

A sermon entitled:
How can a weary world rejoice? We acknowledge our weariness
From the text Luke 1:1-23
Preached at Plymouth Presbyterian Church
St Helens, Oregon
December 1, 2024

We sang “O Come, O Come Emmanuel” as a first hymn today.

The haunting melody of “O Come, O Come Emmanuel” has resonated with the faithful for centuries, carrying an air of mystery and longing that sets it apart from the cheery Christmas tunes so often heard in December. Originally written in Latin in the 8th or 9th century, this hymn was sung in monasteries during the final days of Advent, a practice steeped in anticipation of the coming Christ.

This hymn holds a unique tension—joyful expectation wrapped in somber tones. Written in a minor key, its unresolved melodies reflect the human condition: longing for fulfillment, grappling with sorrow, and yearning for hope. And yet, even amidst the lament, it calls us to “Rejoice!” That paradox is at the heart of our Advent journey:

Mystery and meaning
Hope and lament
Joy and weariness

As we begin this Advent season, we’ll explore these themes through the Gospel of Luke, asking, “How does a weary world rejoice?”

A Story of Weariness and Hope

The Gospel of Luke opens with a story of weariness and hope, an obscure priest named Zechariah and his wife, Elizabeth. It doesn’t open with the joyful announcement of Christ’s birth! The story begins with weariness. Luke writes:

“Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. And they had no children because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.”

Notice the word “and.” Some translations say “but,” implying a contradiction—that their infertility was at odds with their righteousness. But the original Greek word, “καί,” means “and.” It affirms a deeper truth: righteousness and suffering can coexist.

This is important. Zechariah and Elizabeth were faithful and childless. They were obedient and heartbroken. Their story reminds us that life is not either/or—it’s both/and. Righteousness does not shield us from suffering, and suffering does not disqualify us from God’s love.

Acknowledging Weariness

So, how does a weary world rejoice? **The first step is acknowledging our weariness.** It's tempting to suppress our grief or pretend everything is fine, but when we do, we block the flow of both sorrow and joy. Like a kinked hose, we stop the water from flowing entirely.

The story of Zechariah and Elizabeth shows us a different way. Despite their personal sorrow and the oppression of King Herod's reign, they remained faithful. Zechariah continued his priestly duties, going about the mundane in the midst of weariness. And then, in the ordinariness of his life, God breaks through with extraordinary news:

“Your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth.”

What a beautiful moment! And yet, Zechariah's response is marked by doubt. He struggles to believe such good news, and as a result, he is struck mute. Once again, we see the tension of joy and weariness:

- He receives a miraculous promise and cannot speak of it.
- He experiences overwhelming joy and a humbling silence.

This paradox mirrors our own lives, doesn't it? The good and the bad, the hope and the hardship—they so often walk hand in hand.

Advent: Waiting and Hope

Advent calls us to live in this tension. **It invites us to name our weariness while holding on to hope.**

What makes you weary this Advent? Is it the war between Israel and Hamas? Between Ukraine and Russia? Is it the rancid politics? Is it some having too much while others have too little? Or perhaps it's more personal: We just spent time with families. Your weariness may have a name like sickness, anxiety, loneliness . . . What's making you weary this Advent? The prompt on our Advent calendar invites us to write down all the things making us weary on a piece of paper, then ripping that paper into tiny pieces as a way to release it all to God. I encourage you to do this some time today.

Acknowledging weariness is not a sign of weakness; it's the first step toward healing.

Why? Because weariness does not have the final say. As the Psalmist reminds us:

“Weeping may last through the night, but joy comes in the morning” (Psalm 30:5).

This is the hope of Advent. It's the hope symbolized by the first candle we light today—a reminder that the darkest nights cannot extinguish the light of Christ.

So, as we sing “O Come, O Come Emmanuel” this season, let its bittersweet melody remind us

of this truth: Joy and weariness can coexist. In the midst of sorrow, we can still sing “Rejoice!” because we know that Emmanuel—God with us—has come, is coming, and will come again.