

First Presbyterian Church
Luke 1:1-23, “How Does a Weary World Rejoice?”
by Pastor Matt Johnson

I don't know about you, but for a number of people I've talked with this is the first year that they have really felt the “Christmas Spirit” since the pandemic.

The Christmases of 2020 and 2021 were, frankly, brutal. And last year in 2022, we were like furtive survivors emerging from our bunkers unsure of what we would encounter.

This year people are starting to spread their wings and open their hearts to engage with the wonder and joy of the Advent season in ways that feel a bit more like our memories of the pre-pandemic times.

At least that's where I'm at this year.

So I was a little unsure about doing a series of worship services around the theme, “How does a weary world rejoice?”

Are we weary? Maybe not compared to two years ago.

I'm more ready to hear Christmas Music

than I have been in a good long time,

and I do *not* want to slow down that momentum.

Then I learned that the question comes from the carol “O, Holy Night!”

Long lay the world in sin and error pining

'Til He appears and the soul felt its worth

A thrill of hope the weary world rejoices

The theme, “How does a weary world rejoice?” doesn't imply that I am *personally* weary.

Instead, it draws attention to how we move toward the joy of God in a *world* that is weary.

How do we move toward the joy of God in a world that is weary?

When I think about the ongoing headlines of Israel and Palestine,
the ongoing war in Ukraine,
the ongoing crisis of climate change,
the ongoing concern we have for people in health crises,
then I can see the need for this question,
“How does a weary world rejoice?”

I was carried much further by a poem on the same theme written by Sarah Speed.

Wade In

By Sarah Speed

Over time
wind and water
will sand down the edges of a stone.
For humans,
our wind and water
is the grief of the world.
Stay here long enough
and pieces of you
will be pressed upon
by life’s never-ending stream.
It’s enough to make you weary.
It’s enough to make you question.
It’s enough to make you quiet.
And yet, the stream continues.
So do not be afraid to stand in that water.
Wade in. Soak the hem of your jeans.
Drip wet footprints through every room in your house.
Let the water stains tell your story.
And when your body grows weary of swimming,
name the stream.
Acknowledge your weariness.
For eventually,
you will pick flowers from
the opposite bank.
And over and over again, we’ll tell this story.

And over and over again,
a weary world will rejoice.

Our focus this Advent, then, is not on weariness itself or the things that cause it.
Instead we will focus on the persistent renewal of joy
and the thrill of hope that accompany the arrival of God's grace.
We see this surprising and joy inducing arrival of grace again and again
in the first chapter of Luke.

When the Spirit of the Living God began making arrangements for Jesus' arrival,
the world was weary.

Israel was weary of the Roman occupation which began in the year 63 BC,
they were weary of being ruled by the weak-spined vassal king Herod,
they had gone 400 years with no prophets and no new scriptures.
The people were, as Jesus himself later observed,
like sheep without a shepherd.

Zechariah and Elizabeth were two of those people.

In the opening scene of Luke's gospel
we encounter a common scenario from Hebrew storytelling.

An aging, faithful couple,
have shared a life of love together
which has also harbored a deep pain:
they were childless.

Think of Abraham and Sarah, or Isaac and Rebecka.

In those days, children were a source of great honor and a sign of God's blessing.
They were the evidence of God's goodness toward your household.

Think about how Zechariah and Elizabeth would rejoice
if they could go back in time and have a child together.
And yet, God had not blessed them in that way,
and now their bodies bore the aches and pains of many years.
They were well beyond any hope of childbirth.

In v. 8 we find Zechariah preparing
for his service as a priest in the Jerusalem Temple.

At this time, there were 24 orders of priests
that served in the temple on a rotating basis for weekly worship activities.

When a priest's order was serving, there were a variety of roles
and functions that the priests would serve in.

But there was one highly honored service that was chosen by lot,
and only priests who had never done this before were eligible to be selected.

This act of service was the offering of incense
in the Holy Place of the Temple.

This means we know two things: that Zechariah had never performed
this act of worship before in his life,
and that it was a singularly important moment
in his ministry to God and the people.

The burning of incense in the sanctuary represented the prayers of Israel
going up to God, and took place while the people
were outside in the Temple courts offering up their own prayers.

But as he's burning the incense and filling the temple with this rich,
wonderful aroma, something very unexpected happened:

An angel of the Lord appeared to him,
standing at the right side of the altar of incense.

The angel isn't described but Zechariah's reaction is:

He is terrified, gripped with fear.

This is always the response.

You never see anyone in the Bible say to an angel,
"Hey, how's it going?"

But the angel assures him with these words,

"Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard."

At this moment, Zechariah's worship with God's people,
and his personal prayers to God came together.

The angel says that Zechariah's wife, Elizabeth,
will bear a son, and they will name him John.

Think about an area of your life that you wish could be different.

Think about something you wish you could go back in time and change.

If an angel of the Lord showed up and said to you,
"This very thing you have longed for is about to happen,"
wouldn't you rejoice?!?

You might. But you might also be fearful of rejoicing ...
afraid it was too good to be true.

The angel continues in vv. 14-17 with a prediction
of this child's place in God's plans:

- Personally, he will be a delight to the family.
- Ethically, he will be set apart for unique purposes by not drinking any alcohol.
- Spiritually, he will be great in the sight of the Lord: filled with the Holy Spirit before he's even born.
- Prophetically, he will stand in the tradition of Elijah – the greatest of all prophets in the Hebrew Scriptures.
- Socially, he will turn the hearts of parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, a reference to the last verse in the Hebrew Bible, Malachi 4:5-6.

To sum this all up, the angel says he will

"make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

These are the final preparations for God's great work
of setting things right in the world.

I hope you can see that we have now moved into territory
well beyond the weariness of a husband and wife with no child.

This is a child whose life will address the weariness of the world.

This child will introduce the world to the Anointed One of God.

What good news! It's time to celebrate!

But Zechariah wasn't able to see past his weariness – at least not yet.

He wasn't able to recognize that this news should usher in the thrill of hope.

This wasn't a sin, it wasn't a betrayal of faith, it was the reality he inhabited.

He needed time to marinate in this prophecy,
time to see his wife Elizabeth move improbably
through the stages of pregnancy,
time to develop a new sense of what was possible.

The angel prescribed a time of silence for him until his son
– who was to be called John – would be born.

It was a difficult time for Zechariah,
but Elizabeth told her friends that those nine months of Zechariah's silence
were the most treasured season of her married life.

How does a weary world *rejoice*?

Whether we struggle against our own weariness
or the weariness of the world around,
what helps us break through that weight, apathy, and despair?

We must begin by being honest about where we're at.
God won't judge us for being honest. Write it down.
Speak it aloud while walking in nature, talk to someone about,
tell God how you feel stuck.

We also might need to slow down and, like Zechariah, be quiet for longer
than we are comfortable. If you are wondering how to rejoice,
do you have a practice of being still, being quiet,
and listening for God?
This is foundational.

Now you might say, "Be honest, be quiet? How are *those* things
going to help me or the world rejoice?
Being honest and being quiet don't amount to doing much at all."

If you were to say that, you would be absolutely right.

The most important thing we learn from the story of Jesus' arrival
is that the weary world doesn't find the thrill of hop
because of what people in the world do or accomplish.
Hope is possible because of what God has accomplished.

The good news is not about our faithfulness, creativity, or attitude.
The good news is that God has done something entirely beyond our capacity
by taking on flesh and making a tabernacle among us.
It is *Jesus* who stirs up the hope of life and light
where there was only darkness and despair.

Advent is a time to pay attention to the unthinkable wonder
of what God has accomplished through Jesus
who continues to fulfill God's promises in our lives today.

As we heard earlier from Sarah Speed,
And over and over again, we'll tell this story.
And over and over again, a weary world will rejoice.