

“Hope, Peace, and Joy for the Weary”

Luke 1:1-45

Pastor James York

December 3, 2023

PRAYER FOR UNDERSTANDING Loving God, the source of our joy, as we turn our hearts toward your Word, we ask that you would soften us. Soften the callouses on our hearts. Weave yourself in between the cracks in our spirits. And plant hope where there is room. And as you do this, like flowers toward the sun, we will turn ourselves toward you, eager to hear a Word so good that we cannot help but ask ourselves, “How can this be?” With openness and gratitude we pray, Amen.

How does a weary world rejoice? The Gospel of Luke tells stories of the weary rejoicing as the gospel interweaves Christ’s birth with the stories of Elizabeth, Zechariah, and John the Baptist. These stories reveal the full scope of human emotions: isolation, fear, disbelief, as well as connection, trust, and joy. The Christmas season is often an emotionally-charged time when we feel many things deeply—sometimes all at once. Many experience emotional dissonance in the midst of joy-filled carols and festivities.

However you feel, whatever you are thinking, whatever your circumstances, God is with you, God loves you, God is feeling your feelings, hearing your thoughts, and is aware of your circumstances. You are worthy, because you are God’s beloved child. You are enough, because you are loved. You are invited into the mystery of Christmas to receive all you need for your weariness, so you can live wholeheartedly, rejoicing with the shepherds, singing with the angels, seeking with the dreamers, pondering with Mary, and wondering with Joseph. God’s amazing grace completes your incompleteness and makes perfect your imperfections. You are God’s masterpiece, cracked by a broken world, poured out by a barren world, weary by a demanding world, and through Christmas, God heals. God more than repairs and fixes. God transforms and resurrects. God makes cracks into strengths, dry barrenness into streams of living water, and weariness into joy.

Jesus is saying to you: **John 15:11 “I came so my joy and delight may be in you, and that your joy and gladness may be of full measure and complete and overflowing.”** Jesus is bringing for you all the joy and delight of God. And Jesus knows your joy and gladness and comes to make your unique delights overflow. It is both and Christmas is the story of God loving you, God giving you all the joy and delight of God, and God making complete everything that gives you joy and gladness. We are weary, because we are in an already and not yet season. All of these wonderful things have happened and will happen to each of us and none of us have experienced more than a snippet of the glory of Christmas. None of us can fathom the spectacular, glorious majesty that is coming. Advent is a season to wrestle with the already and not yet, to embrace the mystery, to dream, imagine, and wonder. Advent is a season to hear the Christmas story again so we can perceive our place in the story, feel our belonging to God’s family, and let the splendor of God with us, move us on our journey to Christmas.

We believe in a God who knows the shape and form of our weariness. We believe in a God who wants joy and delight for us, not just survival and existence. We believe in a God who looks ahead, who is not done dreaming for the world—a God who sends hope in the form of people, change, movements, and Spirit.

Pastor Lauren Wright Pittman writes: “How does a weary world rejoice? I don’t know. But, I think I’ll start with acknowledging my weariness, finding joy in connection, allowing myself to be amazed, singing stories of hope, making room, rooting myself in ritual and trusting in my belovedness.”

Hannah Garrity writes: “The positives are embedded in the minutiae of life—freely and beautifully given. When I cannot see a positive, I take another breath, a slower step and I look again, more closely. For Her grace—the grace of our Holy Mother God—is found in the details of a moment.”

Pastor Sarah Speed writes: “How does a weary world rejoice?” It was an effort to sift through the pain of that day, to still my scattered mind, and to put some words on paper that might serve as breadcrumbs on the way to joy. How does a weary world rejoice? Day by day, and with God’s help.”

Pastor Lisle Gwynn Garrity writes: “When did I decide that joy didn’t belong with my grief? And so, this Advent season, if you ever find yourself thinking, ‘this is no time for joy,’ then I hope you will reconsider. I hope you will allow joy to be your surprise guest.”

Pastor Anna Strikland writes: “So if you are weary this season, if you feel like joy is out of reach, undeserved, or fleeting, if your pain is tucked away in the closet with the Christmas presents, I hope you will find comfort sitting with Mary, Zechariah and the shepherds as angels bring their greetings of ‘Do not fear.’”

It all counts, your every thought, feeling, circumstance, potential, action, and being. It all counts even your weariness and the weariness of the world. Every aspect of life brings us to a space of possibility where God is providing the unforced rhythms of grace. Even in arduous, agonizing, difficult situations, God is weaving in hope and peace and joy and love and weaving all people together to give us glimpses of the coming of Christmas. Advent is a season to acknowledge your weariness so all of your being can be touched with, God with you.

Joy is rooted in the fact that we belong to God. You deserve to feel joy—fully. The world needs your joy, even if you are weary. Our joy is enhanced when joy is shared. Sometimes our joy is an act of resistance. You are invited to hold space for your weariness and your joy, to seek a “thrill of hope” in our hurting world.

“Wade In”

a poem by Sarah Speed

Over time wind and water will sand down the edges of a stone.

For humans, our wind and water is the grief of the world.

Stay here long enough and pieces of you will be pressed upon by life’s never-ending stream.

It’s enough to make you weary.

It’s enough to make you question.

It’s enough to make you quiet.

And yet, the stream continues.

So do not be afraid to stand in that water.

Wade in. Soak the hem of your jeans.

Drip wet footprints through every room in your house.

Let the water stains tell your story.

And when your body grows weary of swimming, name the stream.

Acknowledge your weariness.

For eventually, you will pick flowers from the opposite bank.

And over and over again, we’ll tell this story.

And over and over again, a weary world will rejoice.

As Advent begins, we start by acknowledging the weariness, grief, rage, and hopelessness we carry—and we also affirm that we are made for joy. Joy is designed to live in a full house of other emotions. Zechariah and Elizabeth have battled infertility. They feel the weight of hopes and dreams unattained. The angel comes with a promise of good news, but Zechariah can’t fully receive it and he is cast into silence for the duration of Elizabeth’s pregnancy. Sometimes weariness can harden us and prevent us from living fully. We have had hard journeys. Grief has left a scar on us. Let us acknowledge the ways we, too, are hardened.

The gospel of Luke: **Luke 1:5-23 NLT** “When Herod was king of Judea, there was a Jewish priest named Zechariah. He was a member of the priestly order of Abijah, and his wife, Elizabeth, was also from the priestly line of Aaron. Zechariah and Elizabeth were righteous in God’s eyes, careful to obey all of the Lord’s commandments and regulations. They had no children because Elizabeth was unable to conceive, and they were both very old. One day Zechariah was serving God in the Temple, for his order was on duty that week. As was the custom of the priests, he was chosen by lot to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and burn incense. While the incense was being burned, a great crowd stood outside, praying. While Zechariah was in the sanctuary, an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing to the right of the incense altar. Zechariah was shaken and overwhelmed with fear when he saw the angel. But the angel said, “Don’t be afraid, Zechariah! God has heard your prayer. Your wife, Elizabeth, will give you a son, and you are to name him John. You will have great joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for John will be great in the eyes of the Lord. John must never touch wine or other alcoholic drinks. John will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even before his birth. And John will turn many Israelites to the Lord their God. John will be a man with the spirit and power of Elijah. John will prepare the people for the coming of the Lord. John will turn the hearts of parents to their children, and he will cause those who are

rebellious to accept the wisdom of the godly.” Zechariah said to the angel, “How can I be sure this will happen? I’m an old man now, and my wife is also well along in years.” Then the angel said, “I am Gabriel! I stand in the very presence of God. It was God who sent me to bring you this good news! But now, since you did not believe what I said, you will be silent and unable to speak until the child is born. For my words will certainly be fulfilled at the proper time.” Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah to come out of the sanctuary, wondering why he was taking so long. When he finally did come out, he couldn’t speak to them. Then they realized from his gestures and his silence that he must have seen a vision in the sanctuary. When Zechariah’s week of service in the Temple was over, he returned home.” The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Zechariah asks, “How will I know that this is so?” When we are weary, we tend to seek clarity. When in your life have you been like Zechariah, unwilling to believe in news that seems too good to be true? See yourself in Elizabeth’s and Zechariah’s story. What is the story they had dreamed of for their lives? What is the story they had accepted or resigned themselves to? How does the angel’s news disrupt this? Similarly, what are the limiting narratives about your life that you have resigned yourself to? How is God disrupting those beliefs and inviting you to live into a new story?

A discipline of hope is to reflect on your day by writing down every negative thought. Examine each thought. Is it accurate or is it a distortion? Many of our negative thoughts are exaggerations. What seeds of possibility are emerging? How will love and joy transform you?

“The Last Time I Saw God”

a poem by Sarah Speed

The last time I saw God face to face I was looking at a bed of tulips.

God was every color of red.

I was merely a mortal, in awe of it all.

The time before that, we were tying back the curtains, looking for stars.

God was the deepest purple and the brightest light.

The time before that, the city was soft with snow.

God was the quiet that tucked us all in.

And in between these small gifts there were newborn babies, and sapling trees,
homemade bread, the sound of a church singing on Sunday.

Why, yes, we are lucky.

We are more than lucky for the moments when delight and awe unzip the weight we carry around.

In community our joy expands. When we cannot rejoice, we can carry each other’s joy. That is what Elizabeth and Mary do for each other. The good news begins to take shape in Elizabeth’s womb, but scripture tells us that she stays secluded, hiding her pregnancy from others—that is, until Mary arrives at her door, also pregnant. Perhaps

Mary’s arrival is the inbreaking that changes everything for Elizabeth, for in that moment, her child leaps in her womb and she is filled with the Spirit. She can’t help but rejoice. Her joy is contagious and wraps around Mary like a hug. God provides comfort through our giving and receiving.

The gospel of Luke: **Luke 1:24-45 NLT** “Soon afterward Zechariah’s wife, Elizabeth, became pregnant and went into seclusion for five months. “How kind the Lord is!” she exclaimed. “God has taken away my disgrace of having no children.” In the sixth month of Elizabeth’s pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a village in Galilee, to a virgin named Mary. She was engaged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of King David. Gabriel appeared to her and said, “Greetings, favored woman! The Lord is with you!” Confused and disturbed, Mary tried to think what the angel could mean. “Don’t be afraid, Mary,” the angel told her, “for you have found favor with God! You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be very great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David. And Jesus will reign over Israel forever; God’s Kingdom will never end!” Mary asked the angel, “But how can this happen? I am a virgin.” The angel replied, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the baby to be born will be holy, and Jesus will be called the Son of God. What’s more, your relative Elizabeth has become pregnant in her old age! People used to say she

was barren, but she has conceived a son and is now in her sixth month. For the word of God will never fail.” Mary responded, “I am the Lord’s servant. May everything you have said about me come true.” And then the angel left her. A few days later Mary hurried to the hill country of Judea, to the town where Zechariah lived. She entered the house and greeted Elizabeth. At the sound of Mary’s greeting, Elizabeth’s child leaped within her, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. Elizabeth gave a glad cry and exclaimed to Mary, “God has blessed you above all women, and your child is blessed. Why am I so honored, that the mother of my Lord should visit me? When I heard your greeting, the baby in my womb jumped for joy. You are blessed because you believed that the Lord would do what he said.” The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Sharing joy is a way a weary world rejoices. Elizabeth’s shame made her weary. Shame is thinking, “I am not enough.” A way to process shame is to name shame, and say pain, pain, pain, then talk to someone about your shame, then let shame go and move on. Shame that is not named and diffused by sharing will continue to hurt until shame is named, shared and processed. Elizabeth named her shame which is revealed in her statement. “God has taken away my disgrace of having no children.”

Shame often causes one to blame. An example of shame is saying, “I am a bad person” or “You are a bad person.” There are no bad persons. Only bad behavior. It is an important distinction one that God proclaims throughout scripture. God loves each of us, for everyone is good. God does not condone bad behavior. We are to repent of bad behavior, to change, to turn to good behavior with God’s help. God forgives all bad behavior. Throughout the process even the person with the worst behavior is still a good person for they are created in the image of God. Resist the temptation to shame yourself or anyone.

Mary also was having shame heaped upon her. The shame of being with child without being married. Elizabeth and Mary, both weary with shame, share their shame and name their pain. Through their sharing they let go of shame, the thought that they are not enough, enabling them to let come the belief that they are enough. This shift in thought and their connection enables them to rejoice.

We are bombarded with shame, ways that we tell ourselves, “I am not enough” and other people telling us, “You are not enough.” God is always proclaiming, “You are more than enough” because you are my beloved child. Joy comes from connection with God that inspires you to truly believe, I am enough, I am God’s beloved, I am able to love and my love will expand forever. Joy comes from connection with each other when we affirm the goodness, the enoughness, in one another. Joy comes from connection with the cosmos that fills us with wonder as we perceive the majesty of a cosmos created good.

“Lessons in Connection”

a poem by Sarah Speed

It’s been a long day, long enough to complain, long enough to wine and dine my
disappointment, to give weariness keys to the house.

But then you get the giggles dancing with the dog in the kitchen.

Paws-sliding, tail-wagging, side-cramping giggles.

I can hear it from across the house.

Your joy burrows its way through the cracks in my armor and then we are both laughing,
gulping for joyous, electric air.

And that’s when I know—

if you grab my hand, if you ask me to dance, if our weary human souls can make room for connection, then we
will survive.

Joy will take root.

Love will keep her keys to the house.

Amen