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Luke 1:1-23; Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19  
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### We Acknowledge our Weariness

The much loved Christmas song, “O Holy Night,” was written in 1847 by a wine broker, named Placide Cappeau. He came from a small town in France. One source suggested that he was better known for his poetry than his church going. Others claimed he was an atheist. Regardless, one Christmas, Placide was commissioned by the local parish priest to write a poem for his Christmas Eve service.

Using the Gospel of Luke, he imagined what it must have been like in Bethlehem at the time of Jesus’ birth. What resulted was a poem titled “Cantique de Noel” or Hymn of Christmas. Moved by his own work, Placide decided to set this poem to music. So he turned to one of his friends, a Jewish musician and opera writer, Adolphe Charles Adams.

Though the words of the poem did not connect with himself personally, Adolphe felt compelled to help his friend out. Three weeks later, the song was completed and performed at the Christmas Eve service. “Initially [the song] was wholeheartedly accepted by the church in France and found its way into many Catholic Christmas services.”<sup>1</sup> But once it was determined that Placide was not a believer and Adolphe was a Jew, the song was denounced by the church. It wasn’t for three decades later that an American writer, John Dwight, discovered “O Holy Night” for a publication he was writing.

John was an ardent slavery abolitionist and since it was about the time of the American Civil War, he resonated with the lines, “Truly He taught us to love one another; His law is love and His gospel is peace. Chains shall He break for the slave is our brother and in His name all oppression shall cease.”

Fast forward a few years to France during the Franco-Prussian War on Christmas Eve. It is said that in the mist of fierce fighting, a French soldier jumped out of his trenches, unarmed, and began to sing the words to “Cantique de Noel.” After completing the song, a German enemy infantryman jumped out from his hiding place and responded by singing a Christmas song in German. For twenty four hours, both sides observed a peace fire in honor of Christmas Day.

Even amidst great weariness and turmoil of war, two enemies found reason to rejoice.

A line in “O Holy Night” says, “A thrill of hope, the weary world rejoices.”

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<sup>1</sup> Ace Collins, *Stories Behind the Best-Loved Songs of Christmas* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 133.

I'm struck this Christmas season by this idea of weariness and rejoicing. How do we hold these two seemingly opposing ideals in tension? What does it mean to be both weary and joyful? What does it look like? And what examples do we see in the Christmas stories of weariness and rejoicing?

We just heard Joseph's story and how both weariness, long suffering, and rejoicing have woven their way into the fabric of his life? Though his story isn't ours, I'm sure you are feeling just as weary and heavy burdened. Maybe it's your own medical prognosis or living with chronic pain. It could be a broken relationship. The loss of a loved one. The weight of being a caregiver. Not quite finding that job of your dreams. Maybe it's financial instability. The direction of a wayward child. A strained marriage. The lingering effects of COVID. Or the brutal wars in the Ukraine and Israel.

Folks. We are weary. I'm weary. Our world is weary.

But "O Holy Night" tells us that even amidst our weariness, a thrill of hope breaks through. A reason to rejoice.

Our scripture story today invites us to enter into the lives of Zechariah and Elizabeth. In the time of King Herod, in the land of Judea, which was occupied by the Roman Army, Zechariah and Elizabeth were weary. Worn out. At the end of their rope. And yet, God broke through their darkness, giving them reason to rejoice.

Please join me as we read from Luke 1:5-23.

Luke 1:5-23

**5** In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. **6** Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly. **7** But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old.

**8** Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, **9** he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. **10** And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside.

**11** Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. **12** When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. **13** But the angel said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John. **14** He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, **15** for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. **16** He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. **17** And

he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

**18** Zechariah asked the angel, “How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years.”

**19** The angel said to him, “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. **20** And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time.”

**21** Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple. **22** When he came out, he could not speak to them. They realized he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak.

**23** When his time of service was completed, he returned home.

Let us pray. Prayer of Illumination.

I want to start off looking at several advertisements that I found that project for us unrealistic images of Christmas. I was first struck by how odd they were some years ago when I was serving at St. Paul’s Winter Housing Overflow and watching television with a group of homeless men. I don’t know if it shocked them as much as it did me. But it made me feel very uncomfortable.

Take this first image. It shows a beautifully dressed woman in her impeccably clean home. Everything is perfectly in place. Notice that even the ornaments on the tree match the gift wrapping on the packages. Who does that? Our tree is a mix mash of homemade ornaments our kids have made over the years and ones that people gave us. Nothing matches. And Christmas morning, our house looks like a train wreck with people lounging around in pajamas as we open gifts.

How about this one from Family Dollar Store. “Helping you do more. More Joy This Holiday.” Except more things that cost a dollar that will break as soon as you play with it certainly won’t give us joy. Besides, joy is something that doesn’t come from a store. Joy is a gift that just shows up out of nowhere. A surprise, that we were least expecting especially when we don’t feel particularly happy.

What about this one? Mom and Dad seem as mesmerized by what their daughter is seeing on her new phone. And I’m thinking...no!!! She’s too young. Don’t give it to her. Social media will destroy herself esteem.

Or how about this one? Not just one new car but three. Are the bows extra? It’d sure be nice to have Santa leave one of those in our driveway. Though in reality, each of those come with an extra car payment, I’d rather not make.

And finally, there was this one. “Whoever said size doesn’t matter...already has a big diamond.” What does that do? It fosters dissatisfaction with the good gifts that we already have. The diamond you were given is just fine enough!

Now juxtapose those images of what we should be feeling with what we are actually feeling. I mentioned some of those things earlier. But in a nutshell, we are weary.

The Oxford dictionary defines weary as feeling or showing tiredness, especially as a result of excessive exertion or lack of sleep. I’m sure Zechariah and Elizabeth were weary.

The Prophet Isaiah spoke about our weariness and God’s lack of it.

"Do you not know? Have you not heard?

The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth.

He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom.

He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak.

Even youths grow tired and weary and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.”<sup>2</sup>

The Hebrew word used here for weary is yaga. It means to be thoroughly exhausted. To tire or to toil. We humans get weary. But apparently, God does not.

I think we will see this morning that Zechariah was weary in life. But despite this weariness...yaga...there are several things from Zechariah’s story that I want to lift up that I think will help us rejoice this Advent season. The first is that despite Zechariah’s weariness, he still showed up for worship. Second, we see how Zechariah was brutally honest before God and never stopped praying. Third, we see how Zechariah was open and available to God despite his weariness. And finally, we see how Zechariah never gave up hope that somehow God would make a way through this desert of barrenness to birth something in him and Elizabeth that they had never expected.

So first, let us dive into the fact that despite Zechariah’s weariness, he still showed up for worship. According to Chronicles, the priests were divided up into twenty four divisions, with each division serving about two weeks out of the year. Zechariah, as a priest, was part of one of those divisions, so this must have been his one day of service. It was something he did very infrequently since the responsibility was cast by lots or drawing straws. One of his primary duties was to keep the incense burning on the altar in front of the Most Holy Place while the people prayed outside the tent of meeting. He would supply it with fresh incense before the morning sacrifice and then again after the evening sacrifice.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Isaiah 40:28-31

<sup>3</sup> 1 Chronicles 23-24

So it wasn't that Zechariah was particularly weary from his roll in the ministry.

It must have been from something else.

Verse 7 alludes to the cause. Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth could not have children and now they were well beyond the childbearing years.

Notice that the scripture tells us upfront that in the sight of God, they had done everything right. "They observed the Lord's commandments and regulations blamelessly." What this also implies, however, was that in the sight of people, it was assumed that they must have done something wrong because in their day barrenness was considered a curse from God. Zechariah and Elizabeth must have been extremely weary, tired to the point of exhaustion...yaga...for dodging people's whispers and downward gazes, and always having to plead their innocence.

Have you ever been wrongly accused of something based on what others thought you had done but you know in the sight of God, you had done nothing wrong? That makes you weary. If so, then you know exactly what Zechariah and Elizabeth were feeling.

Next we see how Zechariah never stopped praying. As he was offering the incense, both he and the people outside were praying. And the angel of the Lord, Gabriel, knew exactly for what Zechariah was praying. A child.

Let's camp on that notion for a moment and think about this. Zechariah knew full well that that ship had passed. And yet, he still prayed that some how, some way, God would make a way, through the impossibility of it. We can only imagine the years and years of unanswered prayers they had experienced, and yet still Zechariah did not give up. He persevered. And like little rain drops collected in a reservoir in heaven, God unleashed all those prayers upon them at just the right time. On account of Zechariah's weariness, maybe all he could do was groan. The bible tells us that the Holy Spirit speaks to God on our behalf when all we can do is groan.<sup>4</sup>

What weariness do we bring to God this morning that all we can do is groan? Isn't it so incredible that our God is so near, that God hears our groans and understands them fully.

As Zechariah was worshipping, God showed up through Gabriel. Our translation today says that he was startled. We can certainly understand being startled when something supernatural happens that we weren't expecting. The Greek actually says that Zechariah was troubled by the Gabriel's visit, not startled. The Greek word used is tarraso, it means to cause inward commotion, take away

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<sup>4</sup> Romans 8:26-27

one's calmness of mind, to disturb our equanimity; To stir up, disquiet, or make restless. Zechariah was caught off guard by the angel's presence.

One podcaster described how joy shows up in this same way amidst being weary. It sometimes bursts into our world in ways, like Gabriel, when we least expect it. But not in a bad way as to make us fearful or troubled, but in a way that leads us to rejoice.

I remember speaking at my grandmother's memorial some years ago and I was particularly teary. Go figure. You guys know that I am sometimes emotional when I talk. But I recalled with everyone this beautiful moment as our family was gathered at my parent's home and the radio was playing. The song Bohemian Rhapsody by Queen came on the radio. We were dancing, and singing, and enjoying being together. Exactly what my grandmother would have wanted. We were very deeply sad regarding our loss, and yet, we were also rejoicing. You can't reconcile those two emotions, they just are.

Have you ever experienced unexpected bursts of joy break through your mourning? It's a gift from God.

We also see how Zechariah was brutally honest before God. I think Zechariah gets a bad rap at Christmastime. Maybe it's because I sympathize with him as a pastor and the expectations we sometimes place on our clergy. Or maybe it's because of how the angel silenced him because Zechariah struggled to fully believe that what the angel was saying would come true. But can we blame Zechariah's hesitancy? There were years and years of trauma, layered upon layer. Maybe even multiple miscarriages. So of course, Zechariah responded guardedly, "Lord, you know that my wife and I can't handle yet another disappointment. Besides we are beyond our childbearing years. How can I be sure of this?"

Sometimes I wonder if we as Christians think that we need to be overly polite with God. That something we might say could somehow offend God and make God angry. My friends, if that is how we pray, then maybe our idea of God is too small and weak. The Psalms are full of examples where David was raw and brutally honest with God about what was going on or how God has been absent.

David cried out, "How long, Lord God Almighty, will your anger smolder against the prayers of your people. You have fed them with the bread of tears; you have made them drink tears by the bowlful. You have made us an object of derision to our neighbors, and our enemies mock us." I wonder if those might be words on every Israeli and Palestinian heart this Christmas season.

What hopes and fears do we bring with us this Advent season? What if we were brutally honest with God ourselves? Could we believe that God would meet us there?

Zechariah was open and available to God. And even though he struggled to believe what Gabriel had told him would happen, he still received God's glad tidings of joy. It was good news! He and Elizabeth would have a son.

Finally, we see how this surprise encounter with Gabriel gave Zechariah hope. The Oxford dictionary describes hope as a feeling or expectation that a certain thing would happen. The Greek word for hope is *elpis* which means expectation, trust, or confidence. It comes from the root word *elpeo*, which means to anticipate (with pleasure) and to welcome. *Elpis* is an expectation of what is guaranteed.

The Hebrew word for hope is *tikvah* which means expectation. It could also mean cord or rope, which comes from a root word which mean to bind or to wait for or upon something. Interesting that whenever a priest entered into the Holy of Holies to offer sacrifices, they tied a *tikvah* around their waste in case they died in the course of their service, and they could be pulled out of there without desecrating the holy space.

I think Zechariah's *tikvah* or hope was more than just God granting them a child. It was the promise that God would actually meet Zechariah and Elizabeth in their weariness. That God had heard their prayers. And that the fulfillment of God's promise would involve them in a way that would change the trajectory of all humankind. This child, would not be just any child, but one who would make ready a people prepared for the Lord. Who would bring Israel back to the Lord their God.

A new light had dawned for Zechariah and Elizabeth who had been wearily walking in darkness.

My friends, how are we doing this morning? Have we been walking in weariness for so long that we've given up any hope of having a meaningful encounter with the living God this Christmas? What if God wanted to light up our darkness? What would we hope for?

What would it take for us to rejoice, despite our weariness?

Zechariah and Elizabeth invite us to walk with them in the land of the valley of the shadow of death and wait until a new light has dawned. The Good News this Advent is that God has not forgotten us. God is with us. And God is in us. Immanuel.

My hope for each of us this Advent season is that we have this sense of holy unrest, a troubling deep in our soul, that things are about to change...in a good way. That God is birthing something new in us this season despite our weariness. And for that, we rejoice.

Let us pray.

"Rejoice, rejoice Immanuel.  
Shall come to thee O Israel!"