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## How Does a Weary World Rejoice?

Luke 1:5-19

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How does a weary world rejoice? This is, of course, to reference a lyric from the well-known carol: “A thrill of hope, the weary world rejoices . . .” *Cantique de Noël* is a Christmas poem full of aching hope. *O Holy Night*—the title it came to be known by—was written by a wine merchant and occasional poet, Placide Cappeau, at the request of a French priest in the 1840s. Later, a Jewish composer, Adolphe Adam, came along and set it to music, giving us perhaps the most beloved carol we hear this time of year. That the song owed its source to an atheist poet and a Jewish composer caused Christian leaders down the years to reject it. Yet, the people kept singing it, even in the shadows of history. Persistent is the voice of hope, especially when it is the voice of a longing people.

When the song crossed the Atlantic, Christian abolitionists heard a truth etched in its verses:

“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.”

For them, this wasn’t holiday sentiment—it was the gospel. They sang it as both proclamation and protest, a reminder that Christ’s arrival breaks the power of every system that stakes its claim on God’s children. It’s a reminder to us that justice and joy belong together; that joy, at times, itself is an act of resistance. It does not wait until that bright shining day of freedom, but tunes its voice even in the darkness.

Songbirds know what it is to sing in the dark. Long before the sun crests the early morning horizon, they are already building a symphonic sound bath, called

by scientists the “dawn chorus.” There, in the suspended darkness between twilight and sunrise, full-throated melodies can ring out louder and farther. The cloak of the dark provides something of a shield against predators, enabling the song its exuberance even from the shadows. This dawn chorus doesn’t unleash its polyphony all at once. It begins from a first melody that dares to break the silence of the night. And slowly—like the unfolding of a Bach fugue—the sound multiplies as each voice joins the others until you and I wake to the joy that is the cacophony of birdsong—that is, if you’re a morning person!

“Blackbird singing in the dead of night . . . Oh, Blackbird fly, blackbird fly, into the light of a dark black night.” The Beatles song *Blackbird* was a message of hope from the shadows, particularly to black women during the Civil Rights Movement. When McCartney wrote those lyrics, he was leaning into the idea that “the dead of night” is not the doom where hope goes to die but the incubator for resurrection.

Advent is a time of singing from the shadows. It sounds like that odd refrain: “Rejoice! Rejoice!” yet sung in a minor key—as in our opening carol this morning. The first hymn text I wrote that was published is titled “Christ, our Ever-Dawning Hope.” In those verses, I was trying to proffer what songbirds, abolitionists, and hopeful believers already know: that at some point, the light will break through, that night will give way to dawn, spring will overwhelm the frozen ground of winter, despair will eventually cede to hope, war to peace.

We enter this yearly rhythm of Advent to be reminded that incarnation—the in-breaking of the Divine in our time and space—is a recurring, even daily reality. Often, it comes in the form of the unbelievable, the seemingly insignificant, the lowly. So it requires we pay attention. Christ is born again and again and again and again, an ever-dawning hope amidst our hopelessness—and not to soothe the weary world—though there is comfort—but to liberate it, even moment by moment.

William Sloan Coffin said, “Hope is a state of mind independent of the state of the world.” There is a thickness to hope. It unhinges us from being at the whim of the risings and fallings of life, yet it is not oblivious to these. And how those risings and fallings have seemed to reach new heights and depths these days! Hope anchors us in the stuff of life while helping us maintain a buoyancy, to not be tanked at the first dip of the choppy waters. This is what I mean that there is a thickness to hope. It withstands. It is the opposite of flimsy.

Yet, this is also a time to acknowledge that even faithful hope can be thinned by the weariness of life. Zechariah, in Luke chapter 1, knew what it felt like to wait so long that hope grows thin. He and Elizabeth were righteous, faithful, and prayerful—and yet remained barren. They were getting much older in years. It would've been easy to believe God had forgotten them. But notice how Zechariah just continues to show up. He tends to the mundane. If we know nothing else, we know how to do that too.

Hope is that investment of sowing seeds in a time of darkness and longing. For Zechariah, it was tending to his priestly duties: lighting the incense, offering the prayers, going about the weekly assignments of worship that caught the attention and applause of no one. And it's in that very place—faithfulness in the mundane—that God breaks in. While Zechariah is performing the same duties he's done a thousand times, an angel appears and announces that the prayer he'd almost stopped praying has been heard. Hope surprises him in the middle of his ordinary work, revealing that his small story is part of God's great story—bigger than he ever imagined. When the word comes to Zechariah, all those years of unfulfilled dreams had built up such a callous that he can hardly believe it. Yet, hope persists, even through the unbelievable.

In his 1955 autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*, C.S. Lewis writes: "Joy surprises us because it arrives unexpectedly, leaving behind the stab, the pang, the inconsolable longing." He says, "All Joy reminds. It is never a possession, always a desire for something longer ago or further away or still 'about to be'". This is why longing and joy can be held together. Their anchor points are not in the fleeting present but are drawn from the strength of a prior faithfulness or a future promise—that horizon of hope.

And there is a difference between hope and optimism.

I recently stumbled upon some helpful words from Pastor Derek Penwell, who shared recently in a post on social media. He said: "Hope is not optimism. Optimism expects things to go well because it assumes the universe is tidy. Hope expects that even if things shatter, we can still pick up the pieces and make something new because God's best work is with the broken and the people and things they break. Hope is resurrection soil. It knows what seeds can do waiting in the dark. It is not a feeling we manufacture. It is a wager we embody that this world, broken as it is, remains caught in the relentless grip of God's love."

I like that. It is a wager we embody . . . This moves hope from the category of wishful thinking to something that is enfleshed when we tend to the mundane. Sometimes we think of hope as something we have to talk ourselves into. Think of the cowardly lion in the Wizard of Oz: “I do believe. I do, I do, I do believe. No, hope isn’t a feeling we muster up when things seem daunting, it is a wager we put flesh on—literally, *incarnate*—even when all evidence is to the contrary. It is choosing to sow small, seemingly insignificant seeds into the darkness of dirty, weary soil.

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Our Advent theme this year centers on that opening question: “How does a weary world rejoice?” In this season, how can we be moved to active waiting by the “thrill of hope”, even in the face of loss, exhaustion, and devastation all around us? However it looks, we begin by honestly acknowledging our weariness. We sit with the dissonance that is holding joy and the trials of life in tension with one another, and not dismissing this by humming nostalgic seasonal tunes.

Hope and joy aren’t an escape from that weariness, or even an answer to it, but an invitation in the midst of it . . . to sing, even in the dead of night. We don’t sing because it makes things better but because when we do, we will find solidarity with other weary voices, which is itself its own liberation, the way the light breaks in.

One commentator I read this week said: “Joy is designed to live in a full house of other emotions.” This is a good reminder. This is why we can speak of our own weariness as we enter this season and yet still talk of joy. So, what is making you weary this season? What can it look like to carry that weariness while also holding to joy? Lately, have you held onto joy while also tending to other feelings, like anxiety, fear, loneliness, sadness, or feeling overwhelmed? What does joy do in those moments?

May the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth reminds us to tend to the mundane and the ordinary, even in the shadows of life, as a way to embody hope, and to ready ourselves for an in-breaking of the possible.

My friends, this is my hope. Amen.