

**READ** Luke 1:1-23 | Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19

**COMMENTARY** | Rev. Cecelia D. Armstrong

We can be weary in various ways. We can be weary because of our age. We can be weary because of our waiting. We can be weary because we have faced the same routine for years and seemingly watched nothing change. We can be weary for various reasons, but must we stay weary? Can we exchange our weariness for hope? Is there a way to experience weariness and insist on the blessed hope that is to come?

Zechariah's question to Gabriel is directly aligned with this question of weariness and expectation of hope. In verse 18, Zechariah asks, "How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years." When we are weary, we tend to seek clarity instead of insisting on God's grace to provide for us during the weariness. As a result, Zechariah is kept silent or muted. When Zechariah is before the people who were wondering about his delay in the temple, they realize that he had seen a vision. What we notice in the text is that the crowd, having witnessed his inability to speak, does not speak on the issue either. Although no words are exchanged, it seems that weariness has fueled the inability to believe or has offered us an opportunity to lose hope.

In the psalm text we hear the cry for restoration. This is a cry for restoration since our weariness has shaken our hope. The request in prayer form is to restore us, to let God's face shine, and the outcome will be that we may be saved. This request is made three times in our selected text. A great professor once taught that if something appears three times in the sacred text, then it must be important. Restoration is important because amid weariness, there must be a light at the end of the tunnel. There must be a way to combat the weariness of the current times. There must be a glimpse of hope that helps to sustain us during the weary times and grants us the opportunity to rejoice.

There is a famous poem by Langston Hughes titled, "Mother to Son."<sup>1</sup> It was written in 1922 and appeared again in print in 1926 in Hughes's first book, *The Weary Blues*. The poem depicts the heaviness of living life as a Black person who faces the many obstacles and dangers that accompany racism in American society. What offers hope during the weariness is the encouragement to not turn back, to not sit down on the steps, and to keep climbin'. This seems to be the encouragement we can find in Zechariah and Elizabeth's story. While silent, don't turn back, but look ahead since restoration is coming.

## REFLECT

Can we exchange our weariness for hope?

Is there a way to experience weariness and insist on the blessed hope that is to come?

<sup>1</sup> Read the full poem here: [poetryfoundation.org/poems/47559/mother-to-son](https://poetryfoundation.org/poems/47559/mother-to-son)

**READ** Luke 1:24-45 | Isaiah 40:1-11

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When we are weary, we find it hard to express joy. When we are weary, we might find it hard to share space with others because our weariness has seemingly stolen our joy. However, is it even possible to be joy-filled by yourself? Sure, there are things we can do that will bring us joy, but what external joy is possible without others to acknowledge it? Could it be that internal joy can only be actualized in external connections? Shared joy is one way that a weary world can rejoice.

We find Elizabeth alone for five months. There is no indication in the text that explains her isolation, but speculation offers that her isolation was due to the same reasons Zechariah was silenced. Elizabeth probably had questions. Can we speculate what those questions might have been? “Does the Lord know how old I am?” “We have been wanting children for a while and NOW we are pregnant?” “The shame of being barren has caused me to be weary, so how am I supposed to rejoice with this?” We don’t hear her questions, but we hear her resolve in verse 25: “This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people.”

We are not sure about Mary’s travels. Mary sets out with haste to enter the house of Zechariah and greet Elizabeth. (*Zechariah probably didn’t say a word.*) We don’t know if she traveled alone, but we do know she went on a mission to get clarity about her own encounter with Gabriel. Creative thinking suggests that Mary did all of this on her own, in isolation, by herself, with no one to help, hurt, or hinder her mission. We don’t hear her questions either. We hear her question Gabriel wondering how this can be, since she is a virgin, but we don’t hear her internal dialogue during her travels.

Imagination says, “Does the Lord know how young I am?” “I haven’t even been married yet and NOW I am pregnant?” “The shame of being with child without being married first has caused me to be weary, so how am I supposed to rejoice with this?” We don’t hear her questions, but we witness her resolve by seeing her travel to her relative.

Two pregnant women meeting and sharing their experiences with one another. Chatting and hanging out. Two pregnant women, who are related but surely different from one another. One is young and one is old. One is married and one is not married yet. One is carrying the Word of God and one is carrying the one who prepares the way. They were both separate when they got news of God’s plans for their lives. (*Do we know how Elizabeth got the news that her pregnancy was special since Zechariah was unable to speak?*) It is when they are connected that they experience shared joy. It is when they come out of their isolation that joy becomes the connection. If comfort is a necessity in this weary world, then rejoicing should be done in the company of others. Mary and Elizabeth have shown us joy in joining and comfort in connecting.

## REFLECT

Is it possible to be joy-filled by yourself? Could it be that internal joy can only be actualized in external connections?



**READ** Luke 1:57-66 | Psalm 126

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“Surprise, Surprise, Surprise” was the title of a sermon that I had written but did not save on my computer. As the service began, fear was the prominent emotion because surely, I had no idea what was about to take place. The other program participants were also bewildered and were on the edge of their seats awaiting the outcome. Fast forward through the angst of the evening; things worked out just fine. “Surprise, Surprise, Surprise” was just that—a surprise! I am not sure if amazement is a precursor for joy and praise, but when it was all over, upon my lips was joy and praise for a seemingly successful night.

There was great rejoicing with Elizabeth after the birth of her son; however, there seemed to be a pause in the praise when the name of the child did not align with the traditions of the day. Surprise, surprise, surprise. Failing to believe Elizabeth (*I guess we haven’t trusted women for a while now*), the gathered crowd motioned for Zechariah to name the child and they were surprised that his selection was the same as Elizabeth’s. In this moment, the crowd was amazed, Zechariah was freed to speak, and praise was the order of the day. Fear came over the neighbors and the rumor mill went wild. Surely the hand of the Lord would be on this child, John.

When we are amazed, we tend to share the news, either seeking validation that it is shocking news or to witness the shock factor the news has on others. Try it. If you were told you would receive \$1,000 for reading this commentary, what would your second reaction be? Your first reaction would be amazement, wondering if it is true. Your second reaction would be to tell someone else, either to get them to believe you or to see if they are just as shocked as you were when you received the news. Either way, rejoicing is found in the laughter that just took place.

In the psalm reading we are reminded that whenever amazing things happen, we find a way to rejoice: “The Lord has done great things for us, and we rejoiced” (Psalm 126:3). When we acknowledge our weary world while remembering what God has already done, and what God is doing, THEN we can rejoice.

As I recall the night of the unsaved sermon, several reasons to be weary surface. I recall being offered the sermons of others to read instead, which caused a weary thought of lacking authenticity. I recall hearing words of comfort from my colleagues, which caused a weary thought of being inadequate. I recall crying in my room and saying to God, “You called me to this and now I don’t know what to do. I sure hope you show up.” God did show up that night. I allowed myself to be amazed. I sowed in tears and was able to reap with shouts of joy. God is able. There is truly a promise for the weary.

## REFLECT

Is amazement a precursor for joy and praise? When have you experienced fear that turns into amazement or joy?

**READ** Luke 1:46-55 | Luke 1:67-80

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Have you ever really unpacked the lyrics of “Lift Ev’ry Voice and Sing” by James Weldon Johnson?<sup>4</sup> 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 list’ning 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 me of the very songs that were sung by Mary, Zechariah, and even Hannah of the Hebrew text.

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. God has shown strength. God has scattered the proud. God has brought down the powerful. God has lifted the lowly. God has filled the hungry. God has helped those who have served God according to the promise made to Abraham. God has already done things that should allow a weary world to rejoice. Mary proclaims this in her song of hope and in the story of justice, joy, and a righteous peace.

Hannah’s song, found in 1 Samuel 2:1-10, is very similar to Mary’s Song and rightfully so. Mary knew Hebrew stories well and would have probably aligned her words based on the words she had buried in her heart. Hannah’s joy seemed to radiate from the victory in an answered prayer. The birth of her son, after being deemed barren, was a victory over the enemies who did not see God’s blessing on her life. Hannah sings a song of hope for current situations. Her reminder to us and the world is to let God be the rock on which we stand. Let God be the one who brings things to life.

Let God make poor and let God make rich; for only God can raise up the poor from the dust, the needy from the ash heap, to place them in places with royalty and to inherit seats of honor. God will be the one and only reason a weary world can rejoice.

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 has something better for those who await the future. Zechariah speaks over the life of the one who will be the prophet of the Most High. Zechariah tells of the blessings for John and speaks into John’s task for the future. Here the song and story of hope encourages us to speak life over those who will replace us when we are no longer on the battlefield for our Lord.

Consider the third stanza of “Lift Ev’ry Voice and Sing” as a prayer. May this be how a weary world rejoices: “shadowed beneath God’s hand.”

## REFLECT

What songs do you sing when you need hope?

<sup>4</sup> Author: James Weldon Johnson (1900). Read the lyrics here: [poetryfoundation.org/poems/48104/lift-evry-voice-and-sing](https://poetryfoundation.org/poems/48104/lift-evry-voice-and-sing).



**READ** Luke 2:1-20

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There is a famously-told Christmas story about a little boy who wanted to be Joseph in the Nativity play. He did not get the part of Joseph but did land the part of the innkeeper. He was disappointed. The night of the performance, he decided to change the story. The story, as told, caused Joseph to inquire about a place for him and Mary. The crowd anticipated that the innkeeper would say, "There is no room in the inn." However, the little boy changed the story that night. He said, "Sure, I've got the best room in the inn. You may have mine." This changed the whole story and caused everyone to laugh. When his parents got him home that night, they asked him why he changed the story. He told them what he learned as a Christian. Since no one knows the day nor the hour that the Son of God will return, then we ought to be ready to give God our best, lean not on our own understanding, and in all our ways trust God to direct our paths.

We make room. God makes room. The angels tell the shepherds, and they make room. There's always room. There's always more space. There's always plenty of good room, just choose your seat and sit down. Where we find the lack of hospitality is where we find the lack of joy. The Rev. Dr. James Foster Reese once said at the 221st General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA), "We are better together." Although he has entered eternal rest with our Savior,<sup>7</sup> his words remain true. Joseph and Mary were given the opportunity to be together even in a space that declared no room. The shepherds went to Bethlehem to see this thing that had taken place, causing them to be together with the holy family. Not only did the shepherds come and witness this thing, but they also left telling everyone by glorifying and praising God, giving society a chance to be together.

Our task during this Christmas season is to make room in the same manner. We should acknowledge that the world is weary from grief, war, a pandemic, political strife, personal and corporate failings, and the list could continue. Although these weary acts take place, our rejoicing happens when we encounter life together. When we change the story as it might seem to be and make room for collective moments to rejoice. For no one knows the day nor the hour of the second Advent, so let's not lean on our own understanding but in all our ways trust God to direct our paths—offering God our best by making room for others. The room we make will allow a weary world to rejoice.

**REFLECT**

This Christmas, how are you making room? The room we make will allow a weary world to rejoice.

<sup>7</sup> Learn more about Rev. Dr. James Foster Reese's life and legacy here: [presbyterianmission.org/story/october-14-2022](https://presbyterianmission.org/story/october-14-2022)

READ Luke 2:21-38

COMMENTARY | Rev. Cecelia D. Armstrong



In 2014, my father passed away and I was asked to deliver the eulogy. I was not sure what I would say or how I would express my own grief for the passing of such a great giant. He was surely one of those guys who just helped wherever he was needed. However, Dad did not just come and do things for you. He would show you how to do it yourself because he did not want to return and do the same task again. Dad was the epitome of the saying, "Give a person a fish and they will eat for a day. Teach a person to fish and they will never go hungry." Dad believed in planting seeds that would germinate and grow in the very people who would be here long after he passed away. The joy of knowing Dad was what got me through preaching his eulogy.

The rituals of taking Jesus to the temple (*naming the child "Jesus," as the angel declared*), and receiving the prophetic messages over Jesus' life are all seeds that were planted according to God's will. The joy of knowing that God planted the original seeds should give us reason to rejoice. In fact, this is where we can all grow when we root ourselves in ritual. Ritual is an act infused with meaning. Ritual is not always easy. Ritual is not always pleasant. In fact, ritual can be weary. Yet, the result of ritual usually produces something memorable, something relaxing, or something pleasant. If ritual is weary, there must be anticipated joy to follow.

Consider a planted seed. Ritualistically, it must be placed in dirt. For the seed, dirt can be a weary place. The Word of God buried in us may sometimes cause us to be in a weary place. The message from Simeon to Mary about Jesus might have come across as a weary message. Without a doubt, the encounter was memorable. The planted seed must receive nurture to burst through the dirt, pursuing the opportunity to bloom.

The Word of God buried in us may need to be nurtured so that we can bloom. Mary and Joseph followed the ritual of their culture and tradition and in doing so were granted lessons on how to parent Jesus. Without a doubt, the lessons received were comforting.

As we consider our own lives, how are we using rituals to bloom for God? When I reviewed my father's life, I was able to recall memorable encounters. Some encounters were tough and hard to receive. Some encounters taught me lessons I will never forget. Some encounters were opportunities for blooming and shining in places that seem drab and weary. The experience of rituals, either good or bad ones or the ones that cause us to be weary, will allow us to rejoice.

REFLECT

How are you using rituals to bloom for God?





## READ Luke 3:21-22

### COMMENTARY | Rev. Cecelia D. Armstrong



My mother was a jewel. Every morning she would wake me by singing a question to me. In her best singing voice, she'd ask, "Hey good lookin'. Wha'chu got cookin'? How's 'bout cookin' somethin' up with me?"<sup>12</sup> Now, Momma was not Hank Williams in any way but her affirmation of me every morning was the start of a wonderful day. Even today, I am fueled by her affirmation even though she is no longer with me. I must admit that knowing that Mom was interested in my plans everyday and that she was willing to be a part of my activities or to include me in her activities helped to develop the work ethic I have. I knew that Mom was my greatest cheerleader.

In our text, Jesus is praying. Jesus is having a conversation with God. God, a Heavenly Parent, is listening intently to Jesus praying. The conversation has been recorded for us to hear. God affirms Jesus' ministry: "You are my Son, the Beloved: with you I am well pleased" (Luke 3:22). Our faith tradition allows us to hear God's voice, see the embodiment of the Holy Spirit in the form like a dove, and witness the baptism of Jesus. We can concentrate on the presence of the Trinity, or we can witness the actions of a parent with a child.

John's responsibility was prophesied in Zechariah's song (Luke 1:67-80). Here we find the fulfillment of his parental blessing. John the Baptist did go before the Lord to prepare the way. John the Baptist did give knowledge of salvation to the people by the forgiveness of their sins. John did grow and become strong in spirit. John was affirmed by the prophecy placed on his life not only by God but also by the loving remarks of his father, Zechariah.

If we are going to trust our belovedness, could we see and receive our baptism as an affirmation from our Heavenly Parent? We should remember that we belong to God. We are God's handiwork, created in Jesus Christ for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life (Ephesians 2:10). We are created, called, and commissioned at our own baptism, which should fuel our joy to be children of God.

As a weary world seeks ways to rejoice, one way could be in receiving the declaration of love affirmed by God in our baptism as it was declared in Jesus' baptism. Can you imagine God singing the refrain from that song by Hank Williams? God calls us "good lookin'" because we were created in the image of God. God questions us to remember the call on our lives by asking us, "what we have cookin'?" God commissions us to "cook up somethin'" with God as co-creators in a world that longs to rejoice. How does a weary world rejoice? Welp, we cook up somethin' with God and be the source of God's joy.

## REFLECT

How are you being called to "cook up somethin'" with God in a world that longs to rejoice?

<sup>12</sup> Lyrics from the song, "Hey, Good Lookin'" written and recorded by Hank Williams. 1951.