

Isaiah 40:1-11 ~ Luke 1:24-45
 "How Does a Weary World Rejoice? - We find joy and peace in connection."
 Second Sunday of Advent ~ Candle of Peace ~ December 10, 2023
 The Rev. Dr. Laurie Brubaker Davis

Introduction:

Are you ready for Episode 2? Just in case you missed last week's Episode 1, or you have had a very long week, like most streaming shows do, let's start with: *Previously...* the angel Gabriel shocked and terrified old priest Zechariah, with the news that he and his wife Elizabeth would in her old age would for the first time, have a child. A son they were to name John, who would be a prophet like Elijah and prepare the way for the Lord. Zechariah expressed skepticism about this impossible prediction, "How will I know that this is so?" and got muted by Gabriel, "until the day these things occur." Faithful Zechariah still finished his shift at the Temple, with his congregants abuzz about what mystical happening made Zechariah, mute.

Episode 2 continues to shock us with the impossible. Again, with the help of that busy angel, Gabriel. If you think about it, I'm sure you will agree that God does seem to delight in shocking us with the impossible. God's signature move: pushing our imaginations beyond whatever limits, whatever boundaries we have constructed. We say, "No way!" and God says, "Yes, I will make a way. Watch me. But I will do this work through you and you and you, who will make it happen." Big things. Impossible things.

Like a just end to the wars in Ukraine and in Gaza; or stopping the epidemic of gun violence in our nation. Or nations working together as a global shared community to slow the accelerating train that is currently careening toward ecological death. Or restorative justice for people long silenced and displaced from their native land. Or if it's two people reconciling a long and bitter broken relationship: we are more likely to give in and give up, than to imagine the impossible. To actually work toward Shalom with others. Like it was something that could happen. Yes, to seek peace between and within. To be peace-mongers. Like a dog with a bone.

If you are feeling overwhelmed by the times we are living in, you are in good company. It's been a decade, hasn't it? Some have called it "the terrible twenties." ⁱ And it's only 2023! Many labels are afoot to name this decade or age we are in. Kind of a tricky thing to do while we are in the middle of it. I doubt those who were living in Europe in say the 900's said to one another, "Hey, man, did you know we are in the dark ages?" Who knows what our era will be called when we are long gone. Some are calling it a "chaotic historical moment. Also, the "Age of Unhinging." Liz Lenkinski, a Los Angeles Social strategist, has diagnosed that we are stricken by a case of "spiritual infirmity" across the land. Presenting symptom is the feeling of being paralyzed or stymied by not being able to know what is coming next.

If you are feeling disoriented by a feeling of chaos or "unhinging" or plagued by a case of spiritual infirmity, I have Good News. You have come to the right place. If you are worshipping remotely, you have tuned in or clicked onto the space where your spirit can breathe. Where the bounds of your imagination can be expanded beyond the possible. And in

that work, even perhaps, take joy. You may not have realized it, but here in this space, in this hour, Jesus gathers us into what could be called a space of joy. Theologian and preacher, The Rev. Dr. William James Jennings, teaches us that Jesus calls us with a "Joy that joins." He calls what we do here "Joy work." And Dr. Jennings identifies joy as resistance. Here, guided by the Holy Spirit, we learn from one another how "to do something different with the given." Whether that given is personal or social suffering, pain, oppression, and violence. Jesus gives us the choice "to do something different with the given, instead of simply giving into the given."ⁱⁱ

The amazing thing about Jesus, is that even his birth story resonates with this impossible joy that comes from a community of folk, different folk, coming together, in the midst of conflict and controversy. From isolation to shared suffering. From fear to faith: believing in something they could not see. Nor could they understand. Yes, I am talking about Elizabeth and Mary. About Episode 2. From a woman too old to have a baby. To a woman too young to have one. Let's see what happens and how the story unfolds....

Pause in reading after verse. 38:

If only Mary had a cell phone and could text her cousin Elizabeth. Or anyone. So alone, bewildered, she must have felt. Instead, she ran all the way to Elizabeth's house in the hill country. Fun fact: the distance between Nazareth, where Mary lived and the Judean hill Country, where Elizabeth and Zechariah lived in Ein Karem, was actually about 80 miles! I bet she was overjoyed to have made this long, uphill journey successfully. Heart already pounding from fear. Now add the uphill run. Continuing with the reading: verses 39 – 45.

Sermon:

"For nothing will be impossible with God." Like for instance, the Packers winning the Super Bowl this year. Not impossible, people! Not only did they win their last three games, but last Sunday, they beat last year's Super Bowl champions, the Kansas City Chiefs, 27 to 19. Go Pack, Go! *For nothing will be impossible with God.* Like this service ending at 10:30. Perhaps that seems less likely...

Mary needed the community of Elizabeth, as she faced possible stoning by death for her pregnancy before marriage. Elizabeth, after five months of seclusion, surely needed the community of Mary. This work of joy I was describing earlier: of doing something different with the given—this work cannot be sustained alone. Jesus' joy is a joy that joins: A joy that brings different views, hopes and dreams together. A joy that pulls us from the darkness into the light. In John 15:8, Jesus says, "My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you, abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete." Jesus was speaking about his joy as he was headed to his passion and death on a cross. Joy from within. Even in the worst circumstances. Jesus' joy is planted in our souls, my friends. When we come together, that seed germinates and flowers and bears fruit. Joy when we refuse to give into the givens of division and violence to one another and to creation, that could otherwise destroy us.

Have you been trying to place where our Advent theme, "*How Does a Weary World Rejoice?*" Come from? Yes, it's from the song we know as, "O Holy Night," originally named "Cantique de Noel" – Song of Christmas. The story of how this beloved Christmas carol came to be, and its lyrics both proclaim joy work as resistance: to personal and social sin. From before his birth, even in these birth narratives: Jesus calls us to do something different with the given. And shows us how. Jesus calls us to claim the joy that stands against the prevailing order to bring forth peace and justice, where there is only devastation and death. The advent of Jesus heralds a reordering of the geography of injustice: valleys exalted; mountains made low.

Here's a quick version of the story of the song, "O Holy Night." Two vastly different people came together to create the song that was banned by the church for awhile because of its origins. A French wine seller and poet in the mid 1800's was approached by a parish priest to write a poem for Christmas mass. Apparently, the wine seller, *Placide Cappeau*, was shocked, but honored by this unexpected request because he had been brought up Catholic and then had drifted away from religion and rarely attended mass. He was also a politically active abolitionist outspokenly against the transatlantic slave trade in France. When Cappeau was commissioned to write the poem, he steeped himself in the Gospel of Luke for inspiration. Much to his surprise, as he opened his imagination (based on the stories of Luke) to what it would have been like to witness the birth of Jesus, he was so moved by the words that came forth, he insisted that this poem become a song.

Here's the next twist: Cappeau decided to get help from his Jewish friend and legendary classical musician, Adolphe Charles Adam. Adam's imagination was stretched and challenged to compose a song for a religion that was not his. Talk about improvisation and imagination at work. It came quickly: Adolphe Adam composed the score of the tune we know today, in just three weeks. The parish priest was overjoyed by this song and indeed had it performed at midnight mass on Christmas Eve, a month later, by a Parisian opera singer. An immediate hit. The song made its way across the Atlantic to John Sullivan Dwight, a white American abolitionist, Unitarian minister, musician, who translated Cappeau's lyrics into English from the French in 1855. His direct translation from the French was:

*The Redeemer has overcome every obstacle: The Earth is free, and Heaven is open.
He sees a brother where there was only a slave, Love unites those that iron had chained.
Who will tell Him of our gratitude, For all of us, He is born, He suffers and dies.*

Dwight converted them a bit to keep the poetics in place, while retaining the original meaning, and changed the title of the song to "O Holy Night." It became popular in the states among the abolitionist crowd during the Civil War. Yes, this song of protest became a staple of Christmas. One other quick story about this song happened one night. During World War I: the story goes that German and French troops left their trenches to sing "O Holy Night" together in an impromptu Christmas ceasefire. Yes, creating a space of joy and resistance, right in the middle of war.ⁱⁱⁱ

I will conclude my sermon by speaking the lyrics to two stanzas of "O Holy Night" as Dan plays the tune underneath. I invite you to listen with your ears and heart and your spirit open to what it tells us about our God for whom nothing is impossible.

*O holy night, the stars are brightly shining
It is the night of the dear Savior's birth
Long lay the world in sin and error pining
Till He appeared and the soul felt its worth*

*A thrill of hope, the weary world rejoices
For yonder breaks a new and glorious morn
Fall on your knees, oh, hear the angel voices
O night divine, O night when Christ was born
O night divine, O night when Christ was born*

*Led by the light of faith serenely beaming
With glowing hearts by His cradle we stand
So led by light of a star sweetly gleaming
Here came the wise men from the orient land*

*The King of kings lay thus in lowly manger
In all our trials born to be our friend
He knows our need, to our weakness no stranger
Behold your King, before Him lowly bend
Behold your King, your King, before Him lowly bend*

*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*

*Sweet hymns of joy in grateful chorus raise we
Let all within us praise His holy name
Christ is the Lord, then ever, ever praise we
His power and glory evermore proclaim
His power and glory evermore proclaim.*

ⁱ <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/2023-in-review/what-to-call-our-chaotic-era> See this article, my source for these labels attempting to describe the age or era we are in right now.

ⁱⁱ "William James Jennings on joy that joins" by Yale Center for Faith & Culture, see his sermon "Gathering Joy" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?reload=9&app=desktop&v=7jGG5ZtABH0>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.thedailybeast.com/how-a-french-atheist-and-an-american-abolitionist-ended-up-creating-a-christmas-classic>