

A Weary World Rejoices Pt. 3

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[0 : 00] If you would, please join me in prayer. God of new life, who comes to us in seasons of darkness and despair, who comes to us in the nighttime experiences of our lives and speaks, God, we lean today into your advent, into your hope and your peace and your joy, trusting your nearness and your goodness.

May we hear your voice somehow today in some way, and may we carry your light into this world. In Jesus' name, amen.

I can't locate myself. Lately, I wake in the night, and a few panicked moments pass in which I can't locate myself.

I could tell you my name, certainly, but not which version of you I'm dealing with. Lately, I can't read a whole page of a book.

It is frictionless, this sliding of attention. I thought it would resolve once the lockdowns ended, but it did not.

[1 : 40] It's as if some kind of lubrication has been applied to my choices. I intend to do one thing, but my unconscious shunts me discreetly away.

It has other plans for me. I am supposed to be looking over my shoulder, alert to the next threat. Those are the words of Catherine May in the opening chapter of her book, *Enchantment, Awakening Wonder in an Anxious Age*.

May is an internationally known writer. She's known for this book in particular called *Wintering* that she wrote. She's based in the UK. And I especially love that her podcast is called *How We Live Now, Pathways for a Post-Everything World*.

Because isn't that how it sometimes feels? That the world around us is post-everything.

[2 : 51] That even if we are people of firm faith, the tides of cynicism are strong, and we often feel the tiredness in our arms as we try to swim against the currents.

Cynicism is born of weariness. And nearly every single day, it seems to me that that weariness is deeply justified. But then May continues with this.

The last decade has filled so many of us with a growing sense of unreality. We seem trapped in a grind of constant change. The rolling news cycles, the chatter on social media, the way that our families have split along partisan lines.

It feels as if we've undergone a having. If there were a spirit of this age, it would look a lot like fear. Now, as I've read May over these last few weeks, I've found myself wondering, what is my own lately?

[4 : 01] What's been happening in me lately? What has this decade done to me? What has it done to this city? What has it done to us as a church and all of us in this room?

And then now, as we approach another Christmas, it feels like that sense of weariness, that sense of wanting to run but having nowhere to go has reached a particular point of precision.

Because this year, we are so easily able to connect with the weariness that undergirds the weariness of the Christmas story. The weariness of our siblings in Palestine and Israel.

This year, it's easy to connect to the despair and the oppression of Elizabeth and Zechariah and Mary and Joseph and Simeon and Anna, who live with the facts of massacre and domination and violence occurring among them every single day in the land where Jesus was born.

This past week, I was struck by an image. I don't know, you might have seen this image. It has a number of names.

[5 : 18] The image is a photograph of a nativity scene created by Bethlehem's Evangelical Lutheran Christmas Church, which the Reverend Munther Isaac pastors.

In it, the baby Jesus is wrapped up in this traditional Palestinian headdress and is lying among rubble. And the idea is that if Christ were born today, he would be born amidst the rubble and ruins of an intractable conflict.

And we have to name that. We have to talk about that. We have to talk about this almost irony now that this Jewish baby boy was born in this land.

So lately, I understand the temptation to be post-everything and the weariness of the world. I get it. And those of us who call ourselves Christians so starkly live between the weariness of the world and what J.R.R. Tolkien says.

We live between the weariness of the world and the joy that is beyond the walls of the world, which is more poignant than grief.

[6 : 40] We try to stand in that and live in that. Now, as actually Pastor Anthony alluded to, some of you might know that our family has this tradition of dressing up for Halloween.

And this year, we chose the theme of Encanto. I know it was very confusing to many of you. You didn't have... Someone asked if... You know, I think James Brown was my favorite thing that somebody asked if I was.

So we always do this thing. We dress up. We were the family Madrigal this year. It was really fun. And as we were preparing to attend the 10-year anniversary of this church, the party that we threw, the costume party, and to go trick-or-treating, I started to see on social media these posts of people saying, essentially, like, how dare you celebrate Halloween in light of current events, in light of what has happened in Israel and Palestine, that how can you dare celebrate anything?

And I remember feeling pretty disconnected from that idea, and pretty, like, shocked by it, a little bit baffled by it.

This idea that you should stop experiencing joy, and that somebody else should be able to tell you to stop experiencing joy. See, the people that I come from, African-American people, have had to celebrate any and everything, not simply in spite of pain and trauma, but in some ways because of it, because there is no other way to survive when you're faced with dehumanizing exploitation and violence.

[8 : 24] You have to make fun and joy out of thin air. You have to conjure it and create it. Author and social justice activist, Austin Channing Brown, makes this point when she reflects on a song that was popularized by Shirley Caesar called, This Joy I Have.

This joy I have. The world didn't give it to me. This joy I have. The world didn't give it to me. This joy I have. The world did not give it to me.

The world didn't give it. And the world can't take it away. Brown goes on to reflect that traditionally the black community has relied on a spirituality born of hardship to declare the sentiments of Shirley Caesar's song, this spirituality which is at its essence what Brown calls a shared rooted resilience in joy.

Contained in this one sentence, Brown says, is a staunch declaration that if the world will take from me, it will take from me only once, not twice.

It cannot have both tragedy and my joy. And I'm here and talking a lot about the experience of African American people because I am in touch with the joy and energy of blackness.

[9 : 55] But I know that this is true for many, many colonized peoples around the world. And even closer, I know that many of you in this room have experienced having to find, having to claim and conjure joy in the midst of grief and trauma in order to survive.

So today what I want to do is expand on the conversation we've been having a bit over the last few weeks of Advent. We've been asking this question of how does a weary world rejoice?

So I want to talk about that. But I also want to add to that, why does a weary world rejoice? And to do that, we're going to turn to this story that we often read on this Sunday of Advent.

We're going to talk some about communal joy. So I think it'll be on the screen, but if you want to read along with me, we are going to Luke 1, 39 through 66.

And it reads, Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.

[11 : 29] And why has this happened to me that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.

And Mary said, My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior. For he has looked with favor on the lowly state of his servant.

Surely from now on, all generations will call me blessed. For the mighty one has done great things for me. And holy is his name.

Indeed, his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm. He has scattered the proud in the imaginations of their heart.

He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty.

[12 : 34] He has come to the aid of Israel in remembrance of his mercy. According to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.

And Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home. Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son.

Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy, and they rejoiced with her. On the eighth day, they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him Zachariah after his father.

But his mother said, No, he is to be called John. They said to her, None of your relatives has that name. Then they began motioning to his father to find out what he wanted to give him.

Apparently they still didn't believe women back then. He asked for a writing tablet and wrote his name is John, and all of them were amazed. Immediately his mouth was open and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God.

[13 : 36] Fear came over all their neighbors, and all these things were talked about throughout the entire hill country of Judea. All who heard them, pondered them, and said, What will this child become?

For indeed, the hand of the Lord is with him. So this story is a story that is narrated in Luke's Gospel, a book that begins with the words, In the days of King Herod of Judea.

And right away, those words let us know that we're dealing with this story of oppressive rule. We're dealing with this story that is set in a weary world. King Herod was the puppet king who made the exploitation of the Jewish people possible.

And if you're not familiar with what comes before what I just read, let me catch you up. So within that setting of exploitation, we learn about this couple, Zechariah and Elizabeth, a priestly couple who are struggling with infertility.

Zechariah is told by a messenger that his wife will have a child, even though she's well past childbearing age. And even more, this child will be a prophet and will make way for the long-awaited Savior.

[14 : 56] Because Zechariah has a hard time like taking in this incredible news. He is forced into silence by being struck mute. And then his wife does get pregnant.

And meanwhile, Mary, this teenager, the cousin of Elizabeth, is also visited by a messenger and told that she too will have a child who will be that very Savior who has long-awaited, God's own son. And then the scripture that I just read has Mary going hastily to her cousin's house and leaving her home. And I love this passage because it's so much about communal joy.

It's so much about connected joy spilling over into the neighborhood. See, prior to this, Luke tells the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth and the story of Mary in parallel.

You ever notice, you read it, they're like, they go together. You hear about this miraculous birth of John and then you hear about the miraculous birth of Jesus. But then in this story, they join.

[16 : 00] The lives of these two women in particular, they merge in ways that make their expression of communal joy palpable. We don't know why Mary goes to her cousin's house.

Maybe she's seeking wisdom from this older relative or maybe she's just so excited. Like she's got to tell somebody. It's like, you know, when we pick up a phone and we're like, I got to tell my friend about this.

We probably don't travel three to five days. But that's what Mary did, all right? She's so excited. And in one of the few moments in scripture where you do not have women talking in the presence of men, it is only women talking to each other, we see Elizabeth's body teach her through this child in her womb.

Her body teaches her this theological truth that Mary's son is actually the Lord of the universe. And Elizabeth proclaims these words of blessing over Mary.

And then Elizabeth bursts out in song and blessing. And Mary bursts out in song proclaiming who God is and the way that God routinely acts in the world.

[17:12] I think it's so interesting that in Mary's song that word lowly is not just about like, oh, Mary's humble.

It carries the connotation of being left out of the system for reasons that are beyond your control. Of being marginalized because of things that are beyond your control.

She proclaims this God of mercy who is merciful to both not let some have an excess and who is merciful to give to all what they need.

And then I have to say this about Mary's song because I don't, if I'm honest, I don't know that I really thought about this until this year. But the words of Mary's song make more sense in Elizabeth's mouth.

I don't know, have you ever noticed that? This song goes back to Hannah's song in 1 Samuel. And Hannah is the one who's the wife of a priest. And Hannah is the one who's struggling with infertility.

[18:16] And there are scholars who say like, really, this song must have originally been the song of Elizabeth and later editors and yada, yada, yada. But the earliest manuscripts actually say, no, this is Mary's song.

And I think that that is deeply suggestive of the nature of communal joy. That in this moment of the miraculous, Mary finds her own song of joy by connecting it to the lived experience of her cousin.

I recently discovered this Buddhist word. I don't know a lot about Buddhism, but I recently discovered this Buddhist word called *mudita*. And it means sympathetic joy.

And apparently, it's one of the highest forms of love that you can practice. One of the most difficult forms. To be in sympathy with somebody else's joy.

So, Mary and Elizabeth lean into each other's joy. Then finally, to round out these verses where joy is emphasized, we get to experience the community rejoicing.

[19:28] And that word in the Greek, rejoicing, has so much to do with leaning into God's grace. That's what it means to rejoice, to lean into God's grace, to lean into what you cannot control or contain, and to let yourself be enchanted.

All right. So, what do these verses tell us about how a weary world can rejoice? first, they're an invitation to the intentional practice of communal joy.

Joy that is shared with others. There's a sense, maybe riding under the text, that joy in isolation is not enough. It's not sustainable.

And that has been my experience. We have to feed off of each other's joy in order to keep it going. And then these verses also, I think, make it very, very clear that we can rejoice by singing songs of hope.

In Luke's gospel, these first two, three chapters, three chapters, I think, there are four different songs. Zachariah sings, Mary sings, Anna sings, Simeon sings, over and over again, there's this bursting into songs of joy.

[20:53] And one of the major things that I think we've lost in a post-everything world is our ability to sing. And I mean that literally, to sing together. Our ability to express joy.

Was that me? Okay. All right. And I know that for many of us who are deconstructing and reconstructing, the loss of music is a big thing. that ability to lean into singing with one another.

So one of the invitations I want to extend, maybe the most practical invitation I can extend to you in the sermon, is in this week leading up to Christmas, find somebody to sing with.

I was reading this Advent devotional and there was a challenge to even sing with somebody over the phone. Like, find the song. And it does not have to be explicitly Christian. It can be, but something that gives you hope.

And sing with another person. Our community group has a playlist that we made and it has a variety of songs on it. Can I say my favorite one?

[21:57] This is my community group. My favorite one is there are all these gospel songs and then there's booty. That's like number five. It's just true. I love it. Okay. But we have to find songs of hope.

All right. Finally, I'll say a few final things. A few final things. One, because the intentional practice of joy is a doorway to the prophetic.

That is one of the reasons that we show up to this work. One thing I want you to take is that the intentional practice of joy is a doorway to the prophetic.

Elizabeth is the first prophet in the book of Luke. She is filled with the Holy Spirit, which means she is prophesying. Joy is not a frivolous emotion.

It's not something that is just like, oh, you know, as they used to say when I was going up, it's not just for play play. Okay. Joy is important. It teaches us about some of the highest goods.

[23 : 03] It teaches us that we are loved, that God is good, that the things that we see will not always be as they are, that before it and after it and under it and through it all, there is a joy that is rooted in God and which calls every created thing to become itself more and more by more and more letting go.

And then not only is the practice of joy a doorway to the prophetic, the intentional practice of joy also helps us hold on to the promise.

It helps us wait. It roots us in memory. Sometimes when I think about Mary singing this song and holding on to the promise, you know, I think about whether or not she might have thought about women before her like Shifra and Pua, the midwives, who carry the promise forward or Miriam, who helps lead the children of Israel out of Hebrews, out of Egyptian slavery and then leads the people in a dance after they get across the Red Sea where those, did Mary sense those people behind her helping to carry forward the promise even at the risk of their own lives as she sang her song.

And then last, why does a weary world rejoice? To intentionally shed cynicism and to lean into vulnerability. See, when Elizabeth's neighbors rejoice, leaning into God's grace, it is not because they're full of faith.

You look at the text, it's not because they're full of faith. Despite their amazement, they continue, the text says, to experience deep fear. But perhaps because of their amazement and their joy, they're a little bit more open.

[25 : 01] The text says that they pondered what the child would become. Their joy opens them to enchantment. And then in this same vein, the curator of Black Liturgy's Cole Arthur Riley, this is what she says, is what she says.

I think when we give ourselves to play, the scope of our lives expands. We become freer in our bodies. We give ourselves to imagination and make-believe.

This takes down our defenses and allows us to move and be without expectation of immediate tragedy. the intentional practice of communal joy is necessary if for no other reason than to make our lives and our emotions to make sure that they don't become irretrievably calloused, that we don't become irretrievably calloused.

So friends, in this season of joy, when we celebrate the birth of Christ and hold fast to the reality that everything in our post-everything world will one day be made right, that this joy we have, the world didn't give it to us and the world cannot take it away.

This joy began before us and finds its center in God. And we do, we have to answer pressing questions like how does a weary world rejoice and why does a weary world rejoice?

[26 : 46] But we also just have to receive what is already true, that the God born to us this Christmas is a God of joy who longs to lead us toward joy.

May the great grace of God just come on up here, come on, come on, come on. All right, you're going to lean into joy. Okay. So may the grace of God in this Christmas season lead you, Table Church, into an experience of God and an experience of joy this Christmas.

Amen.