

**First Presbyterian Church Advent Series: Close to Home**  
**Luke 1:57-66, “How Does a Weary World Rejoice?**  
**We Allow Ourselves to be Amazed”**  
**by Pastor Matt Johnson, 12/17/2023**

There’s a line from O, Holy Night that is in the background  
of our Advent series this year.

The line is: “The thrill of Hope, a weary world rejoices...”

A weary world rejoices! But how? How does a weary world rejoice?

Last week we answered, “We find joy in connection.”

We reflected on the many connections between Mary, Elizabeth  
and their in-utero sons and the joy that emerged in those scenes.

This week we consider another response: We allow ourselves to be amazed.”

How often do you allow yourself to be amazed?

Wonder is all around us—but can we recognize it?

I typically think awe or amazement as a feeling that pops up  
through a surprising and spontaneous moment that sweeps us off our feet.

But I’ve come to learn that can also *allow* ourselves to be amazed.

And on the flip side we can harden ourselves with cynicism and sarcastic jokes  
that keep us from entering into awe and wonder.

We allow ourselves to be amazed when we accept God’s invitation  
to view the world around us through the eyes of faith.

When we go through life aware of the great things God has done,  
and let God’s activity frame our perspective,

we notice and take in the amazing wonders

we might otherwise ignore:

the swirl of silky white creamer in your morning coffee,

the carefully-crafted bird’s nest in your favorite tree,

the delightfully wobbly steps of a toddler

as they discover the confidence to walk,

the dappling beams of sunlight refracting through your window.

Allowing ourselves to be amazed requires us to pay attention to God—  
and then saying yes to wonder when it washes over us.

Amazement is a balm for the weary.

It awakens those who feel numb.

It renews those whose senses have been dulled.

When we make space in our lives to notice  
the innate beauty and wonder of what God is up to all around us,  
it may even turn into joy.

You might remember that Zechariah was sent to amazement school  
by the angel Gabriel. He was made to be mute and for months  
because he doubted the angel Gabriel  
who told him he and his wife would have a son  
and name him “Yahweh is Gracious”  
“Yo-hanun” or as we would call him, “John.”

During these months of communicating through sign language and chicken scratch,  
Elizabeth becomes visibly pregnant. This isn't just a little holiday paunch.

This old lady is ... *pregnant!*

How would her neighbors and relatives respond?

With dismay? With concern? With side-eye stares? With questions like,  
‘Liz, what were you and Zeke *thinking?*’

I mean ... these are real options, right? But this community showed that  
they were ready to noticing the surprise places of God's arrival in the world.

V. 58 says that when they heard the Lord had shown her great mercy,  
they shared her joy.

A weary world rejoices when can be a community that *shares the joy of others*  
instead of comparing, begrudging, or undermining them.

Our congregational vision statement includes the line,  
“We stay connected in times of celebration and in times of grief.”

We share each other's joy.

Eventually, Elizabeth does have the son, and as the Rabbi is about to name him  
after Zechariah, Elizabeth says, “No! He is to be called John.”

How she was let in on this is a mystery.

We know Gabriel visited Zechariah, we know Gabriel visited Mary,  
but we don't have any record of Gabriel visiting Elizabeth.  
Perhaps it was an umbilical conduit from her child  
who was filled with the Holy Spirit before he was born?

At any rate, when she says "He is to be called Johns," some grumbling ensues,  
because nobody in the family was called "Yahweh is Gracious."  
But in this situation, Yahweh had been gracious,  
Yahweh had shown favor.

So they consulted Zechariah. And old Zeke, to their astonishment  
and affirms that his son who is eight days old  
will be named *Yo-hanun*, John.

When he indicates this by writing on a tablet,  
his tongue is released, he can speak again,  
and he is filled with the Holy Spirit.

And what is the response?  
The neighbors were all filled with *awe*!

I don't believe that Zechariah's silence was a punishment for his disbelief.  
Rather, it was a sign that something unbelievable was happening  
that would be cause for amazement to all who allowed themselves  
to pay attention.

Zechariah's silence brought heightened attention to the naming of this child,  
and therefore, it brough heightened attention to the awe inspiring thing  
that God was doing.

Earlier this year there was an article in the New York Times by Hope Reese  
exploring the concept of feeling "awe."  
Reese looked at the work of a Dr. Dacher Keltner, a  
psychologist at UC Berkely.

According to the article,

“Our bodies respond differently when we are experiencing awe  
than when we are feeling joy, contentment or fear.

We make a different sound, show a different facial expression.

Dr. Keltner found that awe activates the vagal nerves,

clusters of neurons in the spinal cord that regulate various bodily functions,  
and slows our heart rate, relieves digestion and deepens breathing.”

Awe also quiets our negative self-talk, Dr. Keltner said,

“by deactivating ... the part of the cortex involved  
in how we perceive ourselves.”

This makes sense, because when we're amazed we are captivated

by the beauty of something that is bigger than us,  
something outside of our usual experience.

Are you stuck in a judgmental, non-amazing way of perceiving yourself  
or the world around you?

Elizabeth and Zechariah had perceived themselves as the barren couple.

They worried about what others thought about them,  
they felt the stigma of being childless.

But here they shared in a moment of amazement

with their relatives, with their neighbors, because of what the Lord had done.

Do you have space in your life where you can share in amazement with others?

Where you can pay attention together to the wonder and beauty  
of God with us?

Can you hear the voice of the Spirit singing high above and weaving through  
headlines that tell us everything is going the wrong direction?

The next thing we see in this passage is that the momentary amazement of this community was not able to be contained. It spread like wildfire.

“Throughout the hill country of Judea people were talking about all these things and everyone who heard this wondered,  
*What then is this child going to be?*  
For Yahweh’s hand was with him.”

When we are amazed, we tend to share the news,  
either seeking validation that it is shocking news or to witness  
the shock factor the news has on others.

So don’t think that being mindful and paying attention  
to the wonder of God’s grace in your life is just for you.  
When you experience the amazement,  
you will want to share it with others.

This is something my wife Sonja is deeply aware of in our relationship.  
My love language is shared experience.  
So if I taste something delicious I *need her* to taste the same thing.  
It doesn’t matter if she’s already eating something totally different,  
I’m a persistent nag, “Babe, here. Try this. You’ve got to have some of this.  
I’m serious, this is incredible.”

If I see something funny and I just have to share it,  
I’ve learned that I need to hang on to it  
until what I perceive to be an opportune moment.  
If she’s on page 397 of a 400 page Victorian novel,  
it’s not a good time.

So I’ll wait until I think she’s not too deeply engrossed in other thoughts,  
and whether she wants to see my funny video clip or not,  
she watches it because she knows that I just need  
to get it out of my system.

Take the brave step to ask God to bring something amazing into your life,  
and share your amazement with others.  
They’ll love it, too! (Most of the time.)

Speaking of sharing things we love, next week we are featuring some favorite Advent and Christmas readings that you've shared with me, and we'll have a variety of congregation members doing the readings.

Today I'll close by sharing with you a poem written by Sarah Speed.  
It's called...

### All the Way to Joy

by Sarah Speed

We could play hard and fast,  
not let anything touch us at all,  
keep composure,  
have all the answers.  
Or we could crack ourselves open  
and let everything in.  
We could feel everything,  
every touch, every marvel.  
We could stand gaping  
at the beauty of the world,  
mouths wide open (because sometimes  
a mouth wide open is the very best gratitude).  
We could laugh so loudly  
that the whole restaurant looks,  
and err on the side of goofy  
whenever possible.  
We could put our defenses down.  
We could grow soft.  
We could choose awe.  
We could take her by the arm.  
We could let her lead us all the way to joy.