

Rev. Lisa Schrott
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Luke 1:5-23

How does a weary world rejoice? We acknowledge our weariness.

This Advent Season we will be hearing the scriptures from the Gospel of Luke, interweaving Christ's birth with the parallel story of Elizabeth, Zechariah, and John the Baptist. In these scriptures we see the full scope of human emotions: isolation, fear, disbelief, as well as connection, trust, and joy. We will acknowledge that the Christmas season is often an emotionally-charged time when we feel many things deeply—as is the case for Zechariah in our scripture this morning. Hear now these words from Luke chapter 1:5-23

In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was descended from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. But they had no children because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.

Once when Zechariah was serving as priest before God during his section's turn of duty, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord to offer incense. Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified, and fear overwhelmed him. But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord." Zechariah said to the angel, "How can I know that this will happen? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years." The angel replied, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur."

Meanwhile the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering at his delay in the sanctuary. When he did come out, he was unable to speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the sanctuary. He kept motioning to them and remained unable to speak. When his time of service was ended, he returned to his home. **This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.**

It was the Advent season of 2018 and I was weary. Weary in ways I didn't even know were possible. My father, who had Parkinson's Disease, had just been placed under hospice care. He had come to stay with Brian and I for a few weeks in early November, to give my brother, with whom he lived a break. While at my house, he developed some significant gall bladder issues that could not be resolved. His health had been declining prior to this situation, having had colon cancer a few years before, diagnosed shortly after my mother died. After more than a week in the hospital, conversations with doctors and my two brothers led to placement in hospice care. My dad was too fragile to move back home, so we set up the medical bed in the living room in early December. My dad loved Christmas – every bit of the holiday from picking out the Christmas Tree to the birthday cake for Jesus he did on Christmas Eve for almost 30 years at my home church. But most especially my dad loved the tradition of setting up his train platform – Lionel trains passed down from his father that traversed the mountain and lakes he made, winding their way through the Plasticville houses when I was kid an Snow Village ceramic houses in later years. The open house he and my mom hosted each Christmas season was overflowing with work colleagues and neighbors and church friends and children galore. So that December 2018, Brian and I put up our train and village – the Lionel locomotive my dad had given me when I moved into my first apartment – and the Snow Village houses my parents had given us, one each Christmas for many years. Figuring out how to set up the trains and tree around the medical bed was a challenge, but there was no question that it needed to be there. We and the hospice nurses learned how to work around the decorations.

It was not just hard work, it was wearying work. Physically weary as we tended to my dad's needs. Emotionally weary as my role as a daughter was flipped to being a caretaker. As I balanced my work as a pastor caring for those in the congregation I served with caring for my dad and caring for myself and home. Spiritually weary as I sought to have some sense of connection to this season of preparation that had always fed my soul. As I realized that what I was preparing for was not celebratory, rather the loss of the heart and soul of my Christmas traditions. I was oh so weary in oh so many ways.

And yet there were incredible moments of joy. How does a weary world rejoice? The smile on my dad's face when we ran the train. My brothers and I putting aside all the things that families argue about for a shared meal around the table at Christmas. Bundling up my dad to see the Christmas lights in our neighborhood. The incredible care I received from members of the congregation, overflowing food and offers of help abounded.

How does a weary world rejoice? We start by acknowledging our weariness. It was hard for me to acknowledge my weariness that year, to silence the voices in my head that said I needed to be someone who could handle all of this – someone strong and dependable. To acknowledge my fear of having Christmas moving forward tainted by illness and death. And yet it was when I acknowledged my weariness and my fears, that joy found a way to break through - through the traditions, the relationships, and help from others. My dad made it through Christmas, dying the second week in January. So the Advent and Christmas season brings tender memories.

How does a weary world rejoice? We start by acknowledging our weariness. What are the voices that we hear that make us weary? Zechariah heard the voice that he and his wife Elizabeth were too old to have children. He heard this voice so loudly that it drowned out the voice of promise from the angel Gabriel. “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. ...” And Zechariah said to the angel, “How can I know that this will happen? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years.” Zechariah was weary. Scripture tell us that he was a man of great esteem. He and Elizabeth came from good stock, from priestly families. Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations. A common understanding in that era was that if you were from a good family and followed the laws of the Lord, you would be blessed with children. And yet Zechariah and Elizabeth, like their ancestors Abraham and Sarah had yet to bear children. Zechariah internalized the message, the voices from the world around him that told him that despite their devotion to God, God’s back was turned on him and Elizabeth. These voices were so strong that he couldn’t accept Gabriel’s words that Elizabeth would bear him a son to be named John. Or maybe he couldn’t bear the disappointment of yet a another cycle, another attempt, another promise.

Disappointment is a powerful emotion – an emotion that can so overwhelm us that we do what we can to avoid it. In her book *Atlas of the Heart* author Brené Brown defines disappointment as “unmet expectations,” saying, that “the more significant the expectation, the more significant the disappointment.”¹

Zechariah expected that he and Elizabeth would have children as part of the natural course of life, the life of those who came from priestly families and were devoted to God. Brown relates that “When we develop expectations, we paint a picture in our head of how things are going to be and how they are going to look... The movie in our mind is wonderful ...When the picture or movie fails to play out in real life, we feel disappointed. And sometimes that disappointment is severe and brings shame.” Brown writes about how our fear of disappointment can impede our relationships with others and our own growth. We can become afraid to share our hopes and dreams because if they don’t pan out, we are not only sad and disappointed, we also feel ashamed. To minimize our disappointment and our shame we lower our expectations as we live smaller, flatter lives. As Brown concludes, “There are too many people in the world today who decide to live disappointed rather than risk feeling disappointment. This can take the shape of numbing, foreboding joy, being cynical or critical, or just never really fully engaging.”²

The angel replied to Zechariah, “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. But now, because you did not believe

¹ Brené Brown. *Atlas of the Heart: Mapping Meaningful Connection and the Language of Human Experience*. Random House. 2021; p43.

² *ibid* p51

my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur.”

Sometimes we need to rest in the silence –silencing the voices of what society is telling us is the perfect life, the voices of our own inner critic telling us that we are not enough. These voices wear us down, make us weary, make it challenging to feel joy. These voices wear us down so that we don’t want to risk disappointment by setting our sights too high, having expectations that others would deem as unrealistic. Zechariah said to the angel, “How can I know that this will happen? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years.”

How does a weary world rejoice? While for me during the Advent of 2018 I felt the weariness more intensely and personally than other years, I think that we as a society have been in a season of weariness for awhile. You can blame it on 24 hours news cycle or the relentlessness of the electronic world we inhabit or the commercialism of the season that has us listening to music and shopping for presents since Halloween. It is too easy to be tired and jaded and cynical and just so over Christmas before it even gets here.

So this year at PCO we are going to acknowledge that we are weary. We will acknowledge that the realities of our world right now are heavy. There are reasons for us to be weary. And yet we will find rhythms for rejoicing. We will light candles of hope and peace and joy and love in our weariness. We will sing and enjoy glorious music. We will create art. We will break bread together as we share the Lord’s Supper. We will eat Christmas cookies and build our nativity each week because in the words of the creative team at *A Sanctified Art*, whose material we are using this season, “We can feel joy in addition to feeling many other things at once: grief, anticipation, anxiety, excitement, disappointment, exhaustion... And so, this Advent, we will hold space for our weariness and our joy. We will seek a “thrill of hope” in our hurting world.”³

How does a weary world rejoice? We will dare to be disappointed by living fully and dreaming big. We will light the candle of hope. We will live as people of hope, which means we will risk disappointment as we promote justice and peace; we will risk rejection as we reach out to others across all that society says should divide us. We will live as a people of hope as we joyfully encounter Immanuel, God with us, in the unexpected surprise of a mighty king born in a humble stable, attended by shepherds. May it be so.

³ *A Sanctified Art. A Weary World Rejoices. A Sermon Planning Guide for Advent–Baptism of the Lord Sunday.* Developed by Rev. Lisle Gwynn Garrity; 2023; p1-3.