

We Acknowledge Our Weariness

Luke 1:5-23

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December 1, 2024

Back in 1847, the parish priest in a small town in France was looking for a way to celebrate repairs to his church's stained-glass windows. After giving it some prayerful thought, he decided that a poem might be appropriate and so he approached a member of his congregation - a local wine commissioner and part-time poet, Placide Cappeau. Cappeau got to work and came up with "Minuit, Chrétiens", a poem about the birth of Christ that was read that year at the church's Christmas Eve service. Cappeau's poem was well-received and soon he asked his friend, Adolphe Adams, to set the words to music, and one of the most well-loved of Christmas songs was born, "O Holy Night".

The song's popularity spread quickly through France, and it was sung not only in churches but also in the streets, at social gatherings, and even in bars. However, it was soon criticized by the Catholic Church for its "militant tone and dubious theology". In 1864, the Journal of Sacred Music in France wrote that the song needed to "go its own way, far from houses of religion, which can do very well without it." But, as we all know, there is no stopping a good song from spreading. Soon, the song was beloved all over Europe, Canada, and the United States. Translated into English by American John Sullivan Dwight, it soon became an anthem of the abolitionist movement because of its third verse, "Truly He taught us to love one another; His law is love, and His gospel is peace. Chains shall He break, for the slave is our brother, and in His name all oppression shall cease!"

There are other stories about "O Holy Night" that seem to be more or less true. There is a legend that French soldiers sang it on Christmas Eve of 1870 during the trench fighting of the Franco-Prussian war and fighting temporarily ceased. It also is reportedly the first song to be aired over a radio broadcast in 1906.

Of course, there are many reasons people love it - the soaring melody that reaches heights most of us can only dream of singing, the intensity that builds as the song goes along, and, of course, the powerful language of hope in the midst of emotional dissonance.

We often talk about cognitive dissonance - the feeling of discomfort when you hold two contradictory ideas or beliefs at the same time - but we rarely hear the phrase emotional dissonance - the feeling of discomfort, or perhaps disbelief, when you hold two contradictory feelings at the same time. Nonetheless, it's right there in the song - "A thrill of hope, the weary world rejoices, For yonder breaks a new and glorious morn!" How can you be both weary and filled with joy?

This is our Advent theme this year - how does a weary world rejoice? To rejoice is to feel great joy or delight. Can we rejoice when we also feel weary? That depends on what we understand joy to be. So, for these next few weeks, we'll be talking about what joy is, where we find it, and how we can cultivate it as we look at the interwoven birth stories of Jesus and John the Baptist.

It's tempting to say that this theme seems especially appropriate this year given the upheaval our country is in. Yet, I don't think a holiday season goes by without some people feeling weary, tired, or sad. My grandfather died on Christmas morning in 1973, and I know my mom still thinks of him every year. I have a friend who lost a baby just before Christmas and still grieves the child she doesn't have. A lot of people struggle with depression at this time of year. And always there are folks who are facing their first Christmas alone after the death of a dear one. There have been Christmases when parents have spent the holiday worrying about their child who was fighting a war in a foreign country. There have been Christmases when nearly the whole country faced financial crises or food rations. And this year, we are living through this season of great uncertainty about our country's future - and our own. There are - and there have been - many reasons to be weary in Advent.

One of the biggest challenges of weariness is truly believing that despite evidence to the contrary, there is joy to be found. That is certainly the case with Zechariah in our scripture passage for today. This is the angel coming to tell Zechariah that he and his wife, Elizabeth, who are well beyond childbearing years, are going to have a son.

Scholars estimate that Zechariah and Elizabeth are somewhere between 60 and 70 years old when this story takes place. We can pretty well imagine some of their backstory. Zechariah was a priest and would have seriously considered that their infertility was some kind of punishment from God. In a society in which a woman's worth is measured by the number of children she birthed, Elizabeth would have had to live with both the pressure to be pregnant and the shame of never being so. We can imagine their disappointment when year after year passed, and no baby was born. What were the hopes and dreams they had for their children, for their family? What vision of the future was lost as they slowly accepted it wasn't to be. I want to acknowledge that there are couples still today who are going through this grief and disappointment. We can add them to all those who may feel weary this holiday season.

With this backstory, we can understand why Zechariah's response is "How can I know that this will happen? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years." Here is the news that he has waited for decades, and he doesn't believe it. He is filled with doubt, and, after all this time, he wants to be certain. Though the angel has told him all of the wonderful things his son will do, he still wants proof that there can still be joy for him.

"Sometimes weariness can harden us and prevent us from living fully" writes Rev. Lisle Garrity. Perhaps you have experienced this. You find yourself getting cynical. You view everything through a negative lens. You immediately jump to suspicious conclusions about other people and their behaviors. You doubt there is good - good in other people, good in society. You play out worse case scenarios in your mind and then become convinced they will be true.

We can imagine Zechariah's inner monologue. "I don't even want to hear what this angel is saying. It's been too long. We are too old. I'm tired of disappointment. There is just no way we could have a baby now. Why is this angel doing this to me? After all, even if Elizabeth does get pregnant, she'll probably have a miscarriage".

These are symptoms of weariness that mask the possibility of joy. They come from assuming that joy can't coexist with difficult feelings like grief, disappointment, or hurt. Yet, if we understand what joy is, we know that isn't true. Joy isn't the same as happiness. Happiness is

fleeting, tied to a particular moment or event that soon passes. Joy is deeper, more firmly grounded in the truths we know about life, truths that comfort us, inspire us, and give us hope.

Joy is knowing that if you are willing to, you can find something so awe-inspiringly beautiful it takes your breath away right outside your window or in the music you listen to or in the eyes of your children or grandchildren.

Joy is the assurance that the cycle of life - life, death, and new birth - is a natural and necessary rhythm in all of creation which we have the blessing of participating in, too.

Joy is knowing when you watch the sun set that it will rise again in the morning.

Joy is remembering that you are a child of God, beautifully made in God's image and worthy of God's love and grace no matter what.

Joy is trusting that it is here in this place right now and always working for the good in us and in the world.

Joy is watching an old woman's smile, the twinkle in her eye, as she watches a child run into their parent's arms.

And joy is the reason we have hope - even when we are weary, even when things fall apart, or our hearts are broken, or we are anxious and afraid. Because joy bubbles up when we see the goodness of God at work and the goodness of God at work gives us hope. It's who we are as resurrection people. We know it is true.

It's always been interesting to me that the punishment the angel gives to Zechariah is to silence him until the baby is born. I wonder why. Maybe it is because the angel knows that until he reclaims joy, his negativity and doubt will only spread to bring down other people. But I think it's more likely that the angel understands Zechariah needs the silence in order to reclaim his joy. He needs the time and space to look inward, to recognize his weariness and to name its impact on him, to soften his heart so it is ready to embrace the joy and hope that is all around him and deep within him.

I think that's how we weary people start this journey of rejoicing. We don't have to resolve our weariness in order to feel joy. The two can live in our hearts side by side. Yet, we do have to be honest with ourselves about them - to name the weariness, to be open to joy. And to anticipate that wherever joy is, the thrill of hope is born.

May it be so. Amen.