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First Presbyterian Church
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Luke 1:1-23

“How Does a Weary World Rejoice? We Acknowledge Our Weariness”

How does a weary world rejoice? This is the question we’re considering during Advent. And it’s a timely question to consider since its usage has been ticking upwards the past 30 years. The question alludes to the line in the hymn “O Holy Night”:

O holy night! The stars are brightly shining;
It is the night of the dear Savior’s 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!
Fall on your knees! O hear the angel voices!
O night divine, O night when Christ was born!

And so as Advent begins we start by acknowledging our weariness. Now weariness is different than being tired.

- Being tired is "I need a nap" and being weary is "no amount of sleep can fix the way I'm feeling right now."
- Being tired can be a satisfied feeling - I worked hard and look what I did! Being weary is the disheartening feeling that no matter how hard I work, it won't be enough.
- Caring for an active toddler can make one tired. Caring for a medically fragile child can make one weary.
- Working a full day and coming home to a sink full of dishes and a pile of laundry can cause one to feel tired. Caring for a loved one with dementia can make one weary.
- Being tired is having a cold. Being weary is having a chronic illness.

- Weariness is the constant ache of worrying about how to feed your family; or knowing your income will not be enough to pay the rent; or entering the memory care unit again, knowing your parent will not recognize you; or waking up and discovering yet again your spouse is gone;
- Being tired is falling asleep on the couch when the movie isn't even halfway through. Being weary is asking, oh Lord, how long?
- Being tired is what we feel as we continue to recover from a cold or the flu and know that we need more rest than usual. Being weary is reading the news and knowing that the world has the same struggles with war now as it had in Jesus' day and wanting it to be different and not seeing how it ever will be.

sing the first verse here but stop after "weary world rejoices". FYI – if this is odd and entire verse should be sung I'm open to that.

The world was weary when a priest by the name of Zechariah was on duty at the Jerusalem temple. This is where we find Zechariah at the beginning of Luke's story, faithfully going about his ordinary priestly duties. Luke lets us know that King Herod ruled the land, and he was a despot so harsh he'd make some current day despots almost look kind. And poor Zechariah's wife is barren, which was a disgrace to their name. Even though Luke tells us Zechariah and Elizabeth were righteous, society said otherwise for they believed that barrenness was a sign of immorality; that someone had done something wrong. So there was certainly gossip as to why the couple was childless.

But it is to this couple, living their weary life in a weary world, that the Angel Gabriel comes with the incredible news that they will be parents; that Elizabeth will conceive and bear a son. But Zechariah can't believe it. "How can I be sure of this? My wife and I are very old," he tells the angel. Poor Zechariah, he had no reason to believe that anything unusual would happen to him as he entered the sanctuary (ready) to perform the privileged duty of lighting an incense offering to God . . . even though an angel stood right there in front of him telling him this incredible good news. No, poor Zechariah had long ago stopped believing that God would actually show up and answer prayers. He'd long ago stopped giving his weariness over to God.

Poor Zechariah, his weariness had hardened him.

And sometimes weariness can do that, (right?) It can harden us and prevent us from living fully. Weariness can leave a scar, and sometimes, we pick at it so much it can never heal.

Back when I lived in St. Louis, I was involved in an organization that I gave an incredible amount of my time and effort to over a number of years. I enjoyed volunteering for it, met some lifelong friends, and did some valuable work. But the last couple years of my involvement were stressful, and I grew weary. The organization made decisions I didn't agree with and started to go in a different direction, and for a while I wasn't alone in my disappointment. Many others felt the same way, and we made our concerns known. As time progressed, however, others who had concerns were able to move on, satisfied that the organization had addressed them. But while they moved on, I could not. My weariness had hardened me and prevented me from seeing what my colleagues could. I remember well the last gathering I attended; I felt alone and it seemed like others were walking on eggshells around me; perhaps because I was always angry. As I drove home, I recognized that it was time for me to let go, and not allow my weariness to harden me any further, and give it to God. And that's what I did, and over time the hardened edges became softer, and I was able to live more fully once again.

Like Zechariah, our weariness can fuel our inability to believe, or it may cause us to lose hope. Sometimes when we're weary, we insist on clarity instead of insisting on God's grace to provide for us during our weariness. When we're weary, we have a hard time believing good news, and feeling any sense of joy. Think about Zechariah . . . he didn't expect anything else to happen that day the Angel Gabriel gave him good news. But then again, who can blame him? Do any of us really expect to win the lottery? To be told this is the day your long forgotten dreams will come true? When the holy crashes into our world, and our assumptions are confronted with new realities, a response of fear and even speechlessness seem reasonable.

What we don't want to do, though, is remain in a state of disbelief and allow our weariness to turn into bitterness or despair and take root in us and fester. And who knows, maybe this is why the angel makes Zechariah unable to speak. Maybe it wasn't punishment, as so many have come to think – but rather God's way of

helping Zechariah to work through his weariness. Lacking the ability to explain, rationalize, or fill the empty space with words, Zechariah had no choice but to listen to God. He had to listen for God and discern what God was telling him rather than letting his weariness do all the talking. And so, with the sound of silence filling the space, God could finally be heard, and joy could be felt once again.

Could our struggles be similar? Do we also spend too much time talking, critiquing or judging, and not enough time listening? Do we settle for a set of talking points, when what we should be doing is listening? Perhaps we are spending too much time looking for *the* answers when silence would make room for questions and a journey of discovery.

Perhaps what we need is silence in order to make room for joy once again. In his silence, Zechariah finds himself in a time of gestation and incubation. Unable to fill the space with noise, he has no choice but to let go of his weariness and give it to God, which makes space for joy once again. “A weary world rejoices”, the old hymn sings – perhaps knowing what we sometimes forget, which is that acknowledging our pain and our weariness makes room for joy.

Regardless of the whys, Zechariah in his silence finds himself in a time of waiting, during which he cannot fill the time with noise or busyness. It’s a time of passive watching and discernment. There will be times to act and speak, and even sing, but this is not one of them.

Friends, there are many people – many of whom are here today or watching online – who have waited years for prayers to be answered and who struggle with despair and broken dreams. Others long for a birth announcement, a sign of new life that will spring up in their lives. Some have come to believe they are unimportant in the grand scheme of life, that they have been forgotten. Some prefer to live disappointed instead of risking the feeling of disappointment, and others live with worst-case-scenario thinking. If any of that sounds familiar, you are not alone. Zechariah felt that way, too. But just like God remembered Zechariah, God remembers you, too. I can assure you, your lives are not destined to be barren. God does not want your life to be barren. How can I be certain of this? I can’t; but I do have faith that this is true.

Friends, our yearning for certainty is so often present when there is fear and grief and despair and bitterness and weariness. Like Zechariah we ask “How can I know?” When we’ve been broken open we’re tender, and we want to know whatever it is that’s coming our way.

But the only certain thing is the truth that we belong to God.

We may not understand God’s ways or God’s timing. We may be filled with doubt and weariness. Yet our story of faith reminds us that God always proves faithful in the end, turning despair to hope, doubt to faith, sorrow to laughter and weariness to joy. God proves faithful by working in unexpected ways and through unlikely candidates, even such unlikely candidates as you and me.

God works against all odds—despite our weaknesses, despite our doubts, despite our resistance, despite our weariness, so we may find joy again.

So how does a weary world rejoice? Day by day, and with God’s help.

The days of Herod were not easy days for God’s people. Yet in the midst of such times, God spoke to and through a faithful couple. These days are also not easy for God’s people.

Even faithful followers can lose sight of Divine promises.

Weary of the daily grind;

Weary of suffering and grief;

Weary of violence and other injustice.

Weary of dreams that never become reality.

When words of hope and praise have dried up,

Draw on the prophetic power of the ancestors.

Trust in those who bring messages of good news.

Listen to wisdom from the ones

who are preparing creation for the incarnation.

Hold the tension of overwhelming fear

alongside the possibility of deep gladness.

Experience the presence of God

who is working through you to

pave the way home to joy.

In this Advent season, we look for God to come once again in the unlikely form of an infant born in a stable, through an unlikely mother and a birth against all odds. And against all odds, we look for God to birth new life in the barren places in our lives, our community, and our world, as we share in word and deed the good news of the coming Savior.

Sing "O Holy Night" first verse here.

Amen.