

A Weary World Rejoices: Hope

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[0 : 00] Lighting in our announcements, tonight is the first Sunday of Advent, the Sunday of Hope. During the Advent season, we as Christians celebrate the coming of Christmas, the coming of Christ's birth, and then life on earth.

We take this time to remember the waiting that preceded Jesus' birth, hundreds of years of waiting for a promised Messiah to come as a Savior for the Jewish people. We think about a people waiting for liberation from empire.

We reflect on the Christmas story and what waiting might have looked like for those few people who knew Jesus' birth was coming before it happened. And we think about our own waiting as we contemplate our waiting for Christ's return and a redeemed world.

This is the tradition we share with Christians around the world, taking the four Sundays before Christmas to reflect and prepare. The candle lighting is a tradition we share even beyond Christianity, like Diwali, Hanukkah, the winter solstice, Kwanzaa, and so many other holidays around this time of year.

Advent includes a tradition of creating light in the midst of darkness. This year, the theme for our Advent sermons and liturgy comes from the song, O Holy Night, which of course tells us that even in the dark night, the stars were brightly shining.

[1 : 15] As we know, later in the song we sing, A thrill of hope, the weary world rejoices. I usually like to have my sermons finalized pretty far in advance, because I like to practice 1,000 times.

But even up to last night, I was rewriting this one, trying to find a way to honor all of the grief and sadness and weariness that folks in this community are holding right now.

As we enter the Advent season, I want to give us each just a minute to think about the question, what weariness are you feeling tonight? What does that feel like in your body, and what does it look like in your life right now?

You're welcome to use the index card on your chair. If so, please only use one side. We'll be using it again. Or if not, you're welcome to just take a minute to think about the ways that you are feeling weary.

That's fine, too. Thank you. Thank you.

[2 : 40] Thank you.

And it's also true that most of the time when people ask me how I'm doing, I tell them I'm doing well. I don't think that I am lying. I certainly don't mean to. I think that a lot of the grief and weariness that I have been feeling is less of an acute sadness and more of a heaviness that's been weighing on me for a while.

Some of it feels like so much a part of my life that I forget to name it, but I do think there's some value in naming the hard things out loud. So I wanted to give us some space to acknowledge any heaviness we may be feeling.

As we explore the Christmas story this month, I think we'll find that whatever weight each of us is carrying, we are probably not the first ones to carry it, and I hope that that is a comfort.

So starting with our Christmas song, today we're going to talk a little bit about the world that the translator of O Holy Night was referring to when he wrote, A Thrill of Hope, The Weary World Rejoices.

[4 : 04] Of course, this is the weary world that Jesus was born into. I want to start with a modern picture of the Sea or Lake of Galilee to try and give us an idea of what the landscape looks like in that region.

As folks may know, many people living in this area around the time of Jesus were shepherds, fishers, builders or stonemasons, or farmers growing crops like wheat, grapes, and olives.

At the time of Jesus' birth and the time of today's passage, the areas where the Jewish people lived were part of the fairly new Roman Empire. We also have a map here for that. You can see Judea circled in the east.

The Jewish people, Jesus' community, were living under military occupation. Most of the Jewish people lived in poverty. There was huge income inequality, and the power and violence of the Roman army were conspicuous and unavoidable.

At the time Jesus was born, King Herod I had ruled the area for 30 years. Folks may know that Herod was extremely ambitious, famously brutal, and more than willing to break laws and sacrifice people's lives in pursuit of his own power.

[5 : 13] Unsurprisingly, the Jewish people had been getting more and more fed up as they spent longer and longer living under his rule. Herod died a couple years before today's story, and the area was divided between his sister and his three sons.

That's the second map we have, second and last, should now, on the screen. One of his sons became the ruler of the blue area in the south, which includes Jerusalem and Bethlehem.

Another became the ruler of the purple areas, which include Nazareth and a city called Sepphoris, where some folks believe Mary was born. As soon as Herod's sons took power, there were revolts in both places, and just as quickly, the Roman armies crushed the revolts, burned down the city of Sepphoris, and killed a few thousand people, as is their custom.

On top of the violent conflicts with people in power, the Jewish community at this time faced a lot of conflicts around religion. The two main Jewish groups in Judea, the Pharisees and the Sadducees, argued over issues like how they should interpret the scriptures and what the right way was to practice their faith.

Perhaps some of us can relate to these kinds of disagreements. During this time, we also see groups like the Essenes, a group of mystics who you may know from their library, which we call the Dead Sea Scrolls.

[6 : 27] We see a lot of independent preachers preaching that an apocalypse is coming. You might think of John the Baptist here, repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. And finally, we have a number of people during this time claiming to be the promised, awaited Messiah, finding weary followers looking for a thrill of hope.

And some of these people get enough followers that the Roman rulers start to feel threatened and crush them violently, as is their custom. All of these religious conflicts matter because today's passage is about a priest.

It seems to me like it would be an exhausting time to be a religious leader. Against the wearying backdrop of poverty, violence, sectarianism, and empire, we meet Zechariah, a priest from the order of Abiyah.

We read that Zechariah's pretty old. He's been a priest for a long time in the midst of all of this political and religious chaos. Zechariah and his wife, Elizabeth, do not have kids. We know that they struggled with infertility when they were younger.

But when I think about Zechariah's grief around parenthood at this point in the story, I don't imagine it as an active thing that's on his mind all the time. Instead, I imagine it as an underlying heaviness that he carries with him everywhere he goes.

[7 : 42] When people ask him how he's doing, maybe he says he's doing well. But we know that Zechariah and Elizabeth prayed for kids, and so far, they're fairly old and their prayers have not been answered.

So our writer, Luke, begins his story of Jesus' life with the weary world of an old priest named Zechariah. This is the book of Luke, chapter 1, verse 5.

In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah who belonged to the priestly division of Abiyah. His wife, Elizabeth, was a descendant of Aaron, which is to say they are both descended from priests.

They were both righteous before God, blameless in their observance of all the Lord's commandments and regulations. They had no children because Elizabeth was unable to become pregnant, and they both were very old.

One day, Zechariah was serving as a priest before God because his priestly division was on duty. Following the customs of the priestly service, he was chosen by lottery to go into the Lord's sanctuary and burn incense.

[8 : 40] All the people who were gathered were praying, all the people who gathered to worship were praying outside during this hour of incense offering. An angel from the Lord appeared to him standing to the right of the altar of incense.

When Zechariah saw the angel, he was startled and overcome with fear. The angel said, Do not be afraid, Zechariah. Your prayers have been heard. Your wife, Elizabeth, will give birth to your son, and you must name him John.

I'm going to pause for a second because I have a picture here that I really like. This is a painting by the Reverend Lauren Wright Pittman. We see Zechariah in the priestly clothes and the angel showing up as incense from the altar.

The Reverend Wright Pittman writes, Zechariah stands in the holy place wearing the most meticulous of garments.

Does he expect to encounter the divine, or is he just going through the motions, lighting the incense as an all-too-familiar scent fills the air? Back to our Bible passage, verse 13.

[9 : 45] The angel said, Do not be afraid, Zechariah. Your prayers have been heard. Your wife, Elizabeth, will give birth to your son, and you must name him John. Of course, this son will grow up to be called John the Baptist.

He will be a joy and a delight to you, and many people will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the Lord's eyes. He must not drink wine and liquor.

He will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before his birth. He will bring many Israelites back to the Lord their God. He will go forth before the Lord, equipped with the spirit and power of Elijah.

He will turn the hearts of fathers back to their children, and he will turn the disobedient to righteous patterns of thinking. He will make ready a people prepared for the Lord. Zechariah said to the angel, How can I be sure of this?

My wife and I are very old. The angel replied, I am Gabriel. I stand in God's presence. I was sent to speak to you and to bring this good news to you.

[10 : 43] Know this, what I have spoken will come true at the proper time, but because you didn't believe, you will remain silent, unable to speak, until the day when these things happen. Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah, and they wondered why he was in the sanctuary for such a long time.

When he came out, he was unable to speak to them. They realized he had seen a vision in the temple, for he gestured to them, but could not speak. When he completed the days of his priestly service, he returned home.

The Gospel of Luke, chapter 1, verses 5 through 23. Can we have the picture of Zechariah back on the screen, please? I really love the bold colors in this picture.

I like the feeling that things that are bold and new and miraculous can happen in the midst of empire and exhaustion, and also in the midst of our doubts. When I have read this passage in the past, I've tended to read Zechariah's nine months of silence as a punishment.

I am also not proud to admit that the interpretation of this passage that I am the most familiar with is the snarky feminist reading, wow, imagine a man being silent for nine months.

[11 : 55] But, as we learn from our deaf siblings in Christ, silence is not inherently negative, and what the angel Gabriel actually says to Zechariah is a little more ambiguous.

Because you didn't believe, you will remain silent, unable to speak, until the day when these things happen. Silence might be a punishment, but it also might be a spiritual practice.

I try to imagine what nine months of silence might have looked like in Zechariah's life. Zechariah was a priest, so his job involved public speaking, including prayer and singing. What would it feel like for a man who had been speaking so publicly for decades to be silent for so long?

Maybe restful. Maybe embarrassing. I suspect that Zechariah spent a lot of that time thinking about what he had said to the angel. How can I be sure of this?

It's a response that seems both very understandable and a little surprising. Of course, it makes sense that an old man who was well beyond waiting for kids would be a little surprised to find out that his wife is pregnant.

[13 : 00] And, on the other hand, you just heard it from an angel. Aren't you a priest? Which is essentially what Gabriel says to him. So why did Zechariah doubt?

Of course, there are a lot of ways we can answer this question. But one thing that is true in my experience is that when we are weary, sometimes we become cynical. Sometimes we can struggle to believe that another world is possible because we are so busy dealing with the day-to-day frustrations and disappointments of the world as it exists right now.

And in that context, silence can be a spiritual discipline and maybe even a gift. Zechariah now has nine months to sit with himself to think about all of the exhaustion and grief that got him to this place of doubt and to start to unravel that.

I am often tempted to try and rush spiritual growth, but something I take from this passage is that this is not something that happens quickly. Zechariah doesn't get to say, you know, God, thank you so much.

I think I have learned all I'm going to learn, so I will have more faith next time. But if you could just let me talk again, please, that would make my life a lot easier. No, God has decided that this is going to take the full nine months.

[14 : 13] In doing this, Gabriel and God give Zechariah the gift of time to think about all of the things that might have led him to doubt an angel and then to start to wonder what other kind of world might exist beyond the limits of his disappointment.

Because the other thing about this time is that Zechariah gets to spend the next nine months watching as the thing he doubted comes true. He'll get to experience all of the excitement and anticipation that his friends experienced 30 years ago.

He'll get to spend this time opening himself up to wonder and coming to terms with the fact that God's imagination is bigger than his own. Now he'll get to talk to God about parenting. What will it be like to raise a child in this turbulent world?

What will parenting look like his age? What will the baby John be like as a kid? Verse 14 sticks out to me. He will be a joy and a delight to you. Is Zechariah ready for joy and delight?

Maybe in the next nine months he will take the time to dream. As we look at this passage, I think we can learn a few things about how we can embrace the spiritual discipline of silence so that we can lean into God's imagination.

[15 : 23] I want to name three steps to help us do this. The first is to pause and acknowledge our weariness. I did some of that a few minutes ago. I wonder what parts of Zechariah's weariness were so obvious he wouldn't have thought to name them.

Did he think of the political violence as something shocking and scary or had he become numb to it long ago? In my life, the stress of the last decade of national politics and weariness from the pandemic don't come up in conversation quite as much anymore.

But when I start to feel existential dread, and I'm not sure why, it helps to remember that these things are still impacting me. The second step is to sit with silence.

What this means is to take the time to be in a space where we can let the voices of our exhaustion and cynicism be a little quieter so that we can hear the voice of God and receive the awe of creation that exists around us.

Of course, there are a lot of places to sit in silence in D.C., the Basilica or the National Cathedral if those kinds of spaces work well for you. Maybe the Arboretum or a park like Roosevelt Island if that kind of place helps you feel connected to God.

[16 : 35] I'm also going to say here that I'm not great at sitting still and I don't love silence. So for those of you who are like me, silence does not have to mean sitting alone in a dark room with noise-canceling headphones.

We read in the passage that Zechariah actually continued to work and I hope he was also supporting Elizabeth with her pregnancy. It seems like the purpose of making him silent here is not to force him into a nine-month isolation but to prevent him from interrupting good news with the sound of his own cynicism.

So silence for me might mean opening myself up to the wonder that exists outside of myself by going for a walk or journaling through the ways that I see God acting in the world so that I can practice paying attention to what God's goodness looks like.

The third thing I want to note is that even in really tough situations there are often people doing beautiful and holy and imaginative work to make things better. Especially when we are working through urgent problems it can be easy to feel like we don't have time to stop and dream or listen for the voice of God because we need to respond to crises quickly.

I don't want to pretend that that's not true instead I want to suggest that there might already be people doing that work of sacred imagination and if we can take the time to be honest with ourselves about our weariness and turn down the volume on our doubt maybe we can listen to them and listen to the voices of wisdom and imagination to learn from them.

[18 : 05] I want to give a few examples of what these three steps might look like in our own lives. I know that many of us in this church are feeling some weariness from work that we're doing whether that is a paid job or school or a volunteer role that may be both meaningful and exhausting.

Sometimes it's hard to acknowledge burnout in areas of our lives where we feel a sense of purpose so I want to give us permission to remember that multiple things can be true. Things can be deeply meaningful and they can be too much.

Of course when they are too much I rarely feel like I have the time to stop and reflect and those are precisely the times when I would benefit from sitting in silence and finding the root of my exhaustion.

I want to mention here as Ella did that there is an advent retreat next Sunday before service so if you are looking for a space to sit in silence that may be an option for you. Listening to others' imaginations in the context of our jobs or the things that give us purpose might mean finding people who have figured out how to make those things sustainable.

People who have been reimagining vocation or of course it can mean talking to God and remembering the breadth of creativity about your life that is available to you. One of the spaces where I have the most trouble acknowledging my weariness is when I am struggling with friendships.

[19 : 25] When I feel frustrated about a close friendship changing, a lot of the time my sadness or exhaustion have already started to look like apathy. I don't even care if they cancel on me. That person doesn't matter to me anyway.

It takes some time to sit and unravel my cynicism in changing relationships to find the disappointment and hurt that is so often at the root so that I can reimagine them and find renewal.

I want to be clear here that I am not suggesting we revisit or reimagine abusive relationships. You are a child of God. Your safety and well-being matter. You are always allowed to say no to situations that will cause you harm.

I am talking about finding hope in relationships that are sources of goodness and maybe also sources of frustration and weariness. When I think about reimagining friendships that feel hopeless, I think about the narratives that Zechariah must have told himself about his life for decades and his shock at learning that God had other plans and that there was hope to be found in a space that he had thought was hopeless.

Sometimes doubt and apathy feel like the easier path, believing that my more challenging relationships can be redeemed, requires me to look at what has gone wrong and admit that I may have had a part of it or one of my least favorite hobbies.

[20 : 43] It forces me to recognize that my stubbornness may not have been useful in every single situation or that it's possible I've been treating someone based on who they used to be and believing that God's expansive vision for redemption forces me to acknowledge that people change and grow.

I believe that the light at the end of that tunnel is worth pursuing and that God's imagination for our relationships is broad enough to include reconciliation and renewal. Maybe you all are feeling great about your life's work and all of your relationships.

I hope that's true and I know that I have been feeling an undercurrent of weariness about some of the broader issues we face in our world as I imagine was true for many people in the time of Jesus and Zechariah.

As we try to become a church that values revolutionary justice and works to create earth as it is in heaven how can we acknowledge our own weariness and lean into God's imagination for the world we are creating?

I know many of us are feeling anxious to say the least about the situation in Gaza right now. I want to acknowledge some weariness there just by naming it. It's a lot.

[21 : 55] Taking in the knowledge of the continued violence and reading devastating stories day after day is extremely exhausting and because the situation is obviously much worse for the people experiencing it I think a lot of us feel a moral obligation to continue learning about it and amplifying it and being upset about it.

I don't really want to tell you that that's wrong but I do think that there is space for sitting with silence in this context and that is the silence of allowing ourselves to grieve. I think it is only through grieving that we can start to see past some of our hopelessness and create and find light in the midst of the darkness.

I'll plug here that some folks at the table have been posting information about vigils including interfaith vigils on Table which as was noted earlier is the Table's online community. I think I said on Table on Circle which is the Table's online community.

For me sitting with our grief about violence injustice is related to leaning into imagination which includes listening to activists who have been spending years envisioning what sustainable activism can look like and teaching the rest of us how to sit with grief and rage and also rest and joy so that we can make our work towards revolutionary justice more sustainable.

Another thing that imagination might mean in this conflict is listening for God's imagination about what heaven on earth can look like in the future of Palestine. If we find that the most we are willing to hope for is a pause to violence and a separation of people maybe our weariness has prevented us from dreaming of better things.

[23 : 35] But I think it is especially in these situations where we find renewal and endurance by listening to folks who have spent a long time envisioning what true peace and safety for everyone might look like in the region.

Of course this is true for any number of justice issues even in the time of Jesus and Zechariah we see folks engaging in holy justice making and I want to name that as an act of hope. It is miraculous to me that time after time throughout history where we would expect only hopelessness in the midst of empire and violence in the midst of so many weary worlds there are people committed to the belief that a better world is possible.

If we are able to quiet our doubts we can listen in for God's imagination in these situations. So when we are feeling weary this advent season from things happening in our personal lives or in our collective world we can acknowledge our weariness sit with our grief and try to quiet our doubts and then listen in for God's imagination wherever we may find it.

Because the good news is that even when we are exhausted and cynical God's imagination is greater than our own. this is a time of year to sit with the darkness but it's also a time of year when we appreciate the light when we anticipate rebirth and new worlds to come.

Finding faith in hard times and leaning into God's imagination are skills we learn they don't happen overnight. I also want to name that none of us is able to hold on to hope and trust and creativity all the time.

[25 : 10] Sometimes we get to rely on one another. When I am feeling exhausted and cynical I rely on you to hold hope on my behalf and sooner or later I'll make my way back to a place of faith and creativity and I can hold it for you.

We'll talk more about connection and community next week but I did want to say that learning to follow God's imagination is a slow process and also a shared process. This also matters because I know some of us are weary from grief and I want us to feel that it is okay just to spend a long time acknowledging our weariness.

As a community sometimes hope looks like taking care of one another and sitting with each other in the midst of that darkness. I am tremendously grateful for the folks in this community who have shown up for me in my own grief recently.

So on this Sunday of hope I want to ask you all to take some time to think and then you can write this down on the index cards on your chairs. even in the midst of weariness where might you find hope?

In what spaces in your life might you spend some time leaning into God's imagination? I'll give us three minutes. We can wrap up.

[26 : 35] Over the next two weeks we are going to talk about how a weary world rejoices. We didn't quite make it to joy this week but I want to leave you all with a short passage from one of my favorite books the book of qualities which describes different qualities as though they were people in our lives.

This is from The Quality of Joy. Although Joy is spontaneous she is immensely patient. She does not need to rush. She knows that there are obstacles on every path and that every moment is the perfect moment.

At times Joy is elusive. She seems to disappear even as we approach her. I see her standing on a ridge covered with oak trees and suddenly the distance between us feels enormous.

I am overwhelmed and wonder if the effort to reach her is worth it. Yet she waits for us. Her desire to walk with us is as great as our longing to accompany her.

Let's pray. God of imagination you know that we are weary. You know the challenges in our lives that go seen and unseen. We thank you that you are a God of love that you walk with us and listen to our fears and grief and disappointments.

[27 : 48] We thank you that you are a God of life that renewal is always available to us. I pray that this season you will help us to turn to you and listen for your holy imagination so that we can find the light in dark places and create earth as it is in heaven.

In your name we pray. Amen.