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## How Does a Weary World Rejoice?

### We Are Weary

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Advent is a season of tension, where all kinds of feelings and emotions are held together at the same time. On the one hand, Advent is a season of hope. There is joy and anticipation of the birth of Jesus, the Savior. There is a spirit of wonder and looking forward to what's coming. But at the same time, life goes on, doesn't it? Just because Thanksgiving is, like, so last week, and Christmas is coming like a freight train, doesn't change the reality of a world weary from its brokenness and pain today – right now. The season of Advent actually heightens the awareness of challenges and the pressure of expectations while at the same time calling us to rejoice anyway! And if we're honest – and we really should be, we have to admit that holding all of this joy together with sorrow and all of this gladness and grief together can make us very weary. The weariness comes from the balancing act of all of that. So, I want you to notice what you're feeling right now; I'm wondering if you can feel the tension. And while you're doing that, I want to say right here and right now that the season of Advent announces that rejoicing is on the way.

As we begin our journey toward celebrating the birth of Jesus, we're asking the central question of this Advent season: "How does a weary world rejoice?" The Gospel writer, Luke, responds with two birth stories. Actually, they're pregnancy stories. Gabriel shows up to announce good news, first to Zechariah and Elizabeth and then even greater news to Joseph and Mary. Here's what we can't miss: both narratives are pregnant with growth and possibility! Both stories are told to create hope for life and more life, which will give birth to rejoicing in the context of a very weary world.

A story in Luke 1 illuminates the tension that we often feel in the season of Advent. I want to read this story and invite you to notice the tension of fear and anxiety being held by the promise of hope and joy.

Luke 1:5-23

*In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. Both were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. But they had no children because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years. Once, when Zechariah was serving as a priest before God, and his section was on duty, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. Now, at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified, and fear overwhelmed him. But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth, he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. With the spirit and power of Elijah, he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to prepare a people prepared for the Lord." Zechariah said to the angel, "How will I know that this is so? I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years." The angel replied, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur."*

This is the word of God for the people of God.  
Thanks be to God.

Context is everything. Luke doesn't waste time setting the context: "*In the days of King Herod of Judea...*" It would be a massive understatement to say that Herod was a bad man. His evil reign is legendary. He was a brutal man who killed his father-in-law, several of his wives, and two of his sons. The heavy taxes he imposed to pay for lavish projects forced an unfair burden on the Jewish

citizens. He was a racist who ruled by fear and violence. And when he realized that the Wise Men had tricked him, he ordered that all male children under the age of two be killed. Living with this threat of constant violence led people to experience deep tension in their lives. The loss of hope and the prevailing fear created a deep sense of anxiety in people's lives to the point where they asked, "How does a weary world rejoice?"

Even if you've made the healthy commitment to curb or stop consuming non-stop news cycles, you most likely know there is unrest everywhere. It breaks your heart: Ukraine, Russia, Israel, Gaza. Angry people with unchecked power find ways to fuel their ambition by creating fear in the lives of others. It doesn't take long for the trickle effect to do its work. And before you know it, we feel it right here in our neighborhoods.

Luke goes on to tell us about Zechariah and Elizabeth. They were dealing with the reality of unfulfilled dreams. Despite their trust and faith in God and their desire for a family, it looked like that would not happen. Luke writes, *"They had no children because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years."* It breaks your heart. Imagine waiting a lifetime for the one thing that would fulfill their dreams. How long and to what extent had they struggled deeply with the heartbreaking reality of infertility? And they were tired. They were asking the Advent question: "How does a weary world rejoice?" That's a good question. Maybe, like Zechariah and Elizabeth, you've been faithfully waiting, praying for something to arrive, something to unfold, something to appear in the mailbox. Your trust in God has fueled your faith. But even so, the "barrenness" of unfulfilled dreams keeps you awake at night, the tears flowing, the anger on the front burner, keeps your frustration with God on a simmer.

This story speaks so powerfully because we struggle with things that seem utterly impossible to us every day. Even when we worship and hear a word of joyous hope, there still might be some little voice inside us that tries to convince us that it's just not going to work; it's impossible. The good news you long to hear is for someone else. So, it's no wonder that when Gabriel lays it all out there for

Zechariah – he even says, *"Don't be afraid, your prayers have been heard, your sweet bride, Elizabeth, will bear you a son, and you will name him John..."* Zechariah says something like, *"Whad'ya, nuts?!"* I'm an old man, and my wife ain't no spring chicken..." And Zechariah goes silent. Either can't or doesn't speak. Or he won't. It breaks your heart. Do you ever feel that way? No words? You got nothing? Maybe you've reserved just enough breath to ask yourself the Advent Question, *"How does a weary world rejoice?"* and it's all silence. Maybe, like Zechariah, you're just overwhelmed with it all, and you have no more words. No more words. Just silence. And your heart feels like it's breaking.

Well, friends, it's in all of that that the Advent question "How does a weary world rejoice?" finds the response: The angel Gabriel says here's how this is going to work: God is on the move, making a way where there is no way: *"A child will be born to a couple beyond their years, and his name will be John. There will be joy and gladness; many will rejoice at his birth. That child will be great in the sight of the Lord. He will be filled with the Holy Spirit. He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. With the spirit and power of Elijah, he will go before him to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to prepare a people prepared for the Lord... the Lord, whose name will be Jesus."*

As we move through this Advent season, we will keep asking the Advent question, "How does a weary world rejoice?" To help us this week, I want to invite you to practice some spirited disciplines that will help make this sticky.

### ***First, Embrace the Silence***

Create some moments each day to welcome some silence and solitude. During that time, reflect on your life, your faith, and your relationship with God. While this introspection can be emotionally challenging, it also opens the door to growth and spiritual renewal. You can join Zechariah in that silence by bringing your whole self to God, laying it all out there: the doubt, the disbelief, along with the trust and hope. You might find joy in that.

### ***Second, Practice Gratitude***

Amid all the challenges, take some time each day to focus on the things you are grateful for. Gratitude can transform the emotional landscape of Advent, reminding you of the joy found in the simple things. A child's voice singing a familiar carol. The kindness of a gift received and the power that the gift has to transform a relationship.

### ***Third, Commit To Community***

Advent is not a solitary journey. Engage in the life of Prince of Peace in this season. Be in conversation with others about what you're thinking about, what you're reading, and what you're learning [Promo Welcome The Seasons]. Supporting one another in the challenges and joys of this season can make it more meaningful.

### ***Finally, Focus On Joy***

Keep asking the Advent question. Ask it early and often: "How does a weary world rejoice? The ultimate message of Advent is the joy of Christ's coming. This joy can be a light during emotionally challenging and dark times. Ultimately, the joy of the announcement of John's birth leads to the birth of the Savior Jesus, which means that life and more life are about to be birthed all around us!