

“How Does a Weary World Rejoice? We Acknowledge Our Weariness” Luke 1:5-23
 First Presbyterian Church of Salt Lake City
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Good morning, friends. We are heading into our advent season. This is a season of waiting for Christ to be born, a season of preparation to make ready our lives for the incarnation of God into our broken world. Now, we know of course, that this has already happened, thousands of years ago when Christ was born. But we retell this story to remember what it MEANS that God took on flesh, that God became human. That is what incarnation means; God becoming human. But friends, the incarnation is not something that just happened once in person of Jesus Christ, it is a reality that continues to happen as Christ’s Spirit now lives inside each of us. God has taken on flesh in us. Therefore, the incarnation happened, and the incarnation is happening. Advent is a season in our church calendar to recognize the ongoing work of incarnation.

Our theme over these weeks will center around a guiding question: “How does a weary world rejoice?” This question comes from a line in the familiar Christmas carol, “O Holy Night”, **“a thrill of hope, the weary soul rejoices.”** This powerful hymn reminds us that weariness and rejoicing, they belong together. Sometimes joy is the most powerful act of resistance we can offer to the darkness and weariness of our world. And so, this Advent, we will hold space for both our weariness and our joy. We will seek a “thrill of hope” for our hurting world. We will welcome joy—even and especially if, we are desperate for hope in our own lives. For indeed, our Savior comes, and he is Christ Jesus our Lord.

These weeks leading to Christmas are intended to create space for you to awaken your senses to the presence of God in your lives. And remember, often God shows up in the places we least expect... in the quiet, ordinary spaces. Our Cosmic King Jesus arrives in a stable, for goodness’ sake. So, never discount your normal, everyday life as the place of God’s arrival. As we travel through Luke’s account this advent, our God will be *seen* in the glow of a midnight angel, *felt* in the leap of a child in the womb, *known* in the song of a mother-to-be, and in today’s story—*heard* in the silence of a priest. Yep, you heard that right—*heard* in the *silence* of a priest. Our priest, Zechariah.

You know, most folks are tempted to leap over Zechariah, and ignore him altogether, in our hurry to get to Gabriel’s annunciation to Mary and the birth of Jesus. Usually, he’s only a character in the distant background; the elderly husband of Mary’s cousin Elizabeth while the two women get together to talk about “What to Expect When You’re Expecting.” But Luke begins with Zechariah and gives quite a bit of narrative real-estate to telling his story. I suspect there might be a reason for this.

Let’s turn to our text this morning. Hear the Word of the Lord from Luke 1:5-23 **“In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord’s commands and decrees blamelessly. But they were childless**

because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old. Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside. Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. But the angel said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord." Zechariah asked the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man, and my wife is well along in years." The angel said to him, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time." Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple. When he came out, he could not speak to them. They realized he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak. When his time of service was completed, he returned home." The Word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

If you've ever had a child, I suspect you didn't find out about the pregnancy like Zechariah did. Standing in the most sacred place of the Temple and hearing from an angel, "surprise, your wife's pregnant" is pretty wild. But, how did Zechariah's even end up in the Holy of Holies? During this time, there were many priestly clans, each rotating through the temple, to take their turn serving as priests. When Zechariah's family came to take their turn, they lit the fires, tended the sacrifices, and oversaw the prayers for all the people of Israel. But once a year, one priest would be selected to step inside the Holy of Holies to perform the incense ritual there. This was only one priest each year, and no priest could ever enter twice. This was a once-in-a-lifetime honor, and most priests were never chosen.

Now, this wasn't a popularity contest or piety award—all the priests stood around and drew lots, and Zechariah's hand happened to grab the lucky straw. He would step into the holiest, sacred room in the Temple filled with God's own presence, representing the whole of his people before God. When he emerged, the people would gather around and await a blessing, a word from God, delivered by Zechariah.

Luke goes out of his way to tell us that even though he got this honor by sheer luck, Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth were people of strong faith. They prayed, they followed the law, they were righteous, good, and faithful in every way. And yet, even though Zechariah and Elizabeth had been faithful all their lives, it seems God had not been faithful to them. They were barren, childless.

Summed up in verse 7, we are told he and Elizabeth had no children, she was barren, and they were getting on in years. As one commentary puts it, **“Translated, this means: triple whammy, dead end.”**

Like Sarah and Abraham, Hannah and Elkanah before them, their barrenness is about more than not having children. In their ancient world this held a powerful stigma and felt like they had no future. No one to carry on the family name, no one to care for them in their old age, but even more than that, no one to receive what had been handed down to them. Notice, we are told that both Zechariah and Elizabeth are heirs from a long line of the priests, going all the way back to Aaron, the brother of Moses. This gospel is trying to tell us that this is about a whole lot more than the pain of not being able to conceive. Which is precisely why Luke goes into such great lengths to tell their story, as eager as we might be to jump ahead to the main event in Bethlehem. Zechariah stands in the first chapter of Luke to remind us that God has been setting the stage for the birth of the Messiah for a very long time... something new is about to happen... and Zechariah and Elizabeth serve as an essential bridge from the Old to the New.

When Zechariah enters the Holy of Holies that day, I imagine he believed that God indeed had a word for the people he represented. Certainly, God had a blessing for everyone, a message of hope and encouragement for the masses—even if God had only silence for he and Elizabeth. Because even through they’d prayed, God had been silent. Month after month, cycle after cycle, nothing but silence. Silence in Elizabeth’s womb, silence in their home, silence from God. By the time Zechariah goes into the Holy of Holies, it is too late. Too many years had come and gone, they were too old. God had been silent for years.

But notice, the angel doesn’t come with vague promises or generic words of comfort for the masses. This wasn’t any anonymous platitude or nameless blessing. It wasn’t for everyone else. Before this would be a word from God for the whole world, the angel of God came with a very specific word to them, Zechariah and Elizabeth; a silence-shattering, new-world-opening, mind-blowing, unthinkable, impossible word. “Your prayers have been heard,” the angel said. “Elizabeth will give birth to a son, and you must name him John. This child of yours will not only bring you joy and delight, he will be the one who brings many people back to God. He will make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

Zechariah, terrified and stunned, responds to this breath-taking announcement in the most awkward, bumbling way possible. “How can I be sure? We’re too old,” he says.

You can almost hear the angel Gabriel sigh. “Because I am the angel Gabriel, and you’re standing in the Holy of Holies, and I’m telling you so.” Shaking his head, Gabriel continues, “Because you didn’t believe, you will remain silent, unable to speak until the day when these things happen.”

Now, some might see this silence as punishment for Zechariah’s disbelief, but I don’t think it’s quite that simple. I’m with scholar Barbara Brown Taylor, who calls it **“a failure of imagination, a fear of disappointment, a habit of hopelessness.”**

Zechariah had grown so accustomed to God's silence that he was unable to receive the word of God when it came. While he never stopped praying, never stopped obeying, he had long ago abandoned any sense that God was listening. Zechariah, whose very name means "God remembers" had become convinced God had forgotten.

Who could blame him? How many of us, likewise, have prayed and believed, but long ago given up hope for an answer? How many of us can no longer imagine that God hears our prayers? We pray that our family could grow, our illness be healed, our relationships mended, our job meaningful, our finances successful—but how strong is our hope in God's answer?

We pray for peace and justice and love to win, but it can feel like shouting into a void. The news of more shootings, more hatred, more violence, more abuse have given us a similar "failure of imagination, fear of disappointment, and habit of hopelessness." Imagining the promises of Isaiah about a light in the darkness, a Prince of Peace reigning with justice and righteousness might sound like impossible dreams. The best we have come to hope for is some nameless blessing, generic word of comfort, or vague platitude.

Instead, what Zechariah discovers is that God has a hope just for them. He and Elizabeth, their deepest and most intimate prayers have been heard, and God is about to fulfill their hopes and dreams, even when they themselves have given up on them. Zechariah's name and his story instead proclaim that God remembers. God's silence will not be forever, and when it arrives, God's voice will not come to us as a vague, generic, nameless message. When God speaks, it will be so stunning, so personal and convicting and convincing and life-changing and mind-blowing and new-world-opening that it might even render us speechless.

The 19th century mystic Baron Von Hügel said, **"Sometimes when we speak before great things we shrink them down to size. When we speak of great things sometimes we swallow them whole, when instead we should be swallowed by them. Before all greatness be silent, in art, in music, and above all in faith."**

When Zechariah emerged from the Holy of Holies, the greatness of God had swallowed him whole. The people stood around waiting for his message, the blessing he would give directly from God. But there were no words. Sound caught in his throat, his hands flapped helplessly. This man assigned to speak for God found himself mute when God actually spoke to him. But some look of holy awe must have been on his face, because the people could tell he had seen a vision, and they fell silent too. Because God had remembered, God had heard, and there was reason to hope.

This opening Sunday of Advent, hear the story of Zechariah and know that God remembers. Even when there is only silence, God is still there—and when God does speak again, it will be a word so surprising and life-changing, so *for you*, that it will swallow you whole and leave you speechless.

Taylor goes onto say, **“It seems entirely possible to me that Zechariah’s silence was the angel’s gift to him – an enforced sabbatical, a gestation period of his own, during which the seeds of hope were sown again in his hushed soul. He could not learn anything with his mouth open. Nothing he could say held a candle to what was happening right in front of him, and his muteness turned out to be the wilderness in which his dream was born.”**

Maybe Zechariah’s story is an invitation to fall silent, a reminder to just be quiet, because the greatness of God is all around. Maybe we’ve spent far too much time talking, and it’s now time to listen. To listen, in wonder and hope-filled imagination... to whatever it is God might be doing in our lives. I leave you with this charge from Frederick Buechner, who tells us to **“Listen to your life. See it for the fathomless mystery it is. In the boredom and pain of it, no less than in the excitement and gladness: touch, taste, smell your way to the holy and hidden heart of it, because in the last analysis all moments are key moments, and life itself is grace.”** Amen