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## How Does a Weary World Rejoice?

### We Sing Hope

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We walked into a coffee shop on Mainstreet Williston, North Dakota to plan a memorial Service. Nancy Lee's Mom, Grace, had come to the end of her lovely life. And we were in planning mode for the service at Our Redeemer's Lutheran Church.

With some dark roast in hand, Nancy Lee, her brother, Darrell, and I sat around the table and just felt the depth of the moment. As usual, it was a moment filled with that unique and powerful mixture of both grief and gratitude. Grief, because Grace would no longer be there to talk to, to reminisce with, and gratitude for the way Grace loved us all to the very end.

As we quietly talked together about the memorial service, the passages of scripture we'd read, the hymns we'd sing, I was distracted. I thought I heard some music. As I sipped that dark roast, I leaned away from the conversation at the table and leaned into the soft melody gently filling the coffee shop. I wasn't quite sure, but I thought I knew what the tune was. It was Amazing Grace.

There we were at the table already filled to the brim with gratitude as we celebrated Grace's life. And then, as I begin to hear the music, I'm drawn into the power of God's Amazing Grace. And It's all just so overwhelming.

There is something powerful about music at this time of year. Maybe you've noticed that Christmas music - holiday music, which-by the way-enters the stream of our cultural consciousness earlier each year, has a way of tapping into our emotions and longings. Sometimes we're ready for that.

Sometimes we're surprised. I will tell you that last week when I sat down to rehearse this a bit, in the middle of Amazing Grace, wow, the tears just came. Whether we're prepared or not, music has a way of making us look both backward and forward.

Holiday music can be very nostalgic. We may recall years gone by when we listened to Elvis singing "Blue Christmas," or the Mormon Tabernacle Choir singing "O Little Town of Bethlehem." Or Yogi Yorgesson singing "I just go nuts at Christmas," or

The Jackson Five singing "I Saw Mommy Kissing Santa Clause." Holiday music can be nostalgic.

But music can also be powerfully hopeful, causing us to look ahead. Maybe Handel's Messiah does that for you. Or when you hear James Taylor singing "Go Tell It On The Mountain" you actually want to do that! There's a good chance that at least one of the songs we've sung or will sing has stirred something in you that either takes you back to a former time or fills you with hope for things to come.

Music has a way of doing that. On this third weekend in Advent, there's a lot of music in the air. As we continue moving through the season of Advent and Christmas, we're asking one central question: **"How Does a Weary World Rejoice?"** Two weeks ago, we began with the very real, if not familiar tension: we acknowledged the weariness, grief, even the hopelessness we carry around with us. At the very same time, we affirmed that God has created us to experience joy. This is a joy that doesn't negate, deny, or erase the weariness and pain, but provides a kind of holy space that we need to hold it. We heard the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth as they endured their decades-long battle with infertility. And their very personal and even intimate story gave us permission to feel the weight of unfulfilled hopes and dreams in our own lives. Last week Pastor Jason reminded us that even in the midst of our weariness our joy begins to expand when we realize the power of community. When we can't rejoice, others rejoice on our behalf. When we don't have a song to sing, or a hope to hold on to, the community of Christ around us sings for us, and hopes for us. Elizabeth and Mary did for each other. Elizabeth, pregnant with the possibility of the impossible – that God makes a way where there is no way, and Mary, expectant with the hope of impending new life, are inspired to sing a song of hope. They can't help but to rejoice. Their joy is contagious and wraps around both of them like a cosmic embrace and Mary and Elizabeth sing hope as they discover this truth: they have each other, God has them, that's enough!

Today, we sing hope again. As soon as Zechariah's voice returns, his first words are gratitude and blessing. Zechariah sings a song of praise for God's protection and promise as he showers a blessing on

his newborn son, John, who will make way for the Savior Jesus. He sings a story of hope. After that, Mary sings a song of joy: "My soul magnifies God; my spirit rejoices in God." Mary sings about a God of liberation who pulls the powerful from their thrones and lifts up the lowly. Mary sings a story of hope, one in which justice and joy are interwoven.

As we prepare to celebrate Christ's birth, we too are invited to sing the songs of hope. Here is that story: Luke 1:67-80 [paraphrased...]

*Zechariah, filled with God's Spirit, proclaimed this: Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel; he has come to set his people free. He has raised up a Savior and placed the power of salvation in the very center of our lives, just as he promised long ago through the preaching of his holy prophets. God promised that we would be delivered – rescued from our enemies, saved from the hands of those who hate us. The promise is fulfilled: God has remembered the holy covenant that God made with our ancestor Abraham; God has revealed to us the mercy promised long, long ago that we would be rescued from all that stands against us so that we might serve God without fear and live in holiness and righteousness with God our whole lives. And you, my child, will be called "Prophet of the Highest!" You will go ahead to prepare the way for the Master, the Savior, to present the offer of salvation to his people, the promise of the forgiveness of sins. Through the heartfelt mercies of our God, God's Sunrise will break in upon us, shining on those in the darkness, light to those sitting in the shadow of death, showing us the way, to guide our feet into the way of peace." The Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.*

Zechariah's song is an ancient melody of gratitude, blessing, and hope. It's safe to say that we could all use more of all of that. The good news is that, like all scripture, the melody from Zechariah's song still rings into this gathering right here. Today, I want to highlight just a couple of things worth holding onto and then give us some things to take with us in the days ahead.

I said a few moments ago that the music in this season has a way of pointing us both backward and forward. The passage from Luke does just that. I want you to notice how Zechariah's song is filled with a look back, it's a song filled with

remembering. Fully embracing God's faithfulness, Zechariah says this:

*"Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel; God has come to free the captives. God has raised up a Savior... God has promised that we would be rescued from our enemies, saved from the hands of those who hate us."*

These words are deeply attached to the promises God made in the past in order for us to move into the future with gratitude, blessing, and hope.

We sing hope! Think about the times in your life when you've faced challenges that you didn't feel equipped to face. Think about the times when you've felt alone, hurt, deeply troubled about something that you just couldn't seem to get free from. Think about the grief you may be experiencing, especially at this time of year as you deal with the loss of a loved one. Our song, the song that we've been invited to sing, is the song of hope. We sing hope!

The ancient song of God's faithfulness is the song that gets us through. We sing hope about a God who comes to free us from the power of those challenges. We sing hope about a God who has risen up a savior to rescue us from the effects of the overwhelming burden of feeling alone. Those challenge may continue to linger, but we sing hope about a God who makes a way where there is no way. Elizabeth, who was [at about 90] well past the age of bearing children, bears a child, John. Her cousin, Mary, powerless in just about every way possible in her culture, and little more than a child at the time, bears the Christ child, Jesus who sets all creation free to sing God's song of hope! With all creation, we sing hope.

But notice also that Zechariah's song is filled with a look ahead, filled with hopeful anticipation. Zechariah says of his own son, John, *"You will go ahead to prepare the way for the Messiah, the Savior, who will bring salvation to the people. You will heal every brokenness and shine light into every dark corner. Those who are feeling trapped in deep darkness, in what seems like the valley of the shadow of death, on them light, God's sunrise will shine!"*

Again, these words are deeply attached to the promises God made in the past in order for us to

move into the future with gratitude and blessing. And so, we do. We walk into the future holding on to the promises of God's faithfulness in the past. We, like the ancient Hebrew people back into the future. [briefly explain this.] There is nowhere we are going where God has not been. There is nothing in our life experience that is new or surprising to God. We sing hope because we know that God has been faithful, is faithful now, and will always be faithful. We sing hope.

In this Advent season – looking back, we've acknowledged our weariness, and we've been reminded that we are not alone, we have a community around us. Looking ahead to days to come, we are invited to sing a song of hope in the face of whatever comes. And we do that because God has been faithful, God is faithful and will be faithful. As we move into the Advent days ahead, I want to challenge you to sing Zechariah's song of hope.

Two things. First, I want to gently challenge you to look back. In this nostalgic season, I want to invite you to make a fearless moral inventory of the ways that you've felt in need of something beyond you, something just beyond your grasp. And I want you to take that one step further and consider God's promise to meet you there in all of those places. Look for the reminders of how God has been revealed in the past. Consider God's faithfulness.

Second, I want to boldly challenge you to look ahead. In this season of hope, I want to invite you to move past nostalgia and sing the song of hope for what is to come. Like backing into the future, you move ahead with the hopeful promise that as God has met you in the past, God meets you in the present with the promise of a future with hope.

There's something powerful about music at this time of year. And it's time for a new playlist. The songs of hope that we add to one another's playlists will be deeply attached to the promises God made in the past in order for us to move into the future with gratitude, blessing, and hope. Those are the songs worth singing. Amen.