

“Awe and Songs for the Weary”

Luke 1:46-80 & Psalm 126

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PRAYER FOR UNDERSTANDING God of the universe, make our hearts porous.

Open our eyes, as if for the first time, so that we might see your world with awe and wonder once again. We often approach scripture with an analytical lens, intellectualizing the stories heard, bringing historical context and textual criticism to the table. For just a moment, pause those instincts to make room for wonder. Help us greet this text with awe and gratitude before we begin dissecting it for truth. For I am confident, that in doing so, we will not only find you in the hallways of our thoughts, but in the pathways of our hearts. With gratitude we pray: keep us open. Amen.

How does a weary world rejoice? Through awe and song. We allow ourselves to be amazed. We sing stories of hope.

Last week, we explored how life makes us weary, hardens our heart, and dampens our hope. Zechariah, a senior priest, who spent most of his life proclaiming the promises of God and delivering messages of hope weekly, was so weary that when the angel proclaimed the good news that he was going to be a father he did not believe it. As the angel described how his son John would prepare the way for Jesus who will save us all, Zechariah wanted proof. As a result of Zechariah's hopelessness, the angel made him mute.

Elizabeth was shamed by family and friends, because she was unable to birth a child. Elizabeth's young cousin Mary's hope was being diminished by the shame heaped upon her because she was an unwed teenager. Mary visited Elizabeth. They name their shame, talk about shame, let shame go, and move on. Mary and Elizabeth talked about how they are enough because they are God's beloved. All of us are enough because we are God's beloved. As they process the full range of emotions, joy emerges. Mary burst into song recorded in Luke: **Luke 1-46-56 NLT “Mary responded, “Oh, how my soul praises the Lord. How my spirit rejoices in God my Savior! For God took notice of God’s lowly servant girl and from now on all generations will call me blessed. For the Mighty One is holy and God has done great things for me. God shows mercy from generation to generation to all who have awe for God. God’s mighty arm has done tremendous things! God has scattered the proud and haughty ones. God has brought down princes from their thrones and exalted the humble. God has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away with empty hands. God has helped God’s servant Israel and remembered to be merciful. For God made this promise to our ancestors, to Abraham, Sarah and their children forever.” Mary stayed with Elizabeth about three months and then went back to her own home.”**

Mary sings about how God is a liberator. Notice how the song begins: **“Oh, how my soul praises the Lord. How my spirit rejoices in God my Savior! For God took notice of God’s lowly servant girl and from now on all generations will call me blessed.”** It is personal. It is a song for all of us and you to sing in your words. Strive to sing your version of, “Oh, how my soul praises the Lord. How my spirit rejoices in God my Savior! For God took notice of God’s, insert your negative self talk here, and from now on all generations will call me blessed.” You are blessed. All the love you receive and share will expand for eternity. This is spectacular news that should inspire you to sing. As you sing, allow yourself to be amazed. The Creator of the cosmos knows everything about you and loves you completely. God delights in you. Your love is making the cosmos more glorious. You bring God joy. God could reside anywhere. The Holy Spirit chooses to dwell in you. God calls your soul a temple. Savor these truths. Open yourself to the awe, wonder, and astonishment of your belovedness. Let it create in you a song that bursts forth.

Singing helps a weary world rejoice. Following in the path of their ancestors, Mary and Zechariah rejoice through song. Their singing shows us that joy is an embodied practice. The content of their songs shows us what their robust hope looks like.

If hope feels out of reach, the practice of singing has the power to transform us.

Pastor Ceclia Armstrong writes: “Have you ever really unpacked the lyrics of “Lift Every Voice and Sing”. This is a song of hope. It is a song that remembers the past, acknowledges current life, and prays for a future full of hope. The hope is for every person who has a voice and a means for singing; hence, the title is to

lift every voice and sing. The lyrics insist that we let our rejoicing “rise high as the listening skies.” The lyrics insist that even when our feet are weary from the death of hope that is not even born yet, we are encouraged to stand. This song is a story of hope and reminds us of the songs that were sung by Mary and Zechariah. Mary sings of a new world order based on past experiences with God. Her joy is found in remembering what the world has the potential to be, based on the presence of God in all things.”

Mary’s song is similar to Hannah’s song found in first Samuel. Mary sang scripture. Mary knew the Old Testament stories well. Her song springs from those stories that she internalized. Hannah’s joy seemed to radiate from an answered prayer. Hannah sings a song of hope for the world. Her reminder to us is to let God be the rock on which we stand. Celebrate God who brings all to life. God will inspire a weary world to rejoice.

All of the psalms are songs. Most of them rhyme in Hebrew. All of the psalms have been translated into English and composed into songs. I have found all of my emotions in at least one psalm and most of them in several. Often, I take segments of these psalms and blend the words with 80s rock music and sing them, often in my mind, sometimes out loud when I think no one is around. My family can attest that I am no singer and my adaptations are odd. These songs comfort and inspire me.

I am slowly emerging from an arduous, difficult, depressing season. As I was writing this sermon, I realized I stopped singing. I started singing again and the songs are transforming me.

A favorite song emerged from a weary time. I was in grade school. At church my parents strongly suggested I sing in the children’s choir. Sandy the choir leader welcomed me despite the fact that I am tone deaf, had no musical ability and due to my dyslexia was in speech therapy mangling spoken words and even more so sung words. I was terrified of being in front of people. I found the choir outfits embarrassing, a white cape with a red bow that tied around your neck. It looked like the bow on these poinsettias. We sang a song based on a psalm that I have sung most days ever since. *God is my rock, my shield and my deliverer; my fortress and my strength. God is my rock, my shield and my deliver, God will rescue me in time. Na Na Na Na. I cried for help and God delivered me. Na Na Na Na. I cried for help and God delivered me. Hey.*

A reading from psalm 126: **Psalm 126 MSG “It seemed like a dream, too good to be true, when God returned Zion’s exiles. We laughed, we sang, we couldn’t believe our good fortune. We were the talk of the nations—“God was wonderful to them!” God was wonderful to us; we are one happy people. And now, God, do it again—bring rains to our drought-stricken lives So those who planted their crops in despair will shout “Yes!” at the harvest, So those who went off with heavy hearts will come home laughing, with armloads of blessing.”**

“The Sound of Hope”

a poem by Sarah Speed

We’ve been singing a sad song for quite some time, the melody syncing with our heartbeats, the lyrics stamped to the front of our minds.

You say, sad songs are honest.

It’s hard to disagree, for sad songs tap us on the shoulder.

Sad songs remind us of the 100 different corners heartbreak could be behind.

But I don’t have it in me to sing a sad song forever.

So despite the news,

despite the aches in my body,

despite the phone call last night that says she’s waiting for the test results,

despite yesterday’s shooting,

despite the unknown and unchanged,

I am going to sing a song of hope.

Like a canary in a snowstorm, I don’t need another song of what is;

I need a song of what could be.

So sing with me.

Our voices may get drowned out by the wind, but surely someone will ask:

Was that a flash of yellow in the snow?

Was that the sound of hope?

How has the practice of singing transformed you? What gives you a thrill of hope? If you were to write a song of hope today, what would the lyrics be?

After Mary's song Luke continues: **Luke 1:57-66 NLT** "When it was time for Elizabeth's baby to be born, she gave birth to a son. And when her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had been very merciful to her, everyone rejoiced with her. When the baby was eight days old, they all came for the circumcision ceremony. They wanted to name him Zechariah, after his father. But Elizabeth said, "No! His name is John!" "What?" they exclaimed. "There is no one in all your family by that name." So they used gestures to ask the baby's father what he wanted to name him. He motioned for a writing tablet, and to everyone's surprise he wrote, "His name is John." Instantly Zechariah could speak again, and he began praising God. Awe fell upon the whole neighborhood, and the news of what had happened spread throughout the Judean hills. Everyone who heard about it reflected on these events and asked, "What will this child turn out to be?" For the hand of the Lord was surely upon him in a special way."

Zechariah was filled with awe as he marveled in his newborn son. God used awe to give him the ability to speak. Scripture states, "**Awe fell upon the whole neighborhood**". Everyone was filled with awe. How often do you allow yourself to be amazed? Wonder is all around us—can we recognize it? As we learn how to rejoice in a weary world, can we live in a way that allows amazement and wonder to surprise us often?

"Allow ourselves" is intentional. Amazement is a precursor for joy. If joy feels out of reach, can we first allow ourselves to notice and take in the amazing wonders in each day. Wonders we can too easily ignore: the swirl of silky white creamer in your morning coffee, the carefully-crafted bird's nest in your favorite tree, the doe-like steps of a toddler as they discover the confidence to walk, the dappling beams of sunlight refracting through your window, a sunset. Allowing ourselves to be amazed requires a posture of paying attention—and then saying yes to wonder when it washes over us. Amazement is also a balm for the weary. Awe awakens those who feel numb. Awe renews those whose senses have been dulled. Surprisingly, awe may turn into joy.

"Awe"

a poem by Sarah Speed

The birds could spend their lives on telephone wires, feet under them, sure and steady.

Or they could open their wings, leave the ground and let the wind carry them home.

I want to be like the birds.

I want an open heart, open arms, open eyes.

Give me a sky view, for I do not want to miss a thing.

Last week I was walking on the Brown's Creek trail. I was listening to an audio book. I like to walk at a brisk pace to get in 3-5 miles. I only had an hour before my next meeting. The creek caught my eye. I stopped, paused my book and listened to the creek as its song reverberated through the canyon. On the sides of the river were a variety of ice formations. Suddenly, I thought of a video Leslie showed me of her great niece who is just a few months old. As she was carried outside, she stuck out her tongue in the cool wind then would giggle. I stuck out my tongue to catch the cool breeze and then laughed. I intentionally allowed myself to take in awe.

"All the Way to Joy"

a poem by Sarah Speed

We could play hard and fast, not let anything touch us at all, keep composure, have all the answers.

Or we could crack ourselves open and let everything in.

We could feel everything, every touch, every marvel.

We could stand gaping at the beauty of the world, mouths wide open (because sometimes a mouth wide open is the very best gratitude).

We could laugh so loudly that the whole restaurant looks and err on the side of goofy
whenever possible.

We could put our defenses down.

We could grow soft.

We could choose awe.

We could take awe by the arm.

We could let awe lead us all the way to joy.

In the gospel of Luke, most people allow themselves to be amazed. After awe falls upon Zechariah, Elizabeth, and the whole neighborhood, Luke uses a Greek word that means to celebrate God's grace together and to share in someone else's joy. God through Christmas is constantly sending out ripples of awe, grace, and joy.

Sharon Salzberg describes awe as “the absence of self-preoccupation” and teaches that awe can help silence one’s inner critic. Recall Zechariah’s initial response to the angel’s news. He is critical and wants certainty. However, in this part of the story, the awe of holding his son enables him to find his voice and silence his inner negative criticism, which enables him to be swept up into even more awe, giving thanks for his place in the Christmas story. What do you learn from Zechariah’s transformation?

We continue the Christmas story in Luke: **Luke 1:67-80 NLT** “Then John’s father, Zechariah, was filled with the Holy Spirit and sang this prophecy: “Praise the Lord, the God of Israel, because God has visited and redeemed God’s people. God has sent us a mighty Savior from the royal line of God’s servant David, just as God promised through God’s holy prophets long ago. Now we will be saved from our enemies and from all who hate us. God has been merciful to our ancestors by remembering God’s sacred covenant—the covenant God swore with an oath to our ancestors Abraham and Sarah. We have been rescued from our enemies so we can serve God without fear, in holiness and righteousness for as long as we live. “And you, my little son, will be called the prophet of the Most High, because you will prepare the way for the Lord. You will tell God’s people how to find salvation through forgiveness of their sins. Because of God’s tender mercy, the morning light from heaven is about to break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death and to guide us to the path of peace.” John grew up and became strong in spirit. And John lived in the wilderness until he began his public ministry to Israel.”

Zechariah sings a song of hope for the future. His song ignites the thrill of hope that awaits us after a long silence. He bursts into thanksgiving for God’s favor. He acknowledges that God’s grace is transforming all, that we have a glorious future. Zechariah tells of the blessings for John and speaks into John’s task for the future. Zechariah’s song of hope encourages us to speak life, awe, grace, peace, and joy to the next generation.

How does a weary world rejoice? By acknowledging our weariness. Finding joy in connection. Allowing ourselves to be amazed. And singing and ringing stories of hope. Amen