



## **We Are Filled with Amazement and Hope**

**Luke 1:46-80**

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It's hard to believe we are just a week away from Christmas Eve. But the kids are now out of school for winter break, people have already begun their holiday travelling, and the delivery window is quickly coming to a close for Amazon purchases. (Let's be honest, when the Amazon Prime delivery window closes, that's when we *know* Christmas is close!)

Amidst our busy preparation for gatherings with family and friends in the coming two weeks, we are also nearing the end of the season of Advent, which invites us as a people of faith to prepare ourselves for the celebration of the birth of Christ.

For Advent this year, our focus is on the Gospel of Luke, as we ask the question, "How does a weary world rejoice?" We began with the story of Zechariah, acknowledging our weariness. Indeed, there is a great deal going on in the world that may add to our weariness. Last week, we looked at the gathering of Mary and Elizabeth, reminding us that there is joy in connection. This week, with a rather lengthy scripture, the songs of Mary and Zechariah invite us to be filled with amazement and hope.

As we consider these choral celebrations of the coming birth, I want you to think back to a time when you were surprised. For example, along with Christmas Eve coming up next week, we also have New Year's Eve coming up in two weeks. On New Year's Eve, along with other holiday celebrations, we often see the shooting of fireworks. I always love the surprise that comes with fireworks. When watching for fireworks, you often have an initial "bang," which lets you know that a firework has been launched into the air. Sometimes you can even see the trail of sparks that leads up to the point when the firework explodes in the air.

In those moments leading up to the explosion of the firework, you know something is about to happen, but you don't know exactly what it will look like. You don't know what color it will be, or how wide the circle will be, or what if it's one of those fancy fireworks that is a specific shape or even one that spells a word. Those are always pretty sweet.

Then, after what may feel like the longest time of waiting, which is never more than a couple seconds, it happens: the night sky lights up and your eyes take in what your mind could have only imagined.

What is your initial reaction to that moment of surprise? How do you respond? How do you feel in that moment?

It may depend on the type of surprise you're encountering, but for many a surprise, like that of a firework lighting up the night sky, our first response is one of amazement.

Last night, I was with the family at National Harbor. We were having dinner near the waterfront when the fireworks began. Though we knew they were coming at some point in the evening, all of us were amazed when they finally arrived. People were getting up from their dinner tables and running to the window to see the explosions more clearly.

To experience that amazement of a moment, you have to be paying attention. One can't be amazed by the wonder of the moment if they aren't aware of what's happening.

Let's consider the middle section of our scripture for this morning, where Elizabeth is said to have given birth to her baby son. The text reads, "It came time for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. ... On the eighth day, they came to circumcise the child." This was a standard custom in the Jewish household, as was determined by the laws of the Hebrew Scriptures. On the eighth day, the child was circumcised and given their name.

Luke's gospel indicates that there was an expectation that the son would be named after his father, Zechariah. But when it came time to give him his name, Elizabeth refused to name him Zechariah, and said, "He is to be called John." Those who had gathered were a bit shocked, and spoke up, saying, "None of your relatives have this name."

Keep in mind, Elizabeth had been in seclusion for the first 5 months of her pregnancy, and the scripture tell us that Mary stayed for months 6 through 9. So, for pretty much the entirety of the nine-month term, Elizabeth and Zechariah were isolated from family and friends. As the community is finally gathered with them to celebrate the birth and naming of this child, they would have expected, as is customary, for this first born son to be named after the father. And while it wasn't uncommon for the mother to name the child, (there are a number of other examples of mothers naming the child in the Hebrew Scripture,) the gathered family is so surprised by Elizabeth's choice of name, that they turned to Zechariah to offer input – perhaps hoping he'd disagree. (I'm sure there's a commentary I could add here regarding the patriarchy, but we'll let that go for now.)

The family wants Zechariah to say what name he wanted the child to be given, yet he is still unable to speak, so he takes a tablet and writes, "His name is John." Pay attention to his wording – he doesn't say, "let's name him John," he writes the affirmative, "his name *is* John." Elizabeth has already named him – the angel has already named him – God has already named him. His name *is* John.

The firework has gone off – Zechariah has spoken, even if but by writing on a tablet. They've all waited for Zechariah to speak up, and now he has. And once he confirms the name of the child, "his mouth was freed, and he began to speak, praising God."

Don't miss the end of verse 63, "All of them were amazed." They were paying attention, and they didn't miss the magnitude of what has just happened.

And what happens when we are amazed?

Go back to the fireworks show for a moment. When you're sitting there, waiting for the fireworks to begin, and the first one finally explodes ... after the initial amazement, what's your next reaction? I don't know if your experience is anything like mine, but inevitably, after the first firework goes off, everyone turns to each other and asks with a burst of energy and joy, "did you see that?!" At dinner last night, after the first sound of the fireworks outside, the murmur of the restaurant came to a slight roar as everyone chimed in, "did you see that?! The fireworks are starting!"

"When we are amazed, we tend to share the news, either seeking validation that it is shocking or to witness the shock factor the news has on others."<sup>i</sup>

Those who were present for the naming of John had the same response. Following their amazement, they could not hold the news to themselves. Luke tells us in the gospel, "All of these things were talked about throughout the entire hill country of Judea. And all who heard them pondered them and said, "What then will this child become? For, indeed, the hand of the Lord was with him."<sup>ii</sup>

If we are paying attention and allowing ourselves to be amazed, the natural response is to share the joy of our amazement with others.

This response is the one that both Mary and Zechariah take, as both of them find themselves, like stars in a Broadway show, breaking out into song. It may be the spoken word that carries the storyline forward, but it is the sung word that shares the joy of and carries the impact of the story.

Both songs, that of Mary and Zechariah, carry a similar message of hope. They are couched in the work that God has done for Israel, with a promise of what God will do for both Israel and for all of created humanity.

In his song, Zechariah "sings a story of praise for God's protection and promise." In her chorus, "Mary sings about a God of liberation who pulls the powerful from their thrones and lifts up the lowly."<sup>ii</sup>

"The content of their songs shows us what robust hope looks like; it looks like a deep yearning for the hungry to be fed, for the lowly to be lifted up, [and] for our children to be blessed by the tender mercy of God."<sup>iii</sup>

The amazement that Mary and Zechariah had overflows into a hope that is proclaimed in song. So sure are they of the hope they sing, that while the songs are offering a glimpse of what will

come, there is no wavering in their proclamation. “So sure is [Mary] that God will do what is promised that it is proclaimed as an accomplished fact.”<sup>iv</sup>

It is this hope that carries us to the manger on Christmas Eve – the hope that the promise of the Angel Gabriel to Mary and Zechariah will indeed come to be fulfilled. The Advent journey is filled with the hope that the songs of these saints will indeed define the way God engages in the world – a world in which God will offer mercy for generation after generation, and a world in which we might be rescued from the hands of our enemies to know salvation and to be forgiven of our sins. The hope of the songs lead us forward as we yearn for a light that will guide us in the midst of our darkness and show our feet the path of the way of peace.

And even while amazement *and* hope mark our Advent journey, even while they carry us forward in the midst of our weariness, it is the hope *of* amazement that ushers us to Bethlehem. It is the expectation of joy in the birth that awaits us in the manger.

As we traverse this final week of Advent, as we journey in our weary ways, may we keep alert that we might be filled with amazement and hope, trusting in the promise of the Angel – holding firm to the proclamation of these Advent songs by Mary and Zechariah – and may we join in the chorus to proclaim the good work of God offered in the birth of Christ. For the one who is coming is God in-fleshed, Emmanuel, the hope of the world to come. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Cecelia D. Armstrong. *How does a Weary World Rejoice Resource?* Published by Sanctified Art, LLC. 2023.

<sup>ii</sup> Armstrong.

<sup>iii</sup> Armstrong.

<sup>iv</sup> Fred B. Craddock. *Luke: Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1990.