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*How Does a Weary World Rejoice:  
We Acknowledge Our Weariness*

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*Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19; Luke 1:1-23*

Last year, in mid-Advent, as I was unloading some holiday bundles from the car, I greeted our neighbors as they were coming back from their church's Christmas pageant. Our household was preparing for Westminster's, and we had fun exchanging details about the ways our respective congregations approach the telling of the familiar story of Christ's birth, with all the chaos and joy. They shared with me that in their church, the roles of Mary, Joseph, and Jesus are assigned ahead of time, but on the day of the pageant and at the designated part of the service, all the other roles are up for grabs! Children come forward and in the moment choose if they will don a

camel costume or pick up a shepherd's staff, whether they want to be an angel or a wise one. They can decide if they want to be someone who helps to narrate the story, offers a low-key "baaa," leads the way as a bright star, foretells a prophecy, or stands to the side in the supporting role of reverent donkey.

I can sense the panic of our Families, Youth, and Children staff and leaders contemplating such a pageant! And we thank them for all the careful preparations already underway for Westminster's pageant, at 11am on December 17, where all of the parts are arranged, and lines are being lovingly rehearsed!

What struck me about this practice in our neighbor's church was the way it created space for whatever a young one's particular energy might be on that given day. If you feel like being more up front, here is your spot. If you feel more like being part of the background, there is room for you over here. And if it all feels like too much when it's

time to rush forward and play a part, then there is an open invitation to participate as an active worshipper.

I know our staff and leaders lovingly receive each child throughout the rehearsal season and on the day of the pageant no one is forced to lead if they aren't ready, but this "grab bag" approach to the pageant seemed like a beautiful acknowledgement of all the things a child of God of any age might bring to this time of the year- fatigue, hope, grief, joy, proclamation, a need for quiet, a need for healing, a need for naming all of this and more as we draw near to God and one another.

This Advent season, we will explore together over the next four weeks a movement into the first two chapters of Luke's Gospel, in conversation with the prophets and the book of Psalms. These passages will help us to acknowledge the range of things we might be carrying with us right now and that sometimes holding onto all of it at once can bring a sense of weariness, as we recognize

our own personal weariness, or the weariness that we know is collectively around us across communities and the world. These first stories in the Gospel are of people who are waiting *and* who are weary. Zechariah and Elizabeth are waiting and weary. Mary is waiting and weary. Simeon and Anna, at the end of Luke chapter 2, when Jesus is presented at the temple, are waiting and weary.

What things make us weary, and what does it mean to name and share our weariness at the beginning of this season, and to look to Scripture for connection, hope, joy, and amazement? What might it look like for us to acknowledge that our starting place this December might be one of weariness, and from that place perhaps we can find ways to rejoice.

I am not suggesting that the Westminster staff as a whole or leaders of the church are weary because of the current pastoral transition, though this December is different from others of recent years! I am suggesting that there is a

universality to weariness, and that each of us can enter into it from one place or another.

You likely don't need me to list all the potential personal factors and those in our communal life together that can make us feel weary, especially not as we prepare to tell the story of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem, which is less than 50 miles from the conflict and humanitarian crisis in Gaza, where a temporary cease fire has ended, and the bombings and ground incursion have resumed.

Palestinian Christian leaders in the West Bank across denominations decided this last week to halt all activities and public celebrations for Christmas, as long as a state of war continues in the Gaza Strip.

I am mindful of considering what is the language of the weary and how privilege either protects some from true weariness or clouds our judgment about the difference between what is weariness and what is actually annoyance, inconvenience, or irritation over the small

interruptions of our lives. There are those who receive no relief from the weariness caused by the systems that keep them in racialized poverty, vulnerable to violence, or with limited access to basic human rights.

The UN estimates that over 5,000 pregnant women are caught up in the conflict in Gaza, where the Palestinian health system has collapsed, and more than 160 babies are born every day in this war zone.<sup>1</sup> Many of us may remember the stories and images of a sea of Egyptian doctors waiting with incubators to receive nearly 30 premature infants born in Gaza several weeks ago and transported for emergency care. Those doctors and health professionals must be weary. Those precious little ones have been born into weariness.

This first Sunday of Advent we begin at the opening of Luke's Gospel, the only Gospel that starts with the story of the birth of John the Baptist to Elizabeth and Zechariah,

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<sup>1</sup> Obtained online, <https://news.un.org/en/interview/2023/11/1143327>, November 20, 2023.

which foreshadows Jesus' birth, and draws us back to Abraham and Sarah, Elkanah and Hannah.

Zechariah the priest is taking his routine service in the Jerusalem temple, something each group of priests did for two appointed cycles each year. Individuals were chosen by lot and were understood to be divinely selected, thus there is something significant about Zechariah's placement in the temple and it is into this moment that the angel Gabriel appears. Gabriel announces that Zechariah's wife Elizabeth will have a baby and they will name him John. Zechariah's immediate response is to pose an objection, which makes sense given that he and Elizabeth were both getting on in years and no longer had any expectation that they would have children. We can imagine the weariness they felt at that stage of life, for sadly, childlessness was considered a disgrace in Israel, which Elizabeth refers to in verse 25 in regard to her pregnancy, when she says, "This is what God has done for

me when God looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people.”

The angel has offered Zechariah a detailed vision of what is to come, and essentially he says, “There is no way I can accept this to be true.” Gabriel affirms that he has been sent by God to speak to Zechariah and to bring him this good news. Because Zechariah did not believe these words, he will be unable to speak until the fulfillment of this vision.

Only the designated priest could enter the sanctuary, and so the people are waiting, since they cannot go into the temple to see what is keeping Zechariah. Rev. Cecilia D. Armstrong makes the observation that when we are weary, we tend to seek clarity instead of insisting on God’s grace to provide for us during our weariness.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Commentary throughout sermon from Rev. Cecilia D. Armstrong from “A Sanctified Art” Advent Worship Planning Series.



When Zechariah comes out and he cannot speak to the people, without hesitation they realize he has seen a vision. *They* don't exclaim there is no way this could be true.

Zechariah seeks clarity. The people seem more ready to seek God's grace.

In her commentary on this passage, Elisabeth Johnson makes that claim that, "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," and I might add, despite our weariness, "to create faith in us and to accomplish God's purposes. Zechariah and Elizabeth were unlikely candidates to receive God's unexpected ways."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Obtained online from *Working Preacher*, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/zechariahs-song-2/commentary-on-luke-15-13-14-25-57-80>, November 18, 2023.

If God was able to work through the weariness of Zechariah and Elizabeth, then what might be possible in our time, through us?

In her poem "Angel-Filled Advent," from the book *Kneeling in Bethlehem*, Ann Weems gives permission to live into feelings of weariness rather than reaching for a consumerist packaged falsehood of Advent.

Wouldn't it be wonderful

if Advent came filled with angels and alleluias?

Wouldn't it be perfect

if we were greeted on these December mornings  
with a hovering of heavenly hosts

tuning their harps and brushing up on their fal-la-las?

Wouldn't it be incredible

if their music filled our waking hours

with the promise of peace on earth

and if each Advent night we dreamed of

nothing but goodwill?

Wouldn't we be ecstatic

if we could take those angels shopping,  
or trim the tree or have them hold our hands  
and dance through our houses decorating?

And, oh, how glorious it would be

to sit in church next to an angel  
and sing hark-the-heralds!

What an Advent that would be!

What Christmas spirit we could have!

An angel-filled Advent has so many possibilities!<sup>4</sup>

Weems's poem suggests that all is not ecstatic, and each moment may not feel as glorious as the glory of the highest heavens. This Advent, the world and each of us individually may not be greeting perfect December mornings with choirs of angels flitting about. If you do have angels filling your waking hours with song and filling your evening dreams with alleluias, please do not

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<sup>4</sup> Ann Weems, "Angel-Filled Advent," *Kneeling in Bethlehem* (Louisville, Westminster/John Knox) 1993, p. 18.

understand me as suggesting you should bear a weight of weariness you aren't already feeling. Maybe you are an angel bringing earthly joy to someone in need of a hark-the-herald, or a fa-la-la. And for that we give thanks. But the world as a whole, creation, and all of God's beloved ones, haven't yet fully received that perfect, incredible gift of love, peace, and justice that God hopes for the world.

Psalm 80 is a fitting Psalm to name the potential contradictions of this season and church may be one of the few places where we can name them, where we can sing for joy and hold onto hope together, while also praying unceasingly for God's peace and justice desperately needed the world over. This Psalm expresses raw and honest misery:

O Lord God of hosts,

how long will you be angry with your people's prayers?

You have fed them with the bread of tears

and given them tears to drink in full measure.

You make us the scorn of our neighbors;  
our enemies laugh among themselves. (Psalm 80:5-6)

And yet the people of Israel are still praying their prayers to God, believing this is a God who hears and receives these prayers and who will respond. The Psalmist makes a plea for restoration three times: “Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved.”

Returning to Cecilia D. Armstrong, “Restoration is important because amid weariness, there must be light at the end of the tunnel. There must be a way to combat the weariness of the current times. There must be a glimpse of hope that helps to sustain us during the weary times and grants us the opportunity to rejoice.”

Must we stay weary this season? No, certainly not. Instead, must we rush to joy and celebration before we are ready? No, not that, either. A staff member reminded some of us during a small group discussion earlier this fall

that it is possible to hold onto two seemingly conflicting emotions at the same time.

What might it feel like to come together now feeling simultaneously weary and hopeful, fatigued but looking for connection, tired and open to joy?

This Advent perhaps we are holding onto weariness, and our practice this season may not be to let it go, to push it aside, necessarily, or to convince ourselves to “cheer up because it’s almost Christmas,” but to listen and learn in our waiting, and perhaps we will discover that from that weariness we might find words and reason to rejoice. If you are looking for a way to do that in community this week, I encourage you to attend Tuesday evening’s Service of Remembrance.

In a few minutes, as we come forward to the table to receive a symbol and a sign of God’s love and grace for us, may we bring our weariness and may we bring whatever

is our commitment to understanding that weariness- that it is a desperation or an outrage that we need to turn over to God, or lament that we need to share in community, or it is a weariness looking for a creative outlet of advocacy.

If we were to have the full array of costumes and roles for the pageant laid out for the taking, what would you choose? Would you be among the choir of angels, proclaiming peace on earth and goodwill to all? Or would you be a prayerful animal in the stable, or a shepherd keeping watch over the flock? Would you, like Zechariah, hold the silence to see what might come of it, or like the people, would you trust in the promise of a vision? Would you stay right where you are, with just enough energy to hold fast to the story?

As we continue through this season together, we will hold weariness before us, and through Scripture and song, we will find joy, hope, and connection not despite our

acknowledgement of our weariness but perhaps because of it.

May it be so. Amen.