

Psalm 80:3-7 ~ Luke 1:1-23

How Does a Weary World Rejoice – We Acknowledge Our Weariness

First Sunday of Advent ~ Sacrament of Holy Communion ~ December 3, 2023

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What is making *you* weary? I am willing to bet, that if we were all to take a collective sigh, and think about the sources of our own particular bone-weary fatigue, our minds would go in as many directions as there are people worshipping in this sanctuary and remotely. Some of you may be weary of long sermons! Or more broadly, religion in general. We each have our personal issues and struggles, no matter how old or young we are or feel. And then there's the whole world of hurt out there, of which we are a part. About which God calls us to care about. For whom God became one of us, in order to redeem, restore, renew.

Before we dive into our Advent series that begins today, "How Does a Weary World Rejoice?" You guessed it: I am going to ask you to turn to a person worshipping near you and spill: just for 30 seconds about *what is making you weary, right now*. Honestly. And then I will give you 30 seconds for the other person to share. Remote worshippers out there who are worshipping alone, take these 60 seconds to talk to God, out loud or write it down—everything you can think of that is making you weary. Ready, set, go....

I definitely heard some energy about what is making us weary. The irony, of course, is that our Savior, Jesus, the one whose coming we anticipate and celebrate in this season of Advent, is the one who said, "*Come to me, all you who are weary, and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.*" (Matthew 11:28) And yet, has rest and restoration *ever* come to mind when you think about the Christmas season? Or when was the last time you went to a Christmas party which involved slowing down, taking a beat, sharing a gentle walk, a time of storytelling and deep listening? If Jesus is the reason for the season, perhaps we should consider this alternative to soul-crushing business.

Here at FPC, beginning today, the First Sunday of Advent all the way through Dec. 31, for the next five Sundays, we are going to do something different. We are going to take our time, walking step by step through the first two chapters of Luke. We will learn into, lean upon, and learn from this deep narrative, so core to our faith tradition. Our children are memorizing their lines in the play they will present on Dec. 17 that tells Luke's story narrated in Luke 1-2. Here in worship, we will be experiencing this season kind of like a Netflix or Hulu series. And today, is Episode 1.

Luke is the only gospel writer who took his time, with two long chapters weighing in at a total of 118 verses of scripture, to tell the story of Jesus' first coming to the earth in the form of a baby boy born to a young girl named Mary. You have heard the basic outline of this story before, and so you may be thinking, not *this* again. However, I wonder, if you have taken a deep dive recently, into the twists and turns of these 118 verses. The cosmic gospel of John starts the story at the beginning of creation. The wonderfully Jewish gospel of Matthew begins by tracing

Jesus' genealogy back to Abraham. Mark doesn't bother with a birth for Jesus story at all. He is in a big hurry to begin when grown-up Jesus' ministry starts.

Luke begins his telling with the birth of John the Baptist, the one who prepares the way for Jesus. Right as the action starts, Luke sets up the backdrop with this phrase, "In the days of King Herod..." Cue the minor, ominous, music. And then presents the problem: a righteous, yet older, childless couple. For the Jewish ear, this is also a sign of hope. Why? A common ancient theme and thread when God is about to take Divine action involves a child is needed by God to perform a special task. And typically, that child's mother has not been able to conceive a child in her womb. There is actually quite a lineup of Ancient Israel super stars who share this type of birth story: Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Samson, Samuel, and now today's story, the miraculous birth of John the Baptist, to old and weary, Zechariah and Elizabeth. How many times has priest Zechariah gone through the motions, lighting the incense, reading the scriptures, leading prayers. Whatever wonder and awe he might have experienced as a younger man was long gone. Between the lines you get the feeling that Zechariah may be settling down into, "This is all there is. Here we go again."

We begin our reading from Luke 1:1 to give you the gift of the full story. It starts with a formal "Dedication to Theophilus." Who is Theophilus? Perhaps Luke's patron, we see it in Acts 1:1, but no one really knows. The name "Theophilus" means "lover of God." That could be you and me, anyone who loves God. This one's for you. And it goes like this.

Communion Meditation:

"You're muted!" Thanks to the Coronavirus Pandemic, we turned to the land of Zoom, and a "Hollywood Squares" experience on screen, to meet when it wasn't safe to do so in person. Many of us had to quickly learn this new mode of communication that involves an important feature: The mute button. Important to use to cut down on extraneous noise when two or more are gathered on screen. But it is hard to remember to mute and unmute oneself in the course of an online conversation.

Here in our story in Luke 1:1, back in the First Century, God (through the Angel Gabriel) chose to mute Zechariah, right when he was supposed to start a church/temple service. Hard on anyone—especially us clergy types. Why? The narrative is spare here, but adequate. What we *can* see is that Zechariah questioned Gabriel's amazing announcement. Maybe because he was tired. Weary. Cynical. Savy. Maybe because he was like us. He needed hard evidence. He needed *to know*. Did you notice his question to Gabriel, "How will I know that this is so?" For this response, Zechariah was muted. And not just momentarily in a meeting until someone figured out how to change the setting. Not just for the duration of the meeting or day. Not until he did know--when it came to pass nine months later.

And at this point in our Advent series, we will leave it there. To be continued next week: Episode 2. For now, as we prepare to come to the Lord's Table, in the light of today's episode, I invite you to consider whom you have been muting of late. And maybe not even realizing it. It could be your partner, your spouse, your best friend. Muting them by tuning them out. By not

really listening. An intimate you know so well, you think you already know what they are going to say before they say it. How might you work to unmute them in your mind and heart this Advent season?

Or perhaps you have muted a more distant friend or relative, a relationship that is sputtering either by intention or benign neglect. Open your heart to hear whom God brings into your mind as you come into the Table. Unmute that person this Advent Season. What about whole groups of people whose politics or worldviews are ones you disagree with? Another reason for muting, shutting them down or out. As an Advent practice try vent learning how to disagree without being disagreeable. The bread of life and the cup of salvation will give you the energy and the grace to give this a go. Sometimes alcohol has been described as "liquid courage." Consider this holy meal as a morsel and a drop of faith, hope, love and grace on tap for you today.

Perhaps you have muted God's voice, God's presence in your life. Maybe deliberately, or without realizing it. God isn't giving you the answers you need. You want to know things that cannot be known. Or the trappings of religion are muting the Inner Voice of Love who calls you Beloved, who calls you by name. Who gets you. When we do this, we are also muting ourselves: your beautiful, evolving, real self.

Come to the Table of Grace, the Table of unmuting as we begin this Advent season. We will be back at this Table again on Christmas Eve. Notice how you do, how we do from today until Christmas Eve with the practice of unmuting others, God, ourselves. It begins with listening. Let's listen for the voices that have been long silenced between now and then. I pray on that mystical night; we all will have grown in our ability to hear the voices within and around us. The voices that will sing the thrill of hope to our weary souls.