. Yeah, that she did and that there is a little bit of a mystique or something around like, can you have kids? Or can you not? Or do you have kids? Or do you not? And it made me think like, man, do we really need to think about women as mothers. It's like maybe women can be mothers who aren't having kids, but they're doing a lot of other things. What is that story? Is it like The Great Divorce or something when the woman goes to heaven and sees all the children, all her children? She'd never had actual children, but she'd cared for so many children. She'd been a mother to so many. It was a really beautiful illustration of like, in God's kingdom we actually don't know the extent of what motherhood looks like.

Elyse Fitzpatrick 22:34

Yeah, and you know, one of the things I think that really came home to me, Mel, when we were writing Worthy, was really up until the birth of Christ, the primary objective of any woman was to give birth and to give birth to a son.

Melanie Penn 22:54

Wow.

Elyse Fitzpatrick 22:56

And, you know, in part that was because of the promise that was made in Genesis, you know, that there's going to be a serpent crushing seed son, who will be born of a woman. And so up until the New Testament, I think that that was really the primary goal of women. But you know, one of the things that I think we really saw, and I saw at least myself, I should talk for myself, as I was writing, it really came home to me that that ultimate goal of giving birth, physically giving birth, is not the primary call of women anymore.

Melanie Penn 23:39

Oh, wow.

Elyse Fitzpatrick 23:40

And the primary call of women is the same as it is for men, which is to give spiritual birth. Talk about, you know, the Lord. You know, go about making disciples doing that sort of thing.

Melanie Penn 24:01

Right. Look after the kingdom, look after the kingdom.

Elyse Fitzpatrick 24:05

Right? And to say, then, okay, this is really changed. And, you know, I know that there's probably going to be women who are listening, who have children, and they find their identity in their family. And, you know, we're not saying that having a family or having children is somehow, you know, not important or not a good thing. What we're saying is that urge to create--we're created in the image of God. Therefore, we have a desire to create, to create life as we can, and that can really be fulfilled and obtained by living life the way you're living it now, which is doing business with God and talking to people about your faith. And, you know, it's so wonderful, I think, and freeing, not just for women who perhaps are married and find themselves for whatever reason unable to have children, but for the 50% of us who are single.

Melanie Penn 25:23

Right, right.

Elyse Fitzpatrick 25:26

And to somehow see that in the kingdom of God, we have great worth not because we're able to produce biological children, but because God has given us voices to use to produce spiritual children. Of course, one of the women that, you know, in the New Testament, you've got, you've got the woman, Lydia, you have the woman, Phoebe, neither of whom we hear anything about their children.

Melanie Penn 25:55

Right, right.

Elyse Fitzpatrick 25:57

And yet, look at what they have done for the Lord. Now, I'm saying all that not to negate in any way pain that women would have in not being able, if perhaps they think that now, you know, I don't have any worth. I don't hear that from you at all. I wouldn't want to encourage that in you in at all.

Melanie Penn 26:23

Right. No, and I don't feel that way, but I, but this is like very custom to everyone.

Elyse Fitzpatrick 26:31

Right? Yeah. So people hear it differently. People feel it differently. Um, I'm almost 70. And when I had a hysterectomy--as long as we're talking, we might as well talk, right? And I had a hysterectomy. And I had a friend asked me, "Do you miss your uterus?" And I thought, "No, we were never that close." I know. I don't know what to say about that.

Melanie Penn 27:02

Yea, I've gotten that kind of stuff too.

Elyse Fitzpatrick 27:04

I mean, I think that, and I don't want to negate what other women feel that, yeah, probably women really do feel that but I never did. And, and I don't think it's important for us to say, yeah, you should feel it. Or you shouldn't feel it. We're all different.

Melanie Penn 27:22

Well, I think what's interesting, Elyse, what you bring up about the woman. And this is really just like the woman-to-woman dynamic regarding this. And I had this weird thing happen where I was suddenly not invited to things. Like, some really close friends had their baby showers and didn't invite me. And didn't even ask me if it was an issue. To be honest, I would have like--there's nothing I love better than celebrating my friend's pregnancies and holding my friend's babies. I mean, I'm just like, addicted. I think it's amazing. But they kind of self-selected me out. And I think like, you know, those questions like, "Well, do you miss?" is like, well, you're in lack. Do you miss what you're lacking? Or like not inviting to a baby shower? It's like, wait, wait, wait. It's like women in general need to be looking at one another, as we are creators, no matter what, like we're bringing a legacy into the world, even if it's not a child. And there's a shared legacy as in what we do as women, no matter our station. And to be honest, I think we

are there. I just think there's some weird social and tribal things that get a little sticky. And then no one knows how to act or what to say.

Eric Schumacher 28:43

I think you've done something--what strikes me is you did something really interesting with Mary's song, because you mentioned earlier, the trouble with getting inside the head of this young woman who's found out that she's pregnant, miraculously, and going to have a baby. In some ways, you had to empathize with her.

Melanie Penn 29:07

Absolutely.

Eric Schumacher 29:07

You had to think and meditate on what it would be like to have to be her, and then to produce a piece of art to celebrate and really to rejoice with one who was rejoicing. You had to figure out how to rejoice as Mary rejoiced. And I think there's a good lesson there going both ways, as scripture commands us to rejoice with those who rejoice and to mourn with those who mourn. Even in the illustration you just shared, I think sometimes we can get it wrong, where, well, Melanie probably wouldn't want to come to the baby shower, because that would hurt her. Actually, that the lack of an invitation might do more harm. How do we--what would you say about how we can think better about those things?

Melanie Penn 30:03

Oh my gosh, that's such a good question. Because for everyone--so like--I might have said like, "Hey, don't rob me of the joy of celebrating with you!" But there might have been somebody else who would think "Oh, don't be so insensitive and invite me." So I don't think any of us know the right thing to do. But for sure, the wrong thing to do is just assume. Just don't assume. Don't assume you know what anyone's going through. Don't try to feel for them. Don't try to think for them. Just say--using very specifically the baby shower thing-- "Hey, I'm gonna have a baby shower, and I would love for you to be there. You don't have to be there. If you come, I love it, but just know there's no pressure." And open up the conversation. There's ways to just kind of enter in. And I don't know. I mean, that's kind of not even just, that just seems like a good rule of life, I guess.

Eric Schumacher 31:05

Yeah.

Elyse Fitzpatrick 31:06

You know, I had a friend in church who was dying of cancer. And I asked her, you know, I said, "Talk to me, what's really hard about this?" And she said, "I've become invisible."

Melanie Penn 31:21

Oh, wow.

Elyse Fitzpatrick 31:22

And I said, "So tell me what is that?" She said, "People don't know what to say to me, and so they don't say anything. They play like I'm not there."

Melanie Penn 31:33

The like, avoid thing. Yeah.

Elyse Fitzpatrick 31:35

Yeah. You know, again, just to say to someone, I don't, I don't know what the best thing is for you right now. Can you tell me and just know that I want to be there for you."

Melanie Penn 31:49

Right. Well and also say, you know, and I would love to be spending time with you. I would love to be talking with you. I think sometimes it puts a lot of weight on someone who's grieving to be like, "What do you need?" And the person's like--

Elyse Fitzpatrick 32:06

Good.

Melanie Penn 32:07

And the person's like, "What do I need? Like? I don't know, I don't even know what day it is."

Elyse Fitzpatrick 32:11

Yeah.

Eric Schumacher 32:12

Yeah.

Melanie Penn 32:13

Someone said something to me one time, and I thought it was so wise. It was like, when someone's in grief for crisis, it's like, it's not how are you doing? It's like, how are you doing today? Like, how are things today? Kind of break it down into like, a smaller piece, and try to just have a conversation about the smaller piece. Because it does get overwhelming for everybody, these hard things, these dark moments, and how to survive them in community. Nobody really knows.

Eric Schumacher 32:43

Speaking of community, I want to explore just a little bit with you how pastors could be helpful to a woman going through that experience. And I'm mindful, you know, when I first started pastoring, you know, every Mother's Day was a buy flowers for all the moms and give a sermon on how great moms are.

Melanie Penn 33:01

Oh Mother's Day! Don't get me started on that!

Eric Schumacher 33:06

And then I heard how awful that was from a lot of women, you know, and particularly with my wife and I going through several miscarriages and learning firsthand how painful that area can be, and hearing

from friends who walk through infertility and that sort of thing. And learning that there are women who do not go to church on Mother's Day, because they can't bear it. And so I've moved to just preaching the next text and not focusing on moms. And you know, I just saw a church on Twitter. I can't remember which one it was, but they had a special evening service, where they invited the church and it was a time of prayer for those dealing with infertility and miscarriage and those sorts of things, which I thought was good. You know, we often celebrate with a baby shower and those sorts of things appropriately when a woman has a child, but what does the church do corporately for those who can't? And so, what could a pastor be aware of Melanie, as he visits you in the hospital, as he follows up with you during recovery? His sermons?

Melanie Penn 34:31

Yeah, oh my gosh, well, Elyse, I would be interested to know what you think as well. And thank you for that question. I mean, backing up real quick--when you guys have observed the ritual of handing out flowers and stuff on Mother's Day. I guess a lot of churches I have gone to have said, well, if you are a mother or if you have a mother, you know, this day is for you.

Elyse Fitzpatrick 34:57

Right. Yeah.

Melanie Penn 34:58

But then I have celebrated with a couple of churches where it was really just about, like all the moms stand up, you know, we're gonna applaud for you.

Elyse Fitzpatrick 35:04

The mom who has the most kids! The mom who has the youngest kid! The mom who gave birth this morning and dragged herself to church! You stand up now! Yeah. Yeah. Sorry.

Melanie Penn 35:16

You're our heroes--and they are, by the way,

Elyse Fitzpatrick 35:18

Yeah, they are!

Melanie Penn 35:20

They are. I mean, I think it's interesting, Eric, what you said about like, there was an evening service for families struggling with infertility. I'm like, why was it separate? Why was that separate? Why was it evening? Why was it not part of the normal rhythm of, you know, a year's liturgy or whatever? Why pull it apart? Look, I don't know anything specific to say, and I would never want to cast a shade on any of the pastors who are around me in my life, because there are a lot just because of the work I do. And I love them all. But I will say, I noticed a lot of silence and nobody really reached out or walked with me through it from a pastoral perspective. And I know enough to know that it wasn't personal. It was just like frozen. It's like, oh my gosh, I'm frozen. I don't know what to do.

Elyse Fitzpatrick 36:16

Yeah.

Melanie Penn 36:17

And so the only advice I would have is just don't do that. Just don't do that. And this is nuanced, too, because then you have women who suffer through something with a partner. So you kind of feel like, okay, she's maybe got some support at home. But then you have someone like me, who didn't go through stuff with a partner. It's like, it's like, I you guys, I mean, I was bleeding to death in my apartment in New York by myself, and someone came to check on me and bring me to the hospital. It's like single people, men and women go through a lot of isolating experiences.

Elyse Fitzpatrick 36:54

Yes.

Melanie Penn 36:54

So then if you have your pastor, not really knowing, like, ooh, I'm freaked out. And this is a reproductive issue, and this is sensitive, and like, what do I do? Then you're really kind of out in the cold spinning your wheels a little bit. So I'd say whatever you do, I mean, the person going through the thing is spinning their wheels. So just don't keep a distance. Figure out whatever it is to get over the fear and make some contact. Yeah, like make whatever contact feels the least threatening and the most respectful for you.

Because a pastor has to honor his boundaries too of whatever is emotionally acceptable. So is it an email, a card, you know, an offer to come over for dinner with the family? Like, what is it? But make some kind of contact.

Eric Schumacher 37:44

Well, I think what Elyse said earlier, or maybe it was you. One of you said, you know, just the question like, What do you need? I found as a pastor, first of all, for pastors listening, you just got to get over biological uncomfortableness.

Elyse Fitzpatrick 38:00

Yeah, you do. Just say the word uterus, and it's not gonna, you know, like, turn you into a Martian or something.

Eric Schumacher 38:07

Hey, we're preaching through Hosea right now. So we're saying all sorts of fun words.

Elyse Fitzpatrick 38:14

I bet you are.

Eric Schumacher 38:16

So they should at seminaries teach a biology and anatomy class, because you're going to learn all the parts as a pastor, and you're going to need to know how to approach those appropriately. And with each person that's different. And I think being willing to say, I don't know anything about what you're going through, but I want to help you. And if you just tell me, help me understand. And then even asking, I think, what Melanie was saying about asking, what would be helpful. You know, I had a 90-some-year old woman who was having a mastectomy. And I asked her the Sunday before I said, "Hey, could I come pray with you and visit you in the hospital before the surgery?" And she said, "Heavens, no, I don't want you there seeing me in that gown without my glasses and hair." And you know, and I loved that, that she actually said, I don't want you to come see me in the hospital. And I'm glad I didn't just barge in and make her really embarrassed. But at the same time, if she had, it's important to ask that question.

Elyse Fitzpatrick 39:30

It really is. It's so important, you know, and part of that issue is maybe generational. I think younger women are a lot more comfortable talking about things than perhaps my mother's generation. Yeah. So I mean, I think that that's really an issue too. But you know, I think sometimes we feel like we have to say something. Yeah, we're like Job's comforters. They did a good job the first week they were there. And then they needed to be quiet.

Eric Schumacher 40:14

So let me ask about that. As we move towards wrapping up, let's talk about wrapping up. Pastors often feel the pressure to go to someone who's suffering and to have something to say.

Elyse Fitzpatrick 40:27

Right.

Eric Schumacher 40:28

Or they asked the question, "What is God teaching you through all of this?"

Elyse Fitzpatrick 40:34

I want to stick a pencil in my eye when people say that.

Eric Schumacher 40:38

So Melanie, talk to us about thinking about gleaned lessons from suffering and people coming with answers for you.

Melanie Penn 40:49

I don't think that God is sending us trials to teach us lessons.

Elyse Fitzpatrick 40:55

Right.

Melanie Penn 40:55

I don't think that. I think that this world is broken, and he's here with us in the brokenness. And that's kind of the end. And all he wants to teach us is, like, how much love and grace he has for us, and we just don't get it. There is being with, like, the only the only thing to do as people in community, or the only thing to tell someone who is grieving or suffering, it's like, we are with you. God is with you. With. That's it.

Elyse Fitzpatrick 41:31

Yeah.

Melanie Penn 41:31

Um, you know, not like jumping into being like, well, maybe God just wants to show you that it's this and this and this and this. It's like, I don't know, I don't know about all that. I'm much more comfortable--the older I get, I'm way more comfortable just like leaving it open. And like not needing it to be like, what is God teaching you through this time? It's like, someone could be taught stuff. I think that's great. I mean, a lot of that is just like the wisdom of going through an experience. It's like, even a non-believer learns things through experiences. But God sending suffering in order to teach you a lesson. I'm just, I'm not, I don't know. I believed that for a long time. I don't know if I believe that anymore. What do you all think?

Eric Schumacher 42:17

Well, I think you know, coming full circle to the album, we started talking about Immanuel, meaning God with us. Christ came in human form and lived in our midst. When he ascended into heaven, his disciples probably had more questions after three years with him than they did beforehand.

Melanie Penn 42:41

Yes.

Eric Schumacher 42:42

And there's so much that isn't wrapped up with a bow.

Elyse Fitzpatrick 42:46

Right.

Eric Schumacher 42:47

And even with the rest of the Bible being written, you know, the Gospels, the Epistles, Revelation. There is so much we don't know. And even, you know, the verse that God works all things together for our good doesn't tell us how.

Elyse Fitzpatrick 43:05

Right.

Eric Schumacher 43:06

I mean, it doesn't tell us what the good is apart from being conformed to the image of Christ. And I think pastorally when our question is, "What lessons did you learn from this," we amplify their suffering, because they've gone through this experience, and now they feel guilty that they don't have answers to that question. And you know, I think about Job. He's never told what that whole thing was about,

Elyse Fitzpatrick 43:40

Right.

Melanie Penn 43:42

Yeah. And what are you supposed to say? It's like, what lesson did I learn? Well, I learned that I have more capacity for sorrow than I ever knew. And I learned that I don't suffer well. And I don't know what the next thing is going to bring. And I mean, it's like, I don't know.

Elyse Fitzpatrick 44:01

It's almost as though as Christians, we think that suffering invalidates the truth of Christianity. And so without us coming, as you said, and just putting a bow on it. So we can't just say, "Oh, you know what, this was horrific suffering. And there's mystery, and there's doubt. And there's confusion. And I don't have any answers. But I still believe in God."

Melanie Penn 44:28

Yes, yeah.

Elyse Fitzpatrick 44:30

I, you know, I think we have to get to the place where we have to be comfortable saying that. Because the thought that your suffering has to have like a lesson. I mean, that sounds like a mom saying to her kid, "Well, now have you learned your lesson?" It's so punitive.

Melanie Penn 44:52

Very punitive. That's right. That's right.

Elyse Fitzpatrick 44:55

Instead of just saying, "Look, I am confused. I have doubt. I have significant pain. I'm suffering, and I don't know why. I'm hanging on by my fingernails, but I do believe, I think, that there is a God. Why can't we do that?"

Eric Schumacher 45:21

Yeah.

Melanie Penn 45:22

Well, Eric, out of all of us, you have this divine business of actually being a pastor, so far be it from us to tell you how to guide people in this experience.

Eric Schumacher 45:35

Oh, my goodness. I think what I've learned in 17 years of pastoral ministry, and I think I've learned it the hard way, is just to be quiet, just to shut my mouth. And to say to people, when people say, "Why is this happening to me?" to say, "I don't know." And you know, there's all sorts of theological truths that we can explain, that God is doing this for his own glory, and he's doing it for your own good, and he's conforming you into the image of Christ. And we could recite all these things. But there's a really real way in which we can also say, I don't know, because we don't know those particulars. And I think like Elyse was saying, with Job's friends, they were doing well when they were quiet. And I think to say, you know, I've had a number of sufferers, at different ages, from people in their 20s, to people in their 80s and 90s, who have just wept in my study, and said, "Why is this happening to me?" And I typically come back to saying, "We live in a broken world. And what I do know is that Christ has died for our sins. He's defeated Satan. He's conquered the grave. And one day, he's going to come back, and he's going to make all of it new and wipe every tear from our eyes." And that is our blessed hope. Our hope is not an explanation. It's the resurrection.

Elyse Fitzpatrick 47:17

There you go.

Melanie Penn 47:19

I love that. Well, gosh, you guys.

Elyse Fitzpatrick 47:23

Thank you so much, Melanie, for being with us again. Thank you for giving us so much of your day.

Melanie Penn 47:31

Thank you for including me! Oh my gosh, I am honored. I'm honored. So thank you so much for your work.

Eric Schumacher 47:37

Melanie, why don't you tell our listeners where they can find you online?

Melanie Penn 47:42

Oh, well, my name is Melanie Penn like Penn Station, and you can find me just by that first and last name on the web, on social media. I'm very Google-able.

Elyse Fitzpatrick 48:00

Google-able, I love that!

Eric Schumacher 48:03

If you like singer-songwriter stuff, you will love Melanie's albums. They are some of my favorite. And I was just thinking through all this, Melanie, your life has had a lot of suffering. And your albums are some of the most joyful that I've ever heard.

Melanie Penn 48:25

Well, like I said, I can also be very oblivious.

Elyse Fitzpatrick 48:29

That helps, doesn't it?

Melanie Penn 48:30

Oftentimes I'm like, "De de de de de!"

Eric Schumacher 48:33

Oh, I envy that so much. Well, thank you everyone for listening and giving us your time. Thank you again to Melanie for sharing her story. We hope that it's been helpful to people to hear. Please do share about the Worthy podcast and the Worthy book and about Melanie's material. And we'll see you next time on the next episode of Worthy.

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