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First Presbyterian Church, SLC

How Does a Weary World Rejoice? We Find Joy in Connection

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Friends of Christ,

We find ourselves in the second week of advent together, continuing our series discussing, “how does a weary world rejoice.” This is taken from the majestic Christmas Carol O Holy Night, it goes like this, **“O holy night, the stars are brightly shining, it is the night of our dear saviors birth. Long lay the world in sin and error pining, till he appeared and the soul felt its worth. A thrill of hope, the weary world rejoices, for yonder breaks a new and glorious morn.”**

The question that we as a church are asking this advent season is, “how does a weary world rejoice?” What incites a thrill of hope in a world that is truly worn down by sin and death.

Last week we talked about Zechariah and the strange circumstances that surround John the Baptist’s baby announcement. Zechariah is a priest in the temple and is chosen to go into the Holy of Holies. Inside he is visited by Gabriel, the messenger of the Lord. He is told, in a way that recalls Abraham and Sarah, that he and his wife, who are both advanced in years will have a son. This is an answer to prayers and yet Zechariah is skeptical. He asks for a sign and the angel Gabriel strikes him mute. Jamie read this beautiful quote from Barbara Brown Taylor, that I will repeat here because Barbara Brown deserves a shoutout in every sermon, she says this,

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.”

Jamie pointed us to the hushed anticipation that comes with advent. The theme for last week, phrased in the form of a question and answer was, “how does a weary world rejoice? We acknowledge our weariness.” Elizabeth and Zechariah have obviously acknowledged their weariness in prayer. As Gabriel announces, “do not be afraid, your prayer has been heard.”

However, before we talk about how last week's theme moves us towards this week's theme we have some more weariness to discuss. I want to name the fact that advent, with all of its stories about pregnancy and fertility struggles, can be quite difficult for many. We cannot change the fact that stories of pregnancy are interwoven into the Christmas story, but we can acknowledge our weariness in this way. If you are someone who is struggling or has struggled with this, know that there are so many around you who care deeply about you and want to walk with you. Know too, that you are created whole and beloved, and you do not gain those qualities by becoming married, having children, or any other “thing” out there. I also want to invite you to do what you need to do to take care of yourself in this season.

Acknowledging our weariness takes courage. The beauty of this though is that it stitches us together. Acknowledging our weariness is not where the story of Advent ends, and so we look to today's theme.

How does a weary world rejoice? We find joy in connection.

In order for us to rejoice, we must acknowledge our weariness, we must come out of our seclusion—self-imposed or externally enforced—and find joy in connection.

With that, friends, let us hear these words from the book that we love,

²³ When his time of service was completed, Zechariah returned home. ²⁴ After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion. ²⁵ “The Lord has done this for me,” she

said. "In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people."

²⁶ In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, ²⁷ to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸ The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

²⁹ Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. ³⁰ But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. ³¹ You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. ³² He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, ³³ and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."

³⁴ "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"

³⁵ The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come over you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. ³⁶ Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. ³⁷ For no word from God will ever fail."

³⁸ "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled." Then the angel left her.

³⁹ At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, ⁴⁰ where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹ When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. ⁴² In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! ⁴³ But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? ⁴⁴ As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵ Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!"

This is the word of the Lord,
Thanks be to God

Friends, our passage this morning moves from multiple stories of seclusion into a beautiful scene of Elizabeth and Mary finding much needed joy in connection and community. Our passage begins with Elizabeth becoming pregnant and then entering into a five month period of seclusion. We aren't exactly sure why she goes into this extended seclusion. It is possible that because of her age that this pregnancy was proving to be really difficult. Or, maybe because of her difficult relationship with pregnancy in the past, she isn't so quick to come out into the public eye. Maybe she isn't ready for that level of scrutiny. It seems clear from her own words that she believes that God has done something miraculous, but it also seems clear that any joy associated with that miracle hasn't set in. Stress, fear, anxiety, shame are all co-mingled with her conviction that nonetheless she is blessed. But she has not yet been given permission, by herself or by others, to actually feel that joy yet. And on top of all of that, her husband can't speak.

So no matter the reason for her seclusion, what we are seeing at the beginning of this gospel is a lot of people in seclusion. Zechariah is in a type of seclusion, unable to communicate with his wife. Elizabeth is in seclusion even while her decades long prayers have been finally answered. Think of it, for whatever reason, she didn't feel like she could go to her friends, her religious community, her family, and celebrate this miracle. Something is terribly wrong here.

But a little further into our passage today we find Mary in a state of some seclusion too.

Joel Green a fantastic commentator on the book of Luke illuminates for us the foreignness of the ancient world and its often patriarchal strictures. Before marriage, women were not generally in the public eye. So Mary, a young woman betrothed to Joseph, has probably spent most of her life confined to her

household. Again, pointing this out is not to celebrate that custom, but to draw our attention to the setting of our scene.

In fact, as a quick aside to appreciate the remarkably surprising way this gospel begins, let me say that the gospel of Luke is painting this amazing portrait of women especially being the paragons of faith and courage in the gospel, in spite of how society would hold them back. Let me tell you that in ancient literature this isn't how stories begin. Along with the poor and marginalized, women are the ones most directly participating in this new, upside-down Kingdom in the Gospel of Luke. It starts here with Elizabeth and Mary being the heroines of faith, whereas Zechariah, the big bad priest is sidelined and Joseph is a marginal footnote. It continues through the ministry of Jesus where women are the monetary supporters of Jesus' ministry and are often the ones who don't mince any words with him, but demand to be heard and for their conditions to be changed. The pharisees didn't mince words either, but they did so out of disbelief, whereas the women in these stories know exactly who Jesus is and therefore know exactly what tree to bark up. They are the only ones standing beside Jesus as he is crucified, and they are the first to proclaim the resurrection.

So back to our story here. Everyone is in a period of serious seclusion. On every level we see weariness. And here, this intrepid young woman, Mary, sets out on a minimum, four day journey from Nazareth to Ein Kerem, a village to the east of Jerusalem. I want to show you a map of this



So as you can see, Nazareth is tucked up in the mountain regions in the north of Israel near the sea of Galilee. Mary would have most likely taken this route, avoiding Samaria even though it is the far easier path, and heading to Jericho. Now, Jericho sits 800 feet below sea level and the road to Jerusalem is 17 miles long with a 3,300 foot climb. Altogether, this journey is around 80 miles and would have been difficult for anyone, let alone a young pregnant woman.

However, she does this in an extravagant gesture of care for her relative to provide assistance in the last trimester of Elizabeth's pregnancy. The story sets the scene by drawing our attention to their shared seclusion. The text doesn't mention Mary speaking to anyone. We don't hear about her going and warning Joseph that she is pregnant and that she is going to take a three month journey to the outskirts of Jerusalem, It doesn't mention her speaking to her parents, it doesn't even mention a journey companion. The text is highlighting Mary's seclusion, at this stage it is clear, she is going it alone. We have already seen that the text is highlighting Elizabeth's seclusion, five months in a silent house, no verbal celebration or joy for Elizabeth.

Until, the moment Mary walks through the door, unannounced by the way, they didn't have cell phones and Mary only knows Elizabeth is pregnant through an angel of the Lord. Mary walks through the door and greets her relative, and the baby leaps for joy in Elizabeth's womb. And Mary pulling herself out of her own seclusion then lifts Elizabeth out of hers and the two mothers have this moment of pure joy in connecting over their shared experience of weariness mingled with joy. fear mixed up with hope. Uncertainty about the future right alongside faithful trust that God has blessed them. And it is all there all at the same time, redeemed and completed in their connection to each other.

How does a weary world rejoice? It acknowledges its weariness, is drawn out of seclusion, and finds joy in connection.

Until this point in our story, we have all of these miracles, but they are all received in isolation. Zechariah is alone when he hears the news, Elizabeth discovers she is pregnant without any verbal warning from her husband, and Mary is also alone when she hears the news. There is a tentative nature to the miracles and “good news” here. But there is nothing tentative about the meeting of these two women. The babies start jumping around and there is loud exclamations, and such joy and relief that finally there is someone to connect with. This Advent is a fantastic time to acknowledge our weariness and it is also a fantastic time to gather. Gather around tables with friends, family, or whoever is nearby. We need each other. Especially in seasons like this, where joy and weariness are co-mingled we need each other. The Christmas season will not be constant happy happy times. That is neither promised nor a guaranteed. But I do know that connecting with others is the best place for both joy and weariness.

Before we move to the table of communion, which is our opportunity to find joy in connecting with one another. I want to point something out here. In the story we have three distinct experiences of seclusion.

- 1. Mary pulls herself out of seclusion and reaches out to others experiencing seclusion. She brings joy and experiences joy.**
- 2. Elizabeth is pulled out of her seclusion. She receives joy and returns it back to Mary.**
- 3. Zechariah is still in a sort of seclusion until the birth of his son John.**

Preaching sermons can be difficult, because I only get to preach one sermon, but there are 150 sets of ears out there, connected to 150 unique and distinct lives. Each one of you has a different story and has a different relationship to joy and

community. Our gospel story today does a good job though of holding space for multiple stories.

Sometimes we will be like Mary, the person who goes to extravagant lengths to connect with someone, and its good for us and good for the person we are reaching out to. Sometimes, we will be more like Elizabeth, unable to complete such a harrowing journey, and we need someone to reach out to us. And finally, sometimes neither happen, and that is its own legitimate part of this story. But, even Zechariah's story is not without hope. I think there is a strong likelihood that, even while he is still in his silence, that he is able to in some way experience the joy of others. It is a bittersweet joy, let me tell you. I've been on that side before. When other people are living the life we so desperately want. When there is a joyful conversation happening right there that we for whatever reason can't join in on.

Of course this can be remarkably lonely, but there is also hope in it. There are times when we have to rely on the joy of others, trusting that every journey through the desert eventually does end. Every period of exile eventually is concluded with a return.

So as we come to the table this morning, we represent the whole range of human emotions and experiences. We join together because we cannot carry that on our own. How does a weary church rejoice? We acknowledge our weariness and find joy in connection, let us begin that journey here at the table with one another.

