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Annie: Hi friends! Welcome to a very special episode of That Sounds Fun. I'm your host Annie F. Downs coming at you in the midst of our Advent series with a very special Christmas Party episode. I'm really happy to be here with you today. We have got a great show in store.

Before we dive into today's conversation, I want to let you know that this episode is sponsored by [Athletic Greens](#). Things I think we all have in common: we want to take good care of ourselves, right, we want to optimize our immune systems, please, especially during cold and flu season, and we want more energy. Well, great news, Athletic Greens can help you with all of that. And me too.

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And just a reminder that all the links to our sponsors, the transcript of the shows, our weekly email newsletter, the AFD Week in Review, and all the details about our Advent series, all those links are conveniently available in the show notes. So check it out.

Intro: Today on the show we have a returned visit for one of our favorite little elves. It's our sweet friend, Ellie Holcomb. She's been on the show four times. Way back on Episode 27 and on our 2018 Christmas party, Episode 211, Episode 307.

I'm just so glad she's back because she's been working on something that I think we all need this Christmas season, a new kids' book. It's called *Sounding Joy* and a musical companion to it called *Sing Christmas Songs*. It's asking the question, what does joy sound like?

And it is the absolute sweetest book, you guys. Whether it's through her solo albums, her books for grownups, or her books and music for kids, Ellie's voice and who she is, she's just a light everywhere she goes. So, especially as we're in the midst of our Advent series and we move into the week of joy starting on Monday, Ellie was the perfect person to have a Christmas party episode with today. So here's my conversation with our friend, one of your favorites, one of my favorites too, Ellie Holcomb.

Amen. We quit. We quit pod and without praying. In working. We gotta pray. Matters too much. Matters too much. We just don't start without praying anymore.

Ellie: Oh, I love that so much.

Annie: Right? Doesn't it just matter to you? Talk to me about how your prayer life has changed in the last couple of years.

Ellie: Oh, I love that question. You know, something that God is teaching me right now, and this will resonate with you as a fellow seven-

Annie: Yes!

Ellie: But you can move and be still at the same time.

Annie: Oh, wow. Please talk about this. This is huge for me.

Ellie: We can move and be still at the same time. It's huge for me too. I have a really hard time resting. I was just actually thinking, I was like, "I'm gonna go basically listen to everything Annie Downs has to say about Sabbath.

Annie: You're like, "If that seven can do it..."

Ellie: I've caught different things that I... There is like a deep longing that is rising up within me to try to be still, to listen. The word God gave me for this last year... We don't always do a word for the year. And love if do, love if don't. But this year I

was asking God, you know, or last New Year's, whatever, "what word do you have for me?" And He was like, "Rest." And I was like that's hilarious because I'm about to go on tour.

And so later on in the year, I get this beautiful image, and it keeps happening over and over again: you can move and be still at the same time.

Annie: So what does that look like for you? For me, my best praying is when I'm stomping around the rich neighborhood next to my neighbor. I mean, that is like, when I am going through... A couple of weeks ago a lady asked me what trash day was and I was like, "That is so sweet you think I live here? I live over there."

Ellie: " I live over there."

Annie: I mean, I haven't had language for like you're saying but I'm moving but I'm still.

Ellie: That's right.

Annie: My spirit is still.

Ellie: Your spirit is still.

Annie: So what does that look like for you? How are you seeing that play out?

Ellie: The first time that I was praying and kind of felt God kind of dropping breadcrumbs to lead me in this direction, I was at the beach and I was taking a walk. And I am amazed by how when I look at water getting next to water, which is a lot of times moving in one way or another,-

Annie: Always.

Ellie: ...rivers, streams, oceans or rising back up to the sky. I mean, it's just there's movement in water.

Annie: Living water.

Ellie: Living water. That's right. So whenever I get around water, there's something that calms down within my soul. I was actually standing... You know, you stand next to the waves and the water washes up and you're kind of like sinking deeper and deeper in the sand?

Annie: Yeah.

Ellie: God was like, "See?"

Annie: Wow.

Ellie: "You're being still but you're moving and you're actually grounding. You're grounding yourself." And so it has been a really beautiful thing to pray as I go. I was even on a walk with my little boy this morning, Rivers. He's learning to walk her dog, Dolly Parton, which is terrifying because I'm like, "She could run off and he runoff." So we're just practicing on really not busy streets.

So we were praying and he goes, "Mom, I'm gonna say a little prayer." And we are both walking, learning how to walk a dog and he is just saying this little prayer of gratitude. And that is not his MO. I mean, he's just like always on the go. I feel like God continues on and "See, you can move and be still at the same time." And so prayer has been a quieting of my soul even in the chaos that is all around and I'm grateful.

Annie: I want to make a distinction for us because I don't think you can work and be still. I think you can move and be still. Because I don't want our friends to hear "so while you're doing the dishes or while you're..." I don't think that's the same. I think moving your body and getting yourself going like you and River this morning, y'all can... Rivers? Rivers, sorry.

Ellie: Double portion. Double portion.

Annie: That's it. Double portion. Oh, my gosh, I have a great double portion for you. Sorry, in a second. The thing we get to practice as people is how do I figure out movement that's not work.

Ellie: Oh, it's so good. It's so good.

Annie: Right?

Ellie: That's right.

Annie: Again, it's a river, not a tightrope. You can try but go like, "Oh man, yesterday I ran while I was praying and my watch was measuring my steps, and I realized this was work not rest."

Ellie: Oh, man.

Annie: And so having that separation.

Ellie: And that is different. One of the other things that happened to me when I sort of started, I don't know, it feels like a journey, the "move and be still" thing for me. But I was watching beach and I know or the song or whatever it is, I'm like, "Oh, this is fun. This is fun breadcrumb trail to follow." But I had a paddle board it's like one of my favorite things to do, to be on the water, to feel really small and feel held by something big which is the reality for all of us.

Annie: It's what you got for your birthday.

Ellie: It's what I got for my birthday.

Annie: Every friend, every one of us, everybody you're friends with, we all got you a paddleboard. And I was like blessed.

Ellie: But honestly, I jumped through it right in my pool and jumped and I was like, "This is amazing." But it's true. I love being on a paddleboard. This amazing stranger, which I love so much, swam out and a storm was coming in. So the waves were starting to get bigger.

Annie: Out here on the lake?

Ellie: No, this was actually in the ocean.

Annie: Oh, wow, wow. Sorry, sorry.

Ellie: I was at the beach with friends. And so she swam out and she was like, "I'm from Cali." She was like, "You need to be surfing this." And my dream is to be a surfer. I have only done it once. And she was like, "I'm from California and you just need to be surfing these waves." And I was like, "No, no, ma'am. This is not a surfboard. It's a paddleboard. This isn't the same." She was like, "You can surf anything anywhere." And I was like, "What?"

Annie: Oh, they're so much cooler than us. California women y'all are so cool.

Ellie: I was like, "Teach me your ways." She helps me start looking for waves. Anyway, it was amazing. And I end up surfing that day. I think I got up like 30 different times. It didn't look that cool but it was so fun. And I felt this reminder, "See, you can move and be still." And when you're surfing, you're standing still. You're grounded.

Annie: You're so grounded.

Ellie: You're super connected but the water underneath you is moving you. That is sort of what I'm wanting to lean into with prayer is let God carry me wherever He wants

me to go: in conversations with my kids, with my neighbors, with the people who are checking me out at the grocery store. And to let Him kind of lead that and then to be grounded in that connection with Him. So just ask, "God, what do you have for me today? What do you have for me today?" And kind of go inward and listen to whatever invitations that He's giving you.

Annie: I mean, that's what we're talking about in Advent is like, what are our surfboards that can hold us and take us into next year?

Ellie: That's right.

Annie: I mean, it is Jesus. It's the fruit of the Spirit.

Ellie: It is.

Annie: That's what takes us into... when we can't control the waves, we can certainly handle what we're standing on. We can certainly ground ourselves with something.

Ellie: With something. You know, half the time that's a couple of deep breaths for me. I'm learning that with my kids. Rivers is the double portion baby. He is wild. He has big feelings and big energy. I mean, he woke up the other day, you know, it's like still dark outside and Emmylou and Huck, our older, crawled into bed with us. We're just snuggling. He walks up, he's fully dressed, with goggles on his head, and he goes, "Good morning. It's science time." I mean he just wakes up like ready to go. We're like, "Oh, my gosh, what have you done?"

Annie: I mean, neither you or Drew are built like that.

Ellie: Not exactly. No.

Annie: So is it like, "How did we make that?"

Ellie: It is a little. I mean, I have like big energy-

Annie: Yeah, certainly.

Ellie: But he has like big energy in a football player's body. Do you know what I'm saying?

Annie: Yeah. Yeah.

Ellie: So he's like physical too. So anyway, I was asking God about him, I was like, "God, I just need you to..." Because sometimes he scares us because he'll run out the

door... Our friends drove by the other day, they text us, they're like, "Hey, just so you know, Rivers is on the roof of Drew's truck outside."

Annie: Oh, my gosh, Ellie.

Ellie: We were like, "What?" We had cousins over, there were a lot of kids in the house. And so it's scary sometimes to parent. But I do not want to parent out of fear. I don't want to parent out of fear. I don't want to live out of fear. I know fear can teach us a lot but I want to let joy and love drive my life and hope drive my life, not fear.

And so this sense of we can parent, we can work, we can do the things that God has called us to do, we can play and we can be grounded in something that runs deeper and that steadier than all of that.

[00:12:17] <music>

Sponsor: Hey friends! Just interrupting this conversation real quick to share about one of our amazing partners, [Everlywell](#). There is no better way to say 'I love you' than by taking care of each other. That's why giving the gift of information and health is so meaningful. And with Everlywell, you can find 30 plus at home lab test, vitamin, supplements and more for everybody on your holiday list.

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For friends of our show, Everlywell is offering a discount of 20% off an at-home lab test at everlywell.com/thatsoundsfun. That's everlywell.com/thatsoundsfun for 20% off your next at-home lab test. Everlywell.com/thatsoundsfun.

Sponsor: And I want to tell you about another one of our incredible partners, [ThirdLove](https://thirdlove.com). Okay, what is the deal with this? Some of the prettiest bras are the opposite of comfortable and the super comfortable ones are not so pretty. Why can't we have both?

Well, ThirdLove says, "What if we came up with a third way?" So they spent years researching and designing the perfect bras that feel just as good as they look. And they're created by women for women which I'm interested in. Their T-shirt bras are the actual best, you guys. My favorite bras technically. And the fitting room quiz, we love a quiz, makes it so easy to get your sizing just right there.

ThirdLove takes a data-driven approach. They found that 50% of women are in between sizes so they invented half cups and carry more than 60 sizes everything from A to H. And with tagless labels, slippery straps, and fabric that feels so luxurious. They have upped the game in all the ways.

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Dave: Hey guys! It's Dave Barnes from Danville. And what sounds fun to me this Christmas is Christmas lights. I love Christmas lights. It's like a Pavlovian response in my body. When I see them I just start getting all giddy and excited. Christmas music. And some of you are like, "Well, what Christmas music, David? I'd say Jon McLaughlin. Because Are you kidding me? Come on, guys. We want high quality music. And that is high quality audio.

So lots of Christmas music. And I just love being with the fam. It's such a sweet season to stay in, get the fire going and watching Christmas movies, listen to some Christmas jams, and then Christmas lights, you know? So yeah, I think that's what I'm excited about.

Jon: Hey, this is Jon McLaughlin from Danville. What sounds fun to me this Christmas is just being at home, listening to some Harry Connick Jr. You know what? No, no, listening to some Dave Barnes Christmas albums. There are a couple out there. Get them at the link in our profile. And just being with my family. Often I'm on tour in December playing a bunch of Christmas shows. And this year, I only have a couple of shows. So I'm going to be around. So I just want to be in the kitchen, making cookies or something with my girls, the house is a mess, and Dave Barnes is just singing to us.

Annie: And now back to our conversation with Ellie.

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Annie: I don't know a thing that my friends are walking through that is more refining than parenting. I mean, all of y'all. I'm like, "Yo, that is not just raising children to adulthood. That is like every day is... It's course correction. Not like 180 degrees, but two or six, or forty. But y'all have to watch three courses every day and course correct constantly.

Ellie: Yeah, that's it.

Annie: It's shocking.

Ellie: It is super humbling. It is a beautiful reminder all the time that we are kids. We're all just lost kids trying to find our way back home. And so I think being a parent of kids is hard and as exhausting. As it is, I think the beautiful part of it is it reminded me that I'm a kid. And it's helped me remember what it's like to be a kid and kind of get back to that. I don't know that true self. We all come here exactly as God intended, you know, fully, whole and then we all get broken along the way. And so finding that way back to that belovedness that, I don't know, that we forget as we get older and we break. We break things.

Annie: I always get yelled at on the internet if I say something like, "I'm gonna tell you my double portion story," and then I forget to do it.

Ellie: Oh, come on.

Annie: So I've got to tell you. I've had my fingers crossed so I didn't forget. I was in Israel last week. Have you been to Israel yet? I can't remember.

Ellie: Oh, I haven't been yet. I saw you there.

Annie: Can we go together?

Ellie: I would love to.

Annie: Okay, we need to go together. I would pay for your trip to watch you experience Israel because I think it would be the most beautiful... I can't wait. It's gonna be beautiful to watch. Let me tell you about the Dead Sea.

The Dead Sea, to get from where they have the shops down to where the water is about 200 feet decline in elevation. Okay, because the Dead Sea is dying actually. It's a very fascinating thing because it's shrinking. So from where they built the shops originally and where you gather and shower is a long way now from the Dead Sea.

Ellie: Oh my goodness.

Annie: And it's a downhill walk to get to the water and it is uphill for 11 minutes to get back. Okay, double portion. That morning, Re our pastor's wife, my friend Re prays that the Lord would give us an abortion. We go to the Dead Sea, I walked out with all of our friends. I don't get in. It's fine. I think it's one and done. If you do it and you love it, do it again. If you do it and don't love it, don't do it again. I don't wanna. It was great. But I did it a few years ago.

Ellie: Love it.

Annie: A friend of mine hands me his phone and his towel to hold while he's jumping in. I set it down and I go back up and I totally forget that I've just set his phone down at the Dead Sea. And I'm like-

Ellie: You don't get to say that every day.

Annie: No, I just set his phone down at the dead sea. And as I start walking back down, and then just like the Lord, speaking of Him laughing with us, as I'm walking those yards back down, the Lord's like, "This is kind of your double portion. You're getting this walk twice because you were irresponsible with somebody else's stuff."

And I got back up and I said to Re, "Well, there's my d..." Because I got back down there and he had found it and it was fine. And I'd set it with our group. I hadn't just thrown it in the water. But I was like, "I'm so sorry. That was so irresponsible." He was like, "No, I saw you put it down and I was like, 'Well, I'll just walk back up now.'" And I was like, "Here's my double portion of The Dead Sea."

Ellie: The double portion of the Dead Sea. All the steps.

Annie: All the steps. Why haven't you been yet? I'm kind of surprised.

Ellie: Well, honestly, we have intended to go several times and our life is just cra... I mean

Annie: Yeah, the kids. It's hard.

Ellie: The management of the kids and the touring, and both parents touring. Like the timing hasn't worked out. And then COVID, you know, some things got put on hold. But we really want to go.

Annie: You will lose your mind when you're like... I got to help baptize people in the Jordan.

Ellie: Oh, my goodness.

Annie: I mean to tell you, I could weep telling you about it. We have to like not be... I can't make you my Ellie right now. I have to make you Ellie Holcomb that I'm talking to. Because if I tell my Ellie, we're puddles on the ground. So Ellie Holcomb let me tell you what it is like. I mean, you're just gonna love it. It's unbelievable. I think everybody needs to go before... I'm like, "Don't wait till you're retired."

Ellie: Don't wait till the Dead Sea is gone.

Annie: Thank you. Hurry. Red Sea is dying. Oh, it's terrible. Okay, so one of the things I loved about Israel is being where Jesus grew up, where He was born, and I'm going, "Oh, this is the original Christmas story. We are here." So Ellie, I mean, that's why we're talking about-

Ellie: The OG Christmas.

Annie: Yes! It was the OG Christmas spot. It's where it all began. So I just love talking about Christmas.

Ellie: I do. I love it.

Annie: I mean, it's just... Jesus is unbelievable.

Ellie: I know.

Annie: Right?

Ellie: I still I'm... Sorry. I'm in awe of the story

Annie: I know.

Ellie: It is crazy. It is so audacious of God to come in the way that He did. I'm like, "That was a terrible idea."

Annie: "You made that so hard on yourself."

Ellie: So crazy. Like everybody's looking for a king and He sends a child into the arms of like a teen mom basically.

Annie: Yes! Yes!

Ellie: It is on the wrong side of the tracks. It is like-

Annie: In the middle of a time when the king decides to kill every baby that age.

Ellie: Right.

Annie: So His life is at risk. Jesus's life was at risk constantly. We just never think about that. His life was at risk all the time.

Ellie: It is. And you're like, "Oh, really that timing? You could have chosen." Oh, you did choose. Oh, you chose. Oh, you chose that time to enter into that chaos and that brokenness to come small. I think as I talked to my kids about this story, and you know, as a parent, it is so crazy in the holidays.

And it's part of why I wrote this book is because I found myself wanting... This is like one of my favorite stories. But I also love the magic and the wonder. There's so much story around Christmas and around this season. There's Santa and there's elf on the shelf... Elf is my favorite movie, I love Buddy the Elf. I feel like the female version of Buddy the Elf.

So I love all of that, sort of like the cultural hullabaloo and hustle and bustle of Christmas. But there is also this magic story of angels and shepherds and babies and animals and a star in the sky and these like people who are following the stars. There's this magical story full of wonder. So I found myself as a parent trying to balance those two stories, I'm like, "Yeah, so Santa comes to give gifts because it's Jesus' birthday." And that's why we all give gifts and try to mix the two together.

So it's been a really... I wanted to write a book that had all of that magic in that wonder of the season. But that tied it into I think the most beautiful story that I

know. The story of God saying, I'm not out to get you. I'm out to draw you near. And not to remind you that like there's good news, there's glad tidings of great joy that shall be for all the people.

Annie: For all people.

Ellie: And we're reminded that we have a home. I can't remember if we talked about that story of the mom who had a 3-year-old and then a newborn-

Annie: No.

Ellie: ...and she can't find the 3-year-old. She puts a newborn down for a nap, she's cleaning up from lunch, she can't find the three old anywhere. And before she runs outside, you know, as a parent you're thinking your children are not in the street, she looks at the monitor to make sure that baby is okay, and she sees the 3-year-olds staring over the baby's bed, the baby's crib. And she's like, "Oh my gosh, what is happening?" So she runs up and stops at the door because her 3-year-old is talking. And the 3-year-old saying to the newborn, "Quick, remind me what heaven is like. I'm starting to forget."

Annie: Oh, we have never heard this story. I've never heard this story. "I'm starting to forget."

Ellie: "I'm starting to forget." And so there is this sense that we all come from where every good thing comes from. We all come from the heart and the mind of God. And we come here and our work is to remember where we came from. And to remember that because of who Jesus is, because of God's heart, to not leave us as we are in this broken world, we're called back home. We're all on our way back home.

I think there's something about kids, they're closer to where we came from than to where we're going back to than us. And maybe that's why God tells us to be like kids. Emmylou the other day said... she was telling me something, and I couldn't hear. Classic mom's peeing on the toilet and through the door situation.

I was like, "Wait, Emmylou, I didn't hear what you said. Can you say that again a little louder?" And she goes, "It's okay, mom, I'll tell you when you're younger." And I was like, "What?" Are you being sassy? What in the world? You're gonna tell me when I'm... but I'm... Wait, I'm only ever... Do you mean you're never going to tell me." And she was like, "No, mom, when you're younger, remember God's gonna come back and make everything new. When you're young again I'll tell you then."

Annie: Oh, my gosh.

Ellie: And I was just like, "That... What in the world?" Yeah, in one sense we're all going to be young one day.

Annie: That is an unbelievable thing for her to say.

Ellie: Isn't that amazing?

Annie: It is so sweet.

Ellie: So there is this beautiful spirit of wonder and magic that is around this season that I think we're all built for that waiting and anticipation for Christmas morning, it taps into really what all music taps into which the structure of music. I heard Dr. Jeremy Begbie say this, is that you start off in a key you go home, and you go away and then you go home again.

I mean, he's a classical pianist but he would play, "Mary had a little lamb, little lamb, little lamb. Mary Had a little lamb whose fleece was white as snow."

Annie: And it's right there. It's that same spot.

Ellie: He just stop at "as wide as..." Everything in you is leaning forward. Go home. Go home to the King. And so the structure of music, even if there's not words, it taps into the story that all of us are living. You start off home, you're currently away, and we all long to go home.

Annie: I've heard some people talking about this literally right now on the internet, about where we were before we were here and if we were before we were here. Because if we are eternal beings, if our spirits are eternal beings, that isn't just eternal forward, that's eternal backwards. Is that what theology says to you?

Ellie: Yeah, it does.

Annie: I think so.

Ellie: I love the mystery of that.

Annie: I do too.

Ellie: It's bigger. That is the question that I keep asking right now. I'm like, "What if God is bigger than I even thought? What does that mean? What does that look like?" And that kind of mystery, thinking like, what? I mean, water is the same way. You

think about the water, it's like, oh, the water when God was like, Hey, separate the land and the water, it's always been here. And we're like, whatever... How much of our percentage is water?

Annie: Oh my gosh.

Ellie: Anyway, so there's just this beautiful, ancient arc of things that has been here and that will be, that I love that. That is really beautiful, the kind of bigness and the mysteriousness of that. and the way God plays into all of that is deeply calming for me.

I've been listening to Krista Tippett a lot. She has a podcast called On Being. She's doing this foundational series right now. And one of the foundations of their sort of group and their thinking is asking how we tell the generative narrative of our time.

Annie: Wow.

Ellie: And she talks about how we're wired, our brains are wired, you know, to remember the negative. Like we live in a chaotic, broken world that is. That is true. But that's only part of the truth because every single day, there are beautiful ordinary moments happening. Beautiful moments of love and of kindness, people making beautiful things and doing beautiful work that matters in classrooms and in homes and in podcast studios and in restaurants, there are meals being served and conversations being had and selfless acts of kindness being done all over the globe. And our brains are wired to remember... I think she said it takes three seconds for us to remember something negative, to go to long-term memory, but 30 to 90-

Annie: Oh my gosh.

Ellie: ...for us to remember the good.

Annie: Jeez.

Ellie: And so what does it look like to ponder and notice and really take in the good and the beauty that we see? What would that look like? That's honestly part of what I think making room in the Advent season is, is making space to remember.

Annie: For those 90 seconds. Yes. Yes.

Ellie: Yeah, which is good. And I'm so grateful that you're doing this every day-

Annie: I know. Thank you. Loving it.

- Ellie:** ...of giving us an invitation to ponder the beauty and the hope and the good.
- Annie:** Yeah. Does Krista Tippett talk about her faith life?
- Ellie:** I think in a lot of different ways in conversations, yes. You kind of hear like snippets of it. I've never heard her... Snippets of Tippett.
- Annie:** That's it.
- Ellie:** I've never heard her-
- Annie:** Like testimony.
- Ellie:** ...explicitly, right, tell her story.
- Annie:** Yeah, me neither.
- Ellie:** But grew up in the tradition of Christianity.
- Annie:** Because she certainly makes cosmos out of chaos as Madeleine L'Engle says. Right?
- Ellie:** Oh, yeah.
- Annie:** So I'm like, She does sacred work. I wonder if she knows she does sacred work. I hope so.
- Annie:** I hope so.
- Ellie:** Because I love so many of the conversations that she has. And the question that she leads with so often is what is your spiritual upbringing? Like what's the spiritual sort of fingerprint that was on your childhood? Yeah, because I think if we can go back to childhood you go again back to that. That innocence story of where we came from, and the broken parts and the beautiful parts and the parts that bewildered you and the parts that brought you out into the mystery. Anyway, so...
- Annie:** And that part of Christmas, too, is it's like there is, for a lot of us, this feeling of the chord resolving at Christmas. Like, oh, yeah, that's why we love Hallmark Christmas movies is because they're easy to digest and they resolve. Even if you're cheezy and you're... whatever, who cares? Because they resolve. And it's what you wish was happening in your life too. Whether you're single or married with kids or whatever, you wish your life was resolving in one hour and 58 minutes too, right?

Ellie: Oh, my goodness.

Annie: Don't we feel that, right? I feel that.

Ellie: I feel it so deeply.

Annie: The homeness of that for some of us. And then there's other parts of us like you were just saying of like, when we get to the holidays, is it peaceful, is it hopeful because that isn't where we found home. That's not where it was safe, that's not where it was good. Right?

Ellie: All the times, yeah.

Annie: For so many. And for the majority of us both-

Ellie: Yeah, both.

Annie: Both. So when I'm thinking about *Sounding Joy*, your book, and your *Sing Christmas Songs* album, talk to me about raising kids at Christmas when everyone to some degree has a complicated history with being raised by people at Christmas.

Ellie: So great. It is a lot to navigate. There's a lot out there to do. There's a lot that they're catching from movies and conversations at school-

Annie: I like to imagine.

Ellie: ...with their friends and their peers. So I think one thing that has... There's a couple things that have been really beautiful. Sally Lloyd Jones, I love the Jesus storybook Bible-

Annie: Love her.

Ellie: ...so much.

Annie: I just saw her say it's in like 60 languages or something.

Ellie: Isn't that wild?

Annie: That is wild.

Ellie: Praise be to God.

Annie: That's it. Right.

Ellie: And she has the sort of grownup version of the Jesus Storybook Bible. Every story whispers His name is the story of God's love.

Annie: And what's the other one that you like so much?

Ellie: The *Thoughts to Make Your Heart Sing*?

Annie: Make your heart sing. I always think of you when I think of that book.

Ellie: That's what inspired me. That's the conversation that launched my kids' book-writing theme was because she said, "In the beginning, God sang the Earth into being and said the whole universe dancing for the joy of it." And she pointed me to that... Tim Keller. Anyway.

So she did not intend for this to be the way. But I think it's like 25 to 26 stories from the very beginning of the Jesus storybook back to the Christmas story. She was like, "I did not know that this would be a rhythm. I didn't design it for Advent, but it is a really wonderful thing."

So we always read through that, make ornaments for each story, and put them up on a little paper tree on our bathroom door downstairs. That has been, I think, making space to ponder the story. Christmas has been really beautiful.

There's a couple other things that traditions that we've done to kind of just bring that like sense of awe and wonder and then also bring a sense of the biggest gift that any of us have ever received is the love of God, is the Christmas story that He came into this broken world so we can know that we're not alone.

One thing that we've used, it's called the giving manger. It is really a beautiful story. It's a little manger full of straw. It has been a really beautiful way to talk about how we can share the love and the light. And every time we share, we do something kind for a neighbor, for each other, you put a little straw in the manger.

Annie: Oh sweet.

Ellie: It feels like a tangible way to make room for the story of God, the story of Jesus, of His Son coming here, and then also this beautiful truth that we get swept up into that story that's so much bigger than ourselves. So that has been really beautiful.

There's also something called the manger mission. And this sounds so funny but there's a lot to... I don't know, there's a lot of other things that we do. We go and we meet Santa. We go and see the rides at Cheekwood. We do a lot of other... The

Polar Express. There's so many other wonderful thing we could do. So we kind of incorporate... I'm definitely a "both and..." person. So we're doing all of it.

Annie: We're doing all of it.

Ellie: But it has been a really... The manger mission, you set up a little nativity and then you take the three wise men. And to kind of enter that adventure of following where God leads and of following the light being a light there. They hide the three wise men. And you could do this with anything. They have a little set in the book that goes with it but you could just do it with any Nativity. They take the three wise men and they hide them in the furthest place away in the house.

Annie: Oh wow.

Ellie: And every single night they move them a little bit closer to the manger-

Annie: Oh, sweet.

Ellie: ...and back to the Nativity. And so there is this anticipation that builds in them. They love putting them in funny places.

Annie: Oh, sure. It's an Elf on the Shelf version.

Ellie: It's an Elf on the Shelf version-

Annie: Yeah, which I love.

Ellie: ...with the Gospel which is beautiful. But now we're gonna have to hide them from Dolly because she eats everything known to man.

Annie: Oh, no. And she's big.

Ellie: She's big. So they're gonna have to take the higher road.

Annie: Yes, yes, yes. They're taking the road over Jericho. Yes, that's right.

Ellie: But they move this. And it is really sweet because on Christmas morning, that is actually one of the first things that they want to go do.

Annie: Is go bring them?

Ellie: Is go bring them to a little manger.

Annie: Why is that so sweet?

Ellie: It's really sweet. So those are just some practical way of doing that. Are you doing the Samaritan's Purse, the Operation Christmas Child?

Annie: Yeah.

Ellie: That's been also a really beautiful way I think to tie kids and to what I really want them to notice that they're part of a global story, that God is not just here in our neighborhood and among our neighbors but all over the world. And that there's different stories that He's writing everywhere and to see other kids and other places that may not have as much as they are and to be a part of bringing some Christmas joy to that feels so beautiful. So I love that you're doing that.

Annie: You know what I love is this year you can build them online, build the boxes online.

Ellie: Okay.

Annie: So you're like, "Okay, great." And also we can be sure it's stuff that kids actually need and want, you know?

Ellie: That's exactly right.

Annie: Because I'm like, "Did I just pack a pair of socks?" And they don't want socks.

Ellie: They don't want socks. I don't know.

Annie: I mean, what I hear you saying is one of the ways y'all have found to do Christmas well is to let activities lead the conversation.

Ellie: Yeah, absolutely.

Annie: Versus letting the conversation lead and then activities follow. You're like, "No, we're gonna go do and then maybe Huck will ask a question or maybe Rivers or maybe Emmylou will ask a question that will give us the conversation of how to talk about this season well."

Ellie: And I mean, isn't that... I don't know. It feels like a really embodied way to do the Christmas season. And kids are so in their bodies. I mean, I'm learning how to talk to Rivers, and to say, "Oh, it looks like your body's really upset right now or really sad or really frustrated right now. How can we calm your body down?" You know, this conversation has been such beautiful language to even some occupational

therapy right now. And I've gotten so many beautiful tools that I laugh because I'm like, "Oh, yeah, I'm learning how to talk to my son/myself."

Annie: Yeah, yeah, meaning me. Yeah, totally.

Ellie: This is what I needed to hear. This is what I needed to do, is to take a couple of deep breaths. I love what Ann Voskamp says too. She says in... I can't remember the name of her Christmas book now. Do you know the name of it?

Annie: You keep talking while I look it up.

Ellie: Okay.

Annie: A Thousand Gifts.

Ellie: A Thousand Gifts. I'm like, "I don't think that's right but it's close." It's such a wonderful book.

Annie: *The Greatest Gift?*

Ellie: The Greatest Gift.

Annie: Am I right? I'm making that up. Let me fact-check myself.

Ellie: Fact check.

Annie: The kids' one is called *Unwrapping the Greatest Gift*.

Ellie: Unwrapping the Greatest Gift.

Annie: And then there is an adult one called *The Greatest Gift*. And they are both amazing.

Ellie: They're both incredible. So in the adult one, in *The Greatest Gift*, she says, "I don't want a Christmas I can buy. I don't want a Christmas I can make. I want a Christmas I can hold. A Christmas holds me."

Annie: Wow.

Ellie: I love that. And I love how embodied that is of just like, what does it look like? I mean, we go and do a lot but also I think more during the Advent season we make room around the table, we light the little Advent candles, which that's always really fun for the kids to do.

I think we make a little bit more... we make room, we prepare room to hold this mysterious, crazy, wild story. And I will say one of my favorite things that we do and I'll never forget being nine at a friend's house invited our family over to do a chili Carol night.

Kids were playing hide and go seek, fed a bunch of people chili and then all of us gathered in this room, grandparents to tiny little babies and they had instruments in the room and they passed out little books and we started singing Christmas carols. And all of our voices were mingling together, everybody shouting out their favorite Christmas carol, "Oh, let's sing this. Let's sing this." And there was something in 9-year-old me that was marked in me that night.

Annie: Really?

Ellie: I was like, "We are made to do this. We are made to sing together." So that is probably my favorite Christmas tradition that we do is-

Annie: Y'all still do this?

Ellie: Usually on Christmas Eve we gather with some neighborhood friends, have Chili. It is a joyful noise. It is total chaos, but pass out kazoos and shakers and bells and have a little Christmas book that I have. Actually, I'm doing them on my website because I want people to do this because there's something that happens when we sing together that for me helps me remember.

And I think it helps us remember (a) that we're not alone. Chords in and of themselves are communal. So they work together to make something beautiful. But I love the idea... and this is where the book came from. It was at a Chili Carol night two years ago that we were seeing, "Repeat the sounding joy, repeat the sounding joy, repeat, repeat the sounding joy." And I'm like, "What? First of all, what does joy sound like?" Which I feel like is a great question for this podcast.

Annie: Fun question, yes.

Ellie: I wanna hear what joy sounds like to you. I'm gonna give you time to think. What does joy sound like? And then what does it mean for us to repeat the sounding joy? What does it mean for us to live in such a way that we reflect the light that shone from that star that night, that shines from the light of the world, Jesus? What does it mean for us to carry that, to be the hope people, to walk into our lives day in and day out and repeat the joy that we have because we know that there is ultimately resolve? Like one day. Even though right now...

And sometimes Christmas can be so hard because you're missing people or your life doesn't look like you thought it would this time of year again. But even in the midst of that unresolve, there is a one day coming. God has come and He's coming again, and we can know that we all are going home one day. And I think Christmas reminds us that we're made for that, we're made to go home and that one day we'll all be there together and we'll be singing.

Annie: That's right.

Ellie: We'll still be repeating the sounding joy.

Annie: I mean, I love that you did that because I think so much we sing Christmas hymns and we do not think about them.

Ellie: Oh yeah. And they're playing in the air all around us.

Annie: And we have sung "repeat the sounding joy" and never once have gone, "What's a sounding joy?"

Ellie: What is a sounding joy?

Annie: I just looked up the lyrics. I wanted to make sure I said them right. Joy to the world because I'd love this "as He rules the world with truth and grace." Right? And I'm always like, "We just sing that and never go like, "Oh, King of kings. He rules the world with truth and grace. Like He rules the world. We're good. He rules the world with truth and grace."

One of the things I love about your book, Sounding Joy, is it does exactly what you said, where it mixes "Here's what it's like today, laughter and music and s'mores and here's what the angels heard and sang, and here's what the shepherds heard." I love how it goes from like our backyard to Bethlehem in like a page turn.

Ellie: It does.

Annie: It's beautiful.

Ellie: Maybe I'll get to do that with you on a plane one day.

Annie: Oh, right. That's in my to-do. I'm gonna turn your page to Bethlehem.

Ellie: But it is. I did really want it to be "both and..." because that's God, right?

Annie: Yeah, yeah.

Ellie: He's both and... And this life is both heavy, chaotic, crazy, it feels divided, but it's also beautiful, and lovely, and full of community and points of connection and healing and hope. So I love that you said that because that is genuinely my hope was to have those.

Annie: Because you can literally go and see the shepherd's field in Israel.

Ellie: Which is crazy.

Annie: It is crazy. It was crazy. You'll love it.

Ellie: It's a real story. It happened in a real-time, in a real place. And it changed everything. It changed everything.

Annie: Are your kids in this one?

Ellie: Oh, yeah.

Annie: I don't see Emmylou.

Ellie: Oh, yeah. They're playing Hide and Go Seek. And guess what? Our dog made it in too.

Annie: No.

Ellie: She's in the forest scene.

Annie: Oh, yeah, there she is.

Ellie: I'm so grateful.

Annie: Oh, here they are The Hide and Seek page. So everybody's there. So that's Emmylou?

Ellie: Yeah, that's Emmylou.

Annie: Emmylou is sitting under a tree and then Huck is running around.

Ellie: Oh, yeah.

Annie: And then Rivers is laid down back there.

Ellie: With the fox.

Annie: With the fox. Yeah, of course. And then Dolly Parton.

Ellie: And Dolly Parton.

Annie: I'll tell you what, Laura Ramos, your illustrator, she knows what we know in MiniBFFs Book Club: kids love animals. The more animals you put in a book, the happier our MiniBFFs are.

Ellie: Oh my goodness, it's amazing. And honestly, I love the emails that go back and forth with an illustrator for a children's book. You know it.

Annie: Yes, they are hilarious.

Ellie: I'm like, "Okay, I think the animals need more winter accessories. Definitely more." I think there's not an animal unless... Except in Bethlehem that was the one distinction. I was like, "I guess the lambs in Bethlehem can't have winter accessories."

Annie: Yes, yes, yes.

Ellie: But in this current time-

Annie: You're so sweet though. I mean, the shepherds in Bethlehem have on the cutest sandals.

Ellie: I know.

Annie: Ellie, they have on the cutest sandals. Oh my gosh, I love this book so much.

Ellie: There's a lot of dust.

Annie: Oh, there's dust. There's dust.

Annie: And kiddies... Okay, okay, I gotta quit. I gotta quit. I would do this on every page. But yes, everywhere else the animals have on winter wear.

[00:48:03] <music>

Sponsor: Hey friends! Just taking a quick break from this conversation to tell you about another one of our amazing partners, stamps.com. [Stamps.com](https://www.stamps.com) is all about keeping the holiday season full of J-O-Y, joy, for us small business owners, not full of dread

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Sponsor: And I want to tell you about one last incredible partner, [ZocDoc](#). Okay, does fitting everything that you need to get done into your calendar in ways that still allow for rest and fun seem impossible this time of year? Not to mention that if you like need an appointment, trying to coordinate someone else's availability with your own adds a whole nother layer of complexity, right?

And usually, when we need to see a doctor, it's not like, "Sure, it can wait a few months" type of situation. Well, with ZocDoc. booking an appointment with a doctor that suits your needs, fits your schedule, and is in your network and in your neighborhood is actually easy.

ZocDoc is a free app that shows you doctors who are patient-reviewed, takes your insurance, and are available when you need them. They have all the specialists, and their mobile app is easy as Lilian makes it look to get lunch for our whole team.

You can search, find and book doctors with just a few taps. And you've got the benefit of reviews from verified patients, from real people who've made real appointments. And now when you walk into that doctor's office you know you can trust them.

So go to zocdoc.com, find the doctor that is right for you, and book an appointment in person or remotely that works for your schedule. Every month millions of people use ZocDoc. Including me. It's my go-to whenever I need to find and book a quality doctor. So go to zocdoc.com/thatsoundsfun and download the ZocDoc app for free, then start your search for a top-rated doctor today. Many are available within 24 hours. That's zocdoc.com/thatsoundsfun.

[00:51:06] <music>

Donovan: Yo, this is Donovan Donnell of Imagine Faith Talk the podcast. So what sounds fun to me this Christmas is my family's annual 12 Days of Christmas competition. Every Christmas Eve we get together, we pull numbers and we form teams, teams that are going to save one specific day of Christmas.

And then as we practice as teammates, we come together as a collective and we all try to make it through the entire 12 Days of Christmas without messing up but also highlighting our day to be the best day out of all 12. It is the most hilarious thing because we're trying to make other people mess up. And while trying to make the mess up, we miss our own lines and we record this whole thing, watch it over and over again afterwards. And it's the most fun and hilarious and incredibly bonding time we have every single year. That sounds fun.

Annie: And now back to finish up our conversation with Ellie.

[00:51:59] <music>

Ellie: It's been amazing. I wish that I could have filmed the first time Rivers interactive with the book, my youngest. He was just in every... I was like, this kid test. But my hope is that it really creates... It's two things. That it's sort of like, you know, a fire for families to gather around to kind of create in the busy fun hustle bustle of Christmas, like a lioness moment, a moment to really gather around the beauty and the light of the gospel.

And then two, that it would be an invitation... And there's music, of course, that we released just recently. It came out November 1st. That it would be an invitation to gather with the people that you love, kids from one to 92 and saying for the joy that we have because of the Christmas story. It's a really good reason to sing.

Annie: So the album is called *Sing Christmas Songs*. The book is called *Sounding Joy*. One of our questions that came in... You know, we asked our friends, "You know Ellie's coming. Do you have any questions for her?" And one of them was, are you ever going to record your scriptures that you sing?

Ellie: Oh, I very much hope so.

Annie: I hope so too. I love listening to them, Ellie.

Ellie: I think I get, almost every time I post something, like what are you making an album these? And I haven't had time.

Annie: You're like, "Dear everybody." If there were three of me..."

Ellie: Yes, I will. But that is a sincere hope of mine. And it is so interesting. I love that when... We referenced this in the Tim Keller thing before, but that when God made the earth... It's written in the form of an archaic Hebrew poem. It says if he sang it into being. And it's because he made every single one of us to sing the song of His goodness with our lives and with their voices.

And so it is a really beautiful thing because when I sing it helps me believe. I can be full of... Have you ever walked into church on a day where you're just like, I don't know, half of the time I'll walk into church and there's chaos? You're getting everybody all together in the car, or you're carrying this heaviness or the chaos of your week and you're like, "The last thing I wanna do is feel like singing." I'm like, everybody's praising and up and I'm like, "I don't know."

But there's something about hearing the tambor of other people's voices, even when I can't sometimes muster the courage to sing myself, that feels like an invitation to remember where we came from, to remember what we're made for. And so it's been a really beautiful thing to sit in God's word and sing it. And if it's paired with a melody, it sinks deeper in for some reason with me.

Annie: Just hear me say it doesn't have to be super profesh, it doesn't have to be a whole song. Just throw in those on the same playlist for us.

Ellie: I love it. Yeah, make a playlist. I love that.

Annie: I mean, I love listening to them.

Ellie: Thank you.

Annie: You do such a beautiful job of bringing scripture to life. And you know so much of the people's ability to memorize Scripture... The scriptures I know best are the ones I sang with GT in the halo Express when I was a kid.

Ellie: 100%.

Annie: I mean, I can run across verses and be like, "I haven't read that in 15 years but I can sing that for you."

Ellie: I know. Annie, that is literally such a beautiful reason to sing with your children. Sing with your kids because those songs you sing as little kids stick in... Rivers in his little prayer today... We sing all the time. I mean, he loves everything strong. He loves things about God being big. He's bigger than any bad guy. And in his little prayer, we sing, "My God is so big, so strong, so mighty, there's nothing my God cannot do." And in his little prayer, he's saying, God, you're so big and strong and mighty.

And these songs that we sing with our kids are the things that get written on their heart. And they get written in our hearts as adults too. But I love the idea of giving our kids songs to sing that carry truths that will carry them all the days of their lives.

Annie: Yes. Yes. That's it. You've done it. You do it. Oh, you're such a gift, Ellie.

Ellie: Thank you.

Annie: What did we not say that you wanna make sure we say?

Ellie: You have not told me what joy sounds like to you.

Annie: Oh, what does joy sound like to me? What does Joy sound like to me? I love... Well, you know, I love kids laughing. The other night, Zanna Barnes, the daughter, the middle one, suddenly found me to be very funny. It's like I met her the day she came out of my friend Annie and she has suddenly in the last month decided I'm very funny. And listening to her get on a roll, that's what joy sounds like. Like when she gets giggling and I don't have to do very much and she can't control herself, it makes me so happy.

Ellie: Oh, I love that so much.

Annie: I know. I think something shifted when I went to Disney with them. I think living 24/7 with someone for a couple of days shifted something for her. I can't quite get

my mind around it. But it's been since that. I think it just feels different to her because I was on vacation with them. I don't know. That's what joy sounds like.

Ellie: I love that. I love that. Man, I love that. And if you're listening and... I don't know, I would love for you to tell us what joy sounds like to you in the comment.

Annie: Oh, I love it.

Ellie: I think too when we ask questions like that, it helps us notice. On my voicemail right now, Emmylou... She was redoing my voicemail. And if you call me, it'd be like, "Hey, this is my mom's phone. Please leave her a message and tell her the most beautiful thing you've seen today."

Annie: Oh my gosh, Emmylou. Of course, she did.

Ellie: I love that. But what does joy sound like? And I think when you ask questions... Krista Tippett says this: when you ask generous questions, they'll be generous back with you.

Annie: Yeah. Yeah. And so there is a sense of when you ask a question you begin to notice. I don't know, notice and pay attention in a way that might not have. So pay attention to the joy that is sounding all around you, take it in for 30 to 90 seconds.

Annie: Yes, live with it.

Ellie: Live with it and let your life be a reminder that there is a generative story that God is writing, that there is a kingdom that is coming here on earth as it is in heaven.

Annie: On earth as it is in heaven. I'm ready. I'm ready. I want it. Christmas gives us taste of it, doesn't it?

Ellie: It does. It reminds us, yeah.

Annie: Ellie, as always... I can't wait to hear people answer sounding joy to us. But because the show is called That Sounds Fun, tell me also what sounds fun to you right now.

Ellie: So much sounds fun to me. I'll have a hard time answering this.

Annie: I know.

Ellie: Because I want to do everything. Drew started calling me extra.

Annie: Started? This has just started?

- Ellie:** Just started. He was like, "That's your nickname. Extra." I was like, "What?" But it really is my fault. I tried to fit in. We did the UT homecoming weekend and then-
- Annie:** I saw. Was that just the coolest thing ever?
- Ellie:** It was amazing. This is not answering your question at all.
- Annie:** No, keep going. It looked awesome.
- Ellie:** I literally was like, "I think after the football game we can fit in a quick trip to Dollywood. And then on the way back, stopped by a pumpkin patch and then do boo at the zoo and we get there." And he was like, "No, ma'am. No." We did all but Dollywood.
- Annie:** I was about to say, "Did you get to go to Dollywood?" No, you got to go at Christmas. It's beautiful.
- Ellie:** That's what I want to do. Oh, oh, well, that's my thing. That sounds fun to me to go to Dollywood at Christmas.
- Annie:** It is the best.
- Ellie:** I do want to see all the lights.
- Annie:** The lines are so much shorter. Okay, the rollercoasters are colder because you're going very fast in winter.
- Ellie:** Yeah, but then I bet they have cider and stuff to warm you right up.
- Annie:** They've got all sorts of treats. The cinnamon bread is warm all the way through middle.
- Ellie:** Listen, this is our year to do it. We have a dog named Dolly Parton.
- Annie:** Yeah, you've got to go.
- Ellie:** And we know all of the Christmas gifts that we're getting her because Dolly Parton the week after we got a dog and named her Dolly Parton, the year that we met Dolly Parton, which is just not casual, and still I can't get over it-
- Annie:** I know.

Ellie: ...but she released a line of dog things.

Annie: Like treats and outfits and...

Ellie: Outfits, chew toys.

Annie: Great. So you already know what Dolly is getting, your dog?

Ellie: I know what my Dolly is getting.

Annie: Your kids at Dollywood at Christmas it's next level. Santa is there.

Ellie: Oh, my goodness.

Annie: Santa does a really cool thing where you write a letter and you mail it while you're there.

Ellie: What?

Annie: And then when you go see him, you see your name on the letter he's writing you back.

Ellie: What?

Annie: It is adorable.

Ellie: Oh, my goodness.

Annie: It's adorable.

Ellie: So that sounds fun to me.

Annie: They've nailed it. Yeah, Dollywood always

Ellie: Let's do it.

Annie: Ellie, love you. Thanks for doing this.

Ellie: Absolutely. It's my favorite thing.

Annie: It's my favorite thing.

Ellie: Do you want to come to Dollywood with us?

Annie: Yes, actually. Technically I do. So let's go.

Ellie: I'm gonna text you when we go.

Annie: Yeah.

[01:00:54] <music>

Outro: Oh, friends, isn't she just the best? Okay, you're gonna want to get her book, *Sounding Joy*, and gift it to all the MiniBFFs in your life. And listen to *Sing Christmas Songs* wherever you love streaming music. In fact, if you've been listening to our TSF Advent playlist over on Spotify, you might just recognize some of the songs from this album because they are there.

Speaking of, it is not too late to get in on our Advent series. You can take time this weekend to catch up or you can just jump in with us. Once you buy it, it's yours. So who says you can't watch Advent devotionals in January too? All the details are at Anniefdowns.com/advent. And I really hope that you'll join us.

If you need anything else from me, you know, I'm embarrassingly easy to find. Annie F. Downs on Instagram, Twitter, Facebook. All the places you may need me, that's how you can find me. And I think that's it for me today, friends. Go out or stay home and do something that sounds fun to you and I will do the same. Today what sounds fun to me... well, I'm still loving World Cup soccer. So you know that's what sounds fun to me—watching some more soccer matches.

Y'all have a great day. We'll see you back here tomorrow as we finish out our Advent series week on peace. We'll see y'all then.