

December 3rd, 2023

Luke 1:1-23 “We Acknowledge Our Weariness”

Welcome to the first day of the church year. The world runs on a calendar that goes from January through December, but the church operates from the first Sunday of Advent, which begins four Sundays prior to Christmas, through the end of what we call “Ordinary Time” in November. Advent is when we take down the green banners, put up the blue banners and decorate in a style that the church borrowed from northern European pagans. All of this leads up to the Feast of the Nativity, or “Christmas” where we celebrate the birth of Jesus. A second century historian named Sextus Julius Africanus had this notion that Jesus was conceived on March 25th, and so he figured that Jesus must have been born nine months later in December which was convenient because that’s when non-Christian pagan traditions celebrated winter solstice. Thus, the Feast of the Nativity was born and officially adopted by the church in the early fourth century. Believe it or not, it was only a minor feast in the church calendar, but it grew in popularity over the centuries. Now it rivals, and some would say surpasses Easter as the most celebrated holy day of the church year. That hasn’t always been the case though. In fact, there is a long history of controversy over Christmas.

With that in mind, let’s talk about the “war on Christmas.” And I’m not talking about the one Pat Robertson said *Starbucks* declared twenty years ago when they told their employees to say, “Happy Holidays” instead of “Merry Christmas.” I’m talking about wars that the *church* declared several times throughout history. Now, why would the church declare war over a holiday that celebrates the birth of the Christ child? Because people were having too much fun. This shouldn’t be surprising given the church’s long-standing reputation for not embracing fun. In fact, there have been several times throughout history when church officials sought to ban the celebration of Christmas because it had become such a debaucherous spectacle (their words not mine.) In 1643, James Cromwell, the Puritan Lord Majesty of the Commonwealth of

England said that Christmas celebrations should be solemn and contemplative. Churches who celebrated Christmas in a joyful or festive manner were, “Giving liberty to carnal and sensual delights.” Cromwell ordered shops to remain open for business on December 25th and organized soldiers to patrol the streets and put a halt to any merry-making. They were told to seize any food that they thought was being prepared for Christmas celebrations. The thing is, the Puritans weren’t exactly wrong about how much Christmas had gotten out of hand. Let’s consider the words to some of the older European Christmas carols we sing. “Deck the Halls” for example. Too many “fa-la-las” for one thing. Some would argue that Christmas isn’t about “being jolly.” It’s not a time to “don gay apparel” which by the way meant something entirely different in 15th century than it does today.

Then there’s “We Wish You a Merry Christmas.” I always thought the part about, “Give us some figgy pudding” and “We won’t go until we get some” sounded a bit demanding. Almost like extortion. Well ... it kind of was! We think of Christmas caroling as an innocent way of spreading Christmas cheer to our neighbors, but in 16th and 17th century England, it was the yuletide equivalent of trick-or-treating. Poor folks would band together and go to wealthy neighborhoods to sing for any holiday goodies they could get from the rich folks’ over-the-top Christmas parties. There was some serious class warfare happening between the wealthy and the poor. The Puritans, as much as we want to paint them as the bad guys, were right! There wasn’t a lot of “Christ” in Christmas anymore. But the Puritans’ attempts to ban Christmas celebrations were highly unpopular and the public pushed back until the holly-jolly Christmas traditions resumed. Over the next few centuries, the pendulum swung back and forth between the extremes of ban Christmas altogether and woo-hoo, let’s party harder! Charles Dickens addressed a lot of these issues in his classic novel *A Christmas Carol*. He did his best to bring the two extremes together, but as in the case of many centrists throughout history, he got a patronizing pat on the head and a “Nice try dude. We’ll make a few movies based on your book and call it a

‘Christmas classic’ while completely ignoring the point you were trying to make. Happy holidays Chuck. We appreciate the effort.”

This morning, as we begin our preparations for Christmas, I want you to consider this – We were created for, born into, and destined for joy. Joy is deeply relational and rooted in the fact that we belong to God. Joy is often a companion to other emotions. We can feel it even as we’re experiencing many emotions at once - Grief, anticipation, anxiety, excitement, disappointment, and even exhaustion. Some folks live with the myth that we don’t deserve joy – that it’s out of our reach. But our joy as Christians is rooted in the truth that we belong to God. The theme for advent this year is, “How Can a Weary World Rejoice?” Let’s be real. The past few years have been exhausting. I’m not going to make a laundry list of all the reasons why I believe this to be true, but I can feel it. I feel it in myself, and I see it in others. But I also believe that we deserve to fully feel joy. Right now, the world needs our joy, even if we are weary. And our joy is better when it’s shared.

Our scripture this morning is, thankfully, from Luke’s gospel where we meet Zechariah and Elizabeth. Zechariah was a priest during the reign of King Herod and Elizabeth, his wife, was a descendent of Israel’s priestly class. This is a couple who, for many years, battled with infertility but remained steadfast in their faith even though Elizabeth was older than what most people considered child-bearing age. Perhaps they felt the weight of unattained hopes and dreams. But one day, an angel named Gabriel visits Zechariah with a promise of good news. Elizabeth is pregnant and will give birth to a baby boy! Good news, right? But for some reason, Zechariah can’t fully receive this good news, and Gabriel casts him into silence for the duration of Elizabeth’s pregnancy. Sometimes weariness can harden us and prevent us from living fully. But is it possible for weariness to give way to hope?

Here's a sneak peek of next week’s scripture. In Luke 1:34 when the angel Gabriel appears to Mary, she’s told that she’ll have a baby boy. Mary says, “How will this be?” Then the angel describes how

everything will come to pass. But Zechariah's response to the angel's news is different. He says, "How will I know? How can I be sure?" The angel 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." What is the difference between Mary and Zechariah's response to Gabriel's good news? You could argue that Mary's response to the angel's impossible news was trust and curiosity. Her response assumes that the news *will* come true. She just wants to know *how* it's going to happen. But Zechariah wants certainty. His question implies that he can't even be sure if what the angel is telling him is even true. Gabriel gives him explicit details about what's going to happen: Elizabeth will bear a son named John who will be a joy and delight; John will be filled with the Holy Spirit, and he will bring people back to God and fathers back to their children. He will prepare people for God. In other words, the angel presents Zechariah with a detailed vision of what will come to pass, and Zechariah, out of his weariness, says, "I can't accept this to be true."

We experience weariness in so many ways. Like Zechariah and Elizabeth, we can be weary because of our age or because it seems like we're always having to wait. We can be weary because we've done the same old routine for years and years, but haven't seen anything change. We can be weary for various reasons, but do we have to *stay* weary? Can we exchange our weariness for hope? Is there a way to experience weariness and insist on the blessed hope that is to come? Zechariah's question to Gabriel is directly aligned with this question of weariness and expectation of hope. In verse 18, Zechariah asks, "How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years." When we are weary, we tend to seek clarity instead of insisting on God's grace to provide for us during the weariness. As a result, Zechariah is muted. When Zechariah is before the people who were wondering about his delay in the temple, they realize that he had seen a vision. What we notice in the text is that the crowd, having witnessed his inability to speak, doesn't speak on the issue either. Even though no words are

exchanged, it seems that weariness has fueled the inability to believe or has offered us an opportunity to lose hope.

I'm going to warn you ahead of time – I'm not going to have a lot of answers during this Advent season. I'm not going to have weekly “top ten” things you ought to be doing to have a great Christmas. I'm not going to be a fountain of platitudes to help you have a holly-jolly Christmas. But I will and do have a lot of questions for you to consider. Like, when in your life have you been like Mary -- curious about the impossible? When in your life have you been like Zechariah? When have you, out of weariness, been unwilling to believe in news that seems too good to be true? What weariness do you carry in your body and soul? What does it look like for you to rejoice when you are weary? When have you welcomed joy while simultaneously feeling anxious, afraid, alone, sad, or overwhelmed? What does joy do for you? How does it change you?

Here's another one related to our scripture lesson - What do you make of Zechariah's time of silence? Consider all the ways Zechariah's inability to speak could change his daily life and routines as a priest. What do you imagine he learns from that season of silence? Have you ever been forced into a time of solitude or silence, or have you willingly attended a silent retreat? How did those experiences shape you spiritually?

Think about Elizabeth. What do you suppose were the hopes and dreams that she and Zechariah had for their lives? What is the story they had accepted or resigned themselves to? How does the angel's news disrupt this? Are there hopes and dreams in your life that haven't come to pass that you've resigned yourself to? How is God disrupting those beliefs and inviting you to live into a new story?

My prayer for this Advent season is that we will find ways to hold space for our weariness *and* our joy. Let us try to seek the “thrill of hope” in our hurting world. Let us learn to welcome joy—even as we are

struggling to find comfort. In this weary world, may we find many ways to rejoice.