

WESTMINSTER
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SERMON

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Joy Ride

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In ancient times, childlessness was perceived to be a sign of God's disfavor. And yet, throughout Hebrew Scriptures the plot line repeats of God choosing aged couples and childless women to conceive – Abraham and Sarah, Rachael, Hannah. God restores the possibility of new life to everyone through these unlikely parents.

To speak of childlessness, or that harsh word “barren”, stings for anyone who has experienced infertility. Miraculous stories of conception for other people can open deep wounds all over again.

Christianity is a story-telling faith. I invite you to listen to these instances of reversals, as more than a curiosity of human biology. Accept them as evidence of all the ways God births new life through each one of us.

We rarely grow in faith from abstract ideas or theologies. Faith takes root through the stories of God entering the lives of people like you and me. The way God interrupts and redirects and corrects humanity in the past becomes the evidence for us to imagine God will do the same for us.

We all carry unfulfilled dreams, disappointments, or reasons to believe we're too old, too poor, too outside of the acceptable, or *too whatever* negative label for us to realize our heart's desire. And yet God comes to the underdog, the unlikely, a barren woman, the younger son, a lowly shepherd, or the total outsider with a grace that renews everyone's world.

This Advent, rather than start off with “Joyful, Joyful We Adore Thee,” let’s linger in the minor key with stories of those for whom the toil of the mundane and lost dreams creates a bone-deep weariness.

We’ll read from the Gospel of Luke about people, from the aged to the young, who lay before God their weariness and become open to God.

Loving God, the decorations of the season camouflage the weariness we carry. The need to be jolly only adds to the weight when we want to feel is lasting joy. Give us permission to let down our fears and certainty about the impossible. Let your spirit swirl among us and fill us with your word as we prepare ourselves for your son to be born among us. Amen.

Luke 1:1-23

Since many have undertaken to compile a narrative about the events that have been fulfilled among us,² just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word,

³I, too, decided, as one having a grasp of everything from the start, to write a well-ordered account for you, most excellent Theophilus,⁴ so that you may have a firm grasp of the words in which you have been instructed.

⁵ 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 descended from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. ⁶ Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. ⁷ But they had no children because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.

⁸ Once when he was serving as priest before God during his section's turn of duty, ⁹ he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord to offer incense.

¹⁰ Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. ¹¹ Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. ¹² When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified, and fear overwhelmed him.

¹³ 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. ¹⁴ You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. ¹⁷ 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 make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

¹⁸Zechariah said to the angel, “How can I know that this will happen? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years.”

¹⁹The 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. ²⁰But 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.”

²¹Meanwhile the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering at his delay in the sanctuary. ²²When he did come out, he was unable to speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the sanctuary. He kept motioning to them and remained unable to speak. ²³When his time of service was ended, he returned to his home.

I imagine later today you may watch TV. The Steelers game? You'll likely see a commercial. The scene opens to three elderly women sitting on a park bench.

All bundled up with hats and scarves. They watch kids sled downhill.

We hear laughter – laughter of the kids not the older women.

One woman studies the forlorn faces of her companions and you begin to hear a piano quietly play.

You're torn between letting your mind wander to make out the tune as you watch this woman pull out a smart phone.

You recognize the melody and begin to recall the lyrics,
"There are places I remember, all my life,
though some have changed."

Oh, but memory can be fickle, and you think to yourself what is that song, just as camera cuts to the next scene where this woman is at home and receives a large box.

She smiles. She takes the box to the park and hands it to her friends. They remain silent. Confusion crosses their faces as music puts into your mind the lyrics...

All these places had their moments
With lovers and friends, I still can recall.¹

Inside the box they find, we'll let's just call it what it is, a foam cushion for skinny butts to sit on. When some people get older, they need more cushioning. Still, no one speaks, but a look of dismay crosses their faces as if to say, "seriously, in a park, you're giving me a cushion to publicly remind me of my frailty."

Then the camera opens to the women at the top of the hill as strings join the piano and the music crescendos with an unmistakable version of the Beatles' song, "In My Life".

¹ <https://genius.com/The-beatles-in-my-life-lyrics>

Side-by-side, they place their cushions in toboggans and take off downhill. Their faces beam. The kids watch, sharing in the delight. As if in in slow motion, their faces transform with time-lapse to their youthful images and the laughter they shared.

Amazon's commercial ends with the words: "joy is shared." It is as heartwarming a commercial as the Budweiser Clydesdales with a puppy.

This little joyride lifts everyone. In sixty seconds, Amazon hawks the possibility that weariness becomes joy with an overnight delivery.²

If only it were that simple. The rush to Christmas and all the trappings of the season try to persuade us that Prime or UPS trucks deliver some version of happiness.

The patience of Advent invites us to slow down. To look beyond any immediate diversions from weariness as we prepare to receive God's joy.

I don't mean to be a Debby-downer.

If you're racing along with a spring in your step, you've likely overcome some stumbling block or are that very slim minority of people blessed with that elusive capacity to center yourself in ways that escape the rest of us.

We envy you.

² https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jmF0bOCa_4Q

During Advent we prepare for God to enter our lives by becoming vulnerable. We acknowledge the limits to our capacity to *self-help* ourselves. It takes courage to be so very human, to admit our weariness.

Weary differs from *tired*. When asked, several colleagues described the difference as:

Being tired is "I need a nap" whereas being weary is
"no amount of sleep can fix the way I'm feeling right now."

(Another wrote) As someone with chronic illness,
I often face a tired that rest won't get rid of on its own.
But I still see that as tired.

Weary is the despair from knowing this illness
is beyond my ability to fix.

I often feel tired after accomplishing something big—a full
workday, caring for kids, coaching soccer. Sometimes tired
feels good.

Weary just feels interminable. "How long, oh Lord?"

Caring for an active toddler can make one tired.
Caring for a medically fragile child can make one weary.
Caring for a loved one with dementia can make one weary.

Being tired is physical. The body needs to rest.
Being weary is emotional. The soul needs to rest.

You have the power overcome being tired.
To overcome being weary requires changing things
beyond one person's control.³

A culture that celebrates “everything is just fine” or worse yet, “I’ve got everything under control” makes it too risky to admit our weariness, even if it is a fundamental part of being human.

Weariness and lament seep through our faith story. Fully one-third of our Psalms begin with lament. How long oh Lord? Or why won’t you help me? The Israelites shook their fists at God. In the Book of Ruth, Naomi renamed herself “bitter” when her dreams evaporated. So many widows resign themselves to an early death.

Story after story, lament precedes the moment when God interrupts an otherwise hopelessness to bring new life.

Despite scripture’s weighty evidence that lament brings us closer to God, somehow we’ve even been seduced into thinking faith gives us some immunity to sorrow. We delude ourselves into thinking weariness and joy cannot co-exist. Somehow we think the church ought to be the happiest place in town.

We don’t need to be the happiest place. We need to be the honest place. Out of such honesty, joy becomes possible. There is nothing more freeing than being able to tell the truth in a safe place.⁴

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<https://www.facebook.com/groups/sanctifiedartcommunity/permalink/3185016915138674>

Now we turn to the good news from Luke's gospel. This writer situates Jesus' birth at the time King Herod ruled. That is shorthand to say the political climate made it so the top 1% of the population feared his wrath and the other 99% expected terror.

Zechariah and his wife, both possess impeccable Jewish pedigrees and yet were not blessed with a child. Month after month shame came to their home. Zechariah carries on in his daily grind...it was his "turn of duty" and the lottery assigned him even more work: offer God incense.

You heard the story. He enters a sacred place. He performs the ritual. Even in weariness, faith matters. Gabriel appears and tells him that God has heard his decades of prayer. His son will be a prophet with the power and spirits of Elijah.

Zechariah, this man of the word and ritual, who celebrated every Passover by making room at the table for Elijah. Who prophesied God will send a messenger to deliver them hears that God chose him. Zechariah's son will prepare the world to receive God. Rather than accept this good news, he needs certainty. Before he'll trust, he needs to know how.

The writer of the Gospel of Luke might as well address this story to each one of us. Don't we all ask these same questions before we let our hearts hope again? How can I know?

⁴ Walter Brueggemann, Clover Reuter Beal, *An Ongoing Imagination: A Conversation about Scripture, Faith, and the Thickness of Relationship*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2019).

Gabriel sentences Zechariah to silence. This man of the word needed to let go of his words for the word of God to take hold. It's not an overnight delivery. For Zechariah and Elizabeth, the nine long months allow for hope to grow.

Advent lasts four weeks, a fraction of the time to birth a baby, but long enough for us to set down our burdens before God. To make room in our hearts for possibility.

The delivery truck driver from UPS, Amazon, or FedEx might tempt you with a momentary smile. Go for it. Give in by giving as a way to share this life. This joy ride comes from sharing this life with one another. The real joy ride comes from God alone.



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