



We Acknowledge our Weariness

Luke 1:1-23

Rev. Thomas G. James

Washington Street UMC

December 3, 2023

By the time we reach December 1, we are in a fevered pitch, knowing that Christmas is not too far away. A retired colleague of mine is one of those folks who counts down the days to Christmas beginning on January 1. Throughout the year, whether it be May, August, or November, he is always posting about how many days are left until Christmas Day. Last week, on Tuesday morning, he posted the simple reminder that there are only *three* Mondays left until Christmas. I'm not sure which emotion that elicits more for me: excitement or anxiety.

There's a lot to do before Christmas, and that is what the Season of Advent is all about. Only, in the Church, our focus in Advent isn't about making sure the travel plans are finalized, or the Christmas dinner is planned, or even that all of the presents are wrapped and under the tree. The season of Advent in the Church is about preparing ourselves for the celebration of joy that Christmas brings. The season of Advent is about acknowledging the need for the arrival of the incarnate Son ... for the birth of Christ.

The invitation to celebrate and receive joy is sometimes a challenge. There are many reasons why one might feel that joy and celebration are too aloof from the realities of our current era. Some of us, perhaps many of us, enter into this season of Advent feeling weary and overwhelmed. There are a lot of global concerns that might be weighing us down. There may be personal or family concerns that have us slouching in our seats.

This past week, I was in a number of meetings and conversations where prayers were requested for some of the troubles people are facing today. One person asked for prayers for themselves and for all who struggle with seasonal depression, for the days are getting shorter and the dark is swallowing the light. One person shared the news of the death of their adult daughter, who died after suffering a recent stroke, and who leaves behind a husband and 3-month old baby girl. One person asked for prayers for Sierra Leone after a attempted coup early last week. Another asked for prayers for their recovery from surgery. The list continues, and each request for prayer makes clear, as a community – as a nation – as a global humanity, we are weary, we are filled with grief, we are enraged, and we are exhausted.

Weary and exhausted.

A fellow pastor asked the Social Media world last week to define the difference between being “weary” and being “tired.” I've thought a lot about that distinction in recent days, and I've reflected as others have shared their thoughts. It was interesting to see people's comments, because the majority of responses weren't offering definitions of the two, even though that was the ask of the original post.

The distinction between “weary” and “tired” is not found in how we explain the feeling itself ... as was echoed time and again in people’s responses, the difference lie in the prescription.

When someone is tired, what they need is a nap. When your *physical* being is worn and exhausted, the best cure is a *good* night’s sleep ... or perhaps two or three in a row.

When someone is weary, it seems no amount of sleep is enough. The cure to being weary is not simply resting the body, it’s about resting the soul. Being weary is about searching for hope in what seems like a hopeless environment. In a weary state, we may wonder, what can make my soul joyful again? Where do I find the mental and emotional strength and spark to keep pressing on?

This is our focus for Advent this year: How does a weary world rejoice?

How does someone who is overcome with grief, or pain, or loss ... how does someone who is weary ... claim the joy of Christmas?

As we embark upon this question, our scriptural focus for this season will be the Gospel of Luke.

Luke’s Gospel begins a bit differently than the other gospel accounts. Matthew’s Gospel gives us the birth story, but it jumps right in on Jesus himself, beginning with Jesus’ genealogical history. John the Baptist will show up in Matthew’s story, but not until chapter 3, and by then, John and Jesus are both adults. The Gospel of John begins with a theological statement about Jesus being the word of God; there is no birth narrative. His account does bring in John the Baptist rather quickly in the first chapter, but again, John is already an adult. Mark’s Gospel opens immediately with John the Baptist, but for a third time, John is already an adult who is in the wilderness baptizing people. Mark doesn’t spend any time with the birth narrative.

Luke’s Gospel is different. Luke doesn’t rush to the story of Jesus. There is a lot of back-story to fill in prior to Jesus’ birth, which doesn’t show up until chapter 2. Before we can hear about Jesus’ birth, we have to learn about John’s.

Luke’s opening gives us the assurance that John comes from a long line of faithfulness. Luke tells us that Zechariah was a priest in the order of Abijah, and that his wife, Elizabeth, was a descendent of Aaron; both are priestly orders. It is defined up front that both were righteous before God, “living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord.” Luke also tells us that they had no children, “because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.”

This note about Elizabeth has to be understood in the context of its time. Given the statement made about their deep faithfulness, her barrenness would have been an odd reality. We know a lot more today about the cause of conception than they would have known 2000 years ago. At that time, barrenness was considered something of a curse from God ... or perhaps, understood the other way around, to conceive was considered nothing more than a blessing of God. In their old age, Zechariah and Elizabeth had given themselves over to the belief that they would never have a child. Not only had

they not had a child as of yet, but they were now at an age where having a child would have been unlikely if not unrealistic.

Luke doesn't say much at this time about their thoughts on never having had a child, but this is an important note to remember for the story that unfolds next.

There were 24 priestly divisions in Israel, the list of which can be found in the First Book of Chronicles, chapter 24. Each division was responsible for serving "in the temple in one-week rotations twice a year." It was the week for Zechariah's division to serve. Lots were cast to determine who among his clan would go to light incense at the altar, and Zechariah was chosen. There was an assembly of people gathered outside the temple in prayer as Zechariah went in to burn the incense.

While Zechariah was inside at the altar, an angel of the Lord appeared to him. Zechariah was terrified; fear overwhelmed him. Even for a man of great faith and a priest of the temple, fear was a normal reaction in the presence of an angel.

The angel sensed his fear and responded, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John."

When Luke had indicated previously that Elizabeth was barren and that she and Zechariah were beyond the expected age to have a child, Luke didn't indicate that Zechariah had been praying for a child ... but the angel's introduction clues us in. This was obviously something Zechariah had taken before God in prayer. This was a topic of some weight for Zechariah.

At the start, Zechariah is too stunned to interject, and so the angel continues.

"You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the holy Spirit."

Again, context here is important for us to understand the statement that is being made. The angel says that Zechariah's son will not drink alcohol. That doesn't seem like a decision one would make about their child before birth, but Zechariah was a priest, and would have likely made the connection that the angel was making. One of the priestly clans, the Levites, did not drink. Though it's a vague connection, Zechariah would have understood the angel's proclamation to say that his son would follow in the family business and would also be a priest – but specifically, he would be a Levite.

Still, Zechariah has no interjection to offer and the angel continues.

"He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for their Lord."

By this point, Zechariah is just about overwhelmed with the information the angel has offered. In this unexpected moment, Zechariah has gone from thinking he would never have a child ... something he had clearly been praying about ... to being informed that not only would he and Elizabeth have a child, but that their son was going to be a priest who carried a pretty weighty role. Their son wouldn't just be another priest in the long line of temple priests, he would be filled with the power and spirit of Elijah and would be preparing people for the Lord.

Zechariah can't believe what he's hearing and finally gains enough composure to speak, only his response is not one of gratitude, hope, or joy. His response is one of shock and disbelief. "How will I know if this really is true?" he asks; and he continues, offering an objection, "For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years." (I'm thankful for Zechariah's sake that Elizabeth wasn't in the room when he said this.)

Zechariah's situation is not uncommon, and perhaps some of us share his hesitancy to receive the good news that the angel had to offer. We may not share the same weariness as Zechariah, but "we can be weary in various ways."ⁱⁱ We can be stuck in anticipation of a new opportunity that never arrives or struggle through an system that never seems to change. How do we exchange weariness for hope when we've been stuck in the weariness for so long that hope seems improbable ... or impossible? We think of hope to be so improbable that even when an angel of the Lord stands before us and tells us our hope is coming to fruition, we still can't believe it to be true.

Zechariah was so convinced this would never happen, he couldn't believe his ears, and he asked, "How will I know this to be true?"

The angel responded in force, "I am Gabriel." (This is one of those lines that would make for a great movie clip. ... I AM GABRIEL.)

He says, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur."

All of this happened while Zechariah was in the temple to burn incense. The exchange with Gabriel took longer than such a task would normally take, and the crowd outside wondered about the delay. When he finally exited the sanctuary, he could not speak to the people, and they realized he had seen a vision. He tried to explain himself with motions, but he was unable to speak. Then, when his time to serve had ended, quite unceremoniously, he went to his home.

...

Luke begins his gospel account with this story. One might hear this story and wonder, what kind of joy is this? This man, this faithful priest, this righteous elder is struck mute because he did not believe the promise of hope that was offered to him by the angel? What kind of opening is this for a story of promise?

But for Luke, it is this weariness that is the very center of the promise. For Luke, it is this exasperation that cries out for hope that is the very reason for the birth of Christ.

Luke begins in the dark, because without Christ, it is as if we are living in the dark. Luke couches the gospel promise of Christ, who is to be born, in the reality that Christ's birth offers us a hope that we are deeply in need of. He proclaims the birth of Christ as a joy that we have long waited to taste. He writes that the gospel is the good news: it is the light at the end of the tunnel that invites us to press on and keep going forward.

He begins in the truth that we are weary. But in the announcement of Gabriel to Zechariah, we begin to see, there is a glimpse of hope to sustain us and a promise of a glory to come. The Lord has heard our prayers, and the glory of God shall be revealed. Let us keep our eyes on the light that leads us out of darkness, and trust in the good news of the angel, that the time of Lord's arrival is coming soon. Thanks be to God. Amen.

ⁱ John T. Carroll. *Luke, A Commentary (The New Testament Library)*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012.

ⁱⁱ Lisle Gwynn Garrity. *How does a Weary World Rejoice Resource?* Published by Sanctified Art, LLC. 2023.