

“How Does a Weary World Rejoice? We Allow Ourselves to be Amazed” Luke 1:57-66

First Presbyterian Church of Salt Lake City

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Good morning, friends. We began our advent series two weeks ago by asking, “How does a weary world rejoice,” and walking through the advent account found in the gospel of Luke. We started at the beginning, with Gabriel’s announcement to Zechariah that he and Elizabeth would soon have a child and that they were to name this miracle baby, John. Now, if you look through the first couple chapters of Luke, you’ll notice that the birth stories of John and Jesus are intertwined; Luke flips back and forth between these two miracle babies. So, we started with the announcement that John would be born a couple weeks ago and then last week turned to the announcement that Jesus would be born.

This morning we flip back to the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth, and to the birth of John. Now remember, the last time we were with Zechariah, he’s literally been struck mute because he just refuses to believe Gabriel’s promise that he and Elizabeth were going to have a baby at such an advanced age. See, Zechariah had long given up hope, leading to a serious failure of imagination for him. So, Zechariah questions the angel, doubting God’s promise, and Gabriel tells him... ‘Well, Zechariah, since you refuse to believe, you’re not going to be able to speak until that miracle baby arrives.’

When we reenter our text this morning, it’s been a long nine months—silent months—for Zechariah. He’s apparently been communicating via a writing tablet because that writing tablet shows up in the passage we will read today. And friends, this wasn’t a notebook or ipad. Remember, paper was not readily available at this time. Zechariah likely used a stone slab that had thick wax poured on top, so that after writing, he could resmooth the wax over and over until it eventually wore down. But it does seem clear that he’s used his ancient-wax-ipad to explain to Elizabeth what had happened to him in the temple that day, because she too knows what the angel said and the name they’ve been called to give their child.

Let’s turn to our text this morning. Hear the Word of the Lord from Luke 1:57-66 **“Now, when it was time for Elizabeth to have her baby, she gave birth to a son. Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy, and they shared her joy. On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him after his father Zechariah, but his mother spoke up and said, “No! He is to be called John.” They said to her, “There is no one among your relatives who has that name.” Then they made signs to his father, to find out what he would like to name the child. He asked for a writing tablet, and to everyone’s astonishment he wrote, “His name is John.” Immediately his mouth was opened, and his tongue set free, and he began to speak, praising God. All the neighbors were filled with awe, and throughout the hill country of Judea people were talking about all these things. Everyone who heard this wondered about it, asking,**

“What then is this child going to be?” For the Lord’s hand was with him.” The Word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

What a wild thing to witness. No wonder we’re told that everyone around—all their relatives, neighbors, everyone in town even—were amazed. I mean, to begin with, Luke seems to suggest that this pregnancy has been pretty ‘hush hush.’ Like Joe said last week, we’re told that Elizabeth stayed in isolation. Mary comes to visit her near the end of the pregnancy and likely stays with her until John is born, but by the way Luke describes it, it’s not like their neighbors, friends, or relatives really know what’s going on until *after* John is born. I mean, Zechariah’s clearly not been out chatting people up about it. But John is born, to a post-menopausal woman that scholars guess is probably in her 60’s or 70’s. And once everyone does *hear* that Elizabeth has had a baby, then they come to rejoice with them and celebrate all God has done. This is clearly a miracle.

We’re told that on the eighth day—as was the custom—they all come to circumcise the child. Now, circumcisions were a big deal in this time, much like infant baptisms or christenings today. This wasn’t just a medical procedure taken care of at the hospital, but a big family affair, a religious and cultural celebration. The whole family would gather. Neighbors and friends would be there, too... all gathered together for John’s circumcision.

Now notice, Zechariah still can’t speak. And the angel had told him, “You’ll be silent and not able to speak until the day that all these things happen.” (Luke 1:20) But why can’t he speak yet? Haven’t all these things happened? Well, actually all these things haven’t happened yet. Because Gabriel had also told him, “Your wife will bear a son, and you are to give him the name John.” (Luke 1:13) The baby is born, but he hasn’t yet been named.

Elizabeth tries to tell everyone gathered that he did indeed have a name: John. But in these days, children were almost always named after a relative, often the family patriarch like the father or grandfather. So, when Elizabeth says, “his name is John,” the neighbors and relatives are confused, since no one on either side of their families has that name. So, Zechariah grabs his writing tablet, and to everyone’s astonishment he writes, ‘His name is John.’

And then, to add to all the wonder already surrounding the birth of this child, all of a sudden, after nine months of silence, Zechariah can speak again! He bursts into joyful song actually; we’ll dig into his song (and Mary’s) more next week.

Luke closes this section by describing everyone’s reaction to all this. Once again, there is more awe and amazement. **“The neighbors were all filled with awe, and throughout the hill country of Judea people were talking about all these things. Everyone who heard this wondered about it, asking, ‘What then is this child going to be?’”**

Filled with awe and amazed. When was the last time you felt awe? How often do you allow yourself to be amazed?

You know, awe can mean many things. It can be found staring at the star-filled sky on a dark night. Or seeing your child take her first steps. Or hearing Mozart performed live. Awe can come over you in prayer or in worship. It can be experienced standing at the top of Angels Landing or on the floor of the Grand Canyon. We might experience awe when someone forgives us when we fail or maybe in our first experience of romantic love. It can happen when we see someone give up their seat on a crowded bus or if we're ever lucky enough to watch a baby be born.

But, while many of us know it when we feel it, awe can be tough to define. Dr. Dacher Keltner, a psychologist at the University of Cal Berkeley, describes awe as **“the feeling of being in the presence of something vast that transcends your understanding of the world.”** Experiencing awe comes from what Dr. Keltner calls a “perceived vastness,” when we suddenly recognize how SMALL we are... and simultaneously how CONNECTED we are in the scope of this massive universe.

When this happens to us, it helps to quiet our inner critic. Author Sharon Salzberg writes that **“awe is the absence of self-preoccupation.”** When we experience awe and recognize the vastness of the universe, our tendency to focus on our self disappears. We literally are too captivated by something else to worry and fret about ourselves. Awe gets us out of heads, out of our own way.

Which all the experts argue is critical to our well-being — just like joy, or contentment or love. The research shows that awe activates our vagal nerves, helps to regulate various bodily functions, and calms down our nervous system. Awe slows our heart rate, relieves digestion, and deepens breathing. Awe triggers the release of oxytocin, the hormone that promotes trust and bonding between us. Awe has been shown to reduce feelings of anxiety and depression. Now, I'm sure none of this data surprises you... because we all know what it *feels* like to experience awe, to allow ourselves to feel amazed. Often it takes our breath away or drops our jaw. It might send a shiver up our spine or give us goosebumps on our arms. But we all know, from our own experience (and now from the research), awe settles us down, it roots us in reality, it allows us to see in new ways.

I think most of us probably associate awe with dramatic, life-changing events... surely Zechariah and Elizabeth's story is one of those dramatic, life-changing moments. But the truth is that awe can be part of our everyday, ordinary lives... IF we are paying attention, IF we are curious, IF we nurture our imagination. But friends, if we're moving too quickly or distracted all the time, we'll easily miss our experiences of awe, our everyday opportunities to be amazed.

When's the last time you properly marveled at the reflections of light found in a bubble of dish-soap while you washed the pots and pans, or how the smell of bread baking in the oven can transport you to a different moment in time, or how the specks of dust danced in the light of your bedroom window? Or noticed the miracle of a cut on your finger knitting itself back together? When is the last time you were caught up by the sound of a someone's laugh, or you slowed down enough to bear witness to a coworkers' act of courage, or noticed your eyes filled with tears because of the lyrics to a song? Opportunities for amazement are everywhere, if we allow ourselves to be amazed.

Children do this so well. One writer, Cole Arthur Riley, even goes so far as to say, *“Children are made of awe.”* They see awe everywhere because they are content to be in the present; they are paying attention in a way most of us grown-ups are not. Riley argues that as most of us grow up, we leave awe behind in favor of the serious business of maturity. Some “mature” folks almost refuse to be in awe after a while; focused only on what is wrong in the world, and seemingly incapable of rejoicing in what is still good and true and beautiful. But this feigned superiority—that foolishly assumes words “childish” and “juvenile” are derogatory terms—it comes at our own peril. We don’t just lose our moments of awe, we reduce our capacity to see and to love. We lose our understanding and wisdom. We miss God all around us.

The late Rabbi Abraham J. Heschel wrote, **“Forfeit your sense of awe, let your conceit diminish your ability to revere, and the universe becomes a marketplace for you. The loss of awe is the avoidance of insight. A return to reverence is the first prerequisite for a revival of wisdom, for the discovery of the world as an allusion to God.”**

So how do we return to reverence, as Heschel says? I mean for those of us who can admit that we’re far too focused on the serious business of maturity, can we get our awe back? Can we get to the place where we rediscover the truth that actually, “Joy is the serious business of heaven” as C.S. Lewis so aptly writes? The good news is yes... but it does require your intention and effort, you have to allow yourself to be amazed. Riley reminds us, **“awe is an exercise, both a doing and a being. It is a spiritual muscle of our humanity that we can only keep from atrophying if we exercise it habitually.”**

I think this might help. It’s an illustration I recently shared on our last women’s retreat. How many of you have been here? (**SHOW Picture of Observation Point, Zion**). This is Observation Point in Zion National Park. I’ve hiked here a few times and as you can see, it is an obvious place to experience awe. I wept the first time I stood there, blown away by its beauty and grandeur. But here’s the deal... I had to do some things to be able to stand there in awe. I had to make a conscious decision to go. I had to create time and space in my life to be there. Even more, I had to hike several miles in order to stand there. It required my energy, my effort, and my intention to experience awe.

But even still, all my efforts did not create this incredible mountain range; it is entirely a gift from God. Observation Point exists in all its breathtaking beauty, no matter if I’m aware of it and experience it, or not. It stands there right now, just as stunning as it always has been; a gift. And so, the question becomes, will we hike, will we go, will we place ourselves in a position to be able to recognize the gift and to experience the awe. Because here’s the thing... life is filled with uncounted “observation points” ... they are everywhere all the time. The big, majestic moments and the perfectly ordinary ones... all with the potential to drop your jaw and remind you what is real. But it does require we slow down, we pay attention, and live with purpose.

Friends, I want you to understand that allowing yourself to experience awe, it is not optional. You cannot live without awe, at least not live well. Even more, you’ll struggle to encounter God if you

are unwilling to embrace mystery and awe. How does a weary world rejoice? We allow ourselves to be amazed. Einstein wisely said, **“There are only two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is.”** That is the truth friends. This life is indeed a miracle. And this Christmas story we retell year after year, of miracle babies being born, of God coming in the flesh to redeem all of humanity, of angels and shepherds and magi... you will not be able to really hear it, much less understand it, if you are too serious and grown-up to embrace awe.

But if you will intentionally step into the mystery, though it feel foolish or childish... if you will slow down and be present to the goodness and beauty and miracle of this life, then this story of God will be your salvation. This is what Paul means when he writes that **“the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength (I Cor 1:25). The message of Christ is foolishness to those who refuse to see it, but for those who are being saved, it is the power of God.” (1 Cor 1:18)**

Friends, the invitation for us today is to allow ourselves to be amazed. To allow awe to swallow us whole and to embrace this story of salvation. And, not simply in nostalgia or even gratitude for how God has intervened in the past. No, we are invited to be presently in awe, drawing strength from this salvation history to help us remember again that God is STILL intervening, God is STILL arriving in unexpected places and to unexpected people. People like you and me, who just like Zechariah, might be experiencing our own failure of imagination. But friends, our God is alive and at work in this world and in you. Beauty and goodness and truth and love are all around, if you will but only have the eyes to see. Do not miss it this year friends. Slow down. Be present. Watch for God to arrive.

In her poem, “When Death Comes,” Mary Oliver writes;

**When it’s over, I want to say, all my life
I was a bride married to amazement.
I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.**

May it be so for you and for me friends. Amen.