

Rejoicing Together
Series: How Does a Weary World Rejoice?
Luke 1:24–45
Sunday, December 8, 2024 (Advent 2)

Let us pray: Lord, as we hear these words of promise in anticipation of your coming, may your Spirit come upon us now and speak to us the word that we need to hear, in Christ. Amen.

We started a new sermon series last week that will guide us through the season of Advent, as we prepare our hearts and minds and lives for the coming of Christ. This series asks the question, “How does a weary world rejoice?” Even in this festive season with all the lights and decorations and music, so many of us are weary. Maybe you’re weary because the Christmas season has been going on since the end of September, and you’re *tired* of the music and decorations. Maybe you’re still weary from Thanksgiving and family gatherings that, while *great*, can be *exhausting*.

Maybe you’re weary from politics and a long election season. Weary from the news. Weary from violence and war around the world. Weary from work. Weary from a medical situation, an illness or constant tests and treatments and doctor’s appointments. Weary from taking care of someone else. Weary from financial worries or problems in a relationship. Weary from grief over the loss of someone you love. Weary from loneliness. Weary from being the one person who has to hold it all together. Weary from just day after day of the same routine, and it seems like nothing changes.

In the midst of that weariness, how can we find *joy*? Ridgley started off last week by talking about how weariness and joy can often coexist. That it’s not *either/or*. Sometimes it is through our weariness that we *find* joy. And I think it helps to first understand the difference between *joy*

and *pleasure*. Our world, especially American culture, is so heavily focused on *pleasure*, that we often confuse the two. But there *is* a difference.

Pleasure is *external*. It is brought about by something outside of you; something *other* than you. Pleasure depends on your circumstances, your surroundings, your activities. Most of the time, pleasure is brought about by something physical. Pleasure is about how something or someone makes you *feel*; it comes from what you are *doing* or what is *happening* around you, and it is *temporary*, because, eventually, what you are *doing* has to *end*.

Joy is *internal*. It results from a fullness, an abundance inside of you. Joy does *not* depend on your circumstances, surroundings, or activities. It can exist apart from those things. You can be struggling, emotionally or physically, and *still* have joy. While pleasure comes from what you are *doing*, joy arises from something *else*, something *deeper*. You can still have joy when all those other things are taken away from you. Pleasure is *temporary*, but joy is *lasting*.

Pleasure is not a *bad* thing. God has provided us with things in this world that are pleasurable: beautiful music, delicious food, people that we love, things that we enjoy doing. God created these pleasurable things, and they are *good*. And God gave us the *capacity* for pleasure. We just have to make sure that our sense of self is not dependent on them. We have to find a fulfillment that is not dependent on our circumstances or surroundings. So how do we find joy in the midst of our weariness?

Last week we heard the story of Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth, and this is the story that's going to be carrying us through this whole series. Zechariah was a priest. He and Elizabeth had no children, and it says, "they were getting on in years." But one day as Zechariah is in the

temple making an offering, an angel of the Lord comes to him and tells him that his prayers have been heard, and Elizabeth will have a son.” Zechariah (understandably) questions how this could be, since they are so old, and the angel says, “Just for that, you won’t be able to talk until the baby is born.” We pick up today where we left off last week, with the revelation that Elizabeth is indeed pregnant. But then we get this detail that, I don’t know about you, but I had never noticed before. It says that Elizabeth conceived, *and for five months she remained in seclusion.*

This amazing this has happened to her, but she is completely isolated and alone for five months. Why? Maybe she was scared (her husband sees a vision, and now he can’t speak, and she is pregnant; that’s some pretty intense stuff). Maybe she was just trying to make sure she didn’t lose the baby. “We’ve waited all this time, so I’m going to play it safe and not go anywhere or do anything.” Maybe she didn’t think anyone would believe her, and people would laugh at this old lady who has become pregnant. Whatever the reason, Elizabeth went into seclusion for five months and, as far as we know, she did not share the news of her pregnancy with anyone.

When Jen and I were going through the process of adopting Brandon from South Korea, the day that we got a phone call telling us that he would be coming in three days and what we needed to do to go get him, that morning just before the phone call came, we found out that we were pregnant with Ryan. We were *so* happy and excited, but we also knew that we were not *supposed* to get pregnant during the adoption process. They want all the focus to be on this child that is coming home because it’s a huge adjustment, and you run the risk of losing the child that you are adopting and the money that you have paid. So while we had so much joy, we were also terrified. There was this very real fear of, “What if they take Brandon away from us?” And so we just didn’t say anything. For three months. You have this unbelievable news that you want

to share with everyone, but you *can't*. It is really hard and isolating and lonely not to be able to share your joy with others.

After Elizabeth had been in seclusion for five months, it says that her relative Mary was visited by an angel who tells her that she will have a child who will be the Son of God and will sit on the throne of his ancestor King David, and of his kingdom there will be no end. It says that Mary was *perplexed* by the angel's words. But that word *perplexed* is a Greek word that doesn't just mean *perplexed*, like you're confused about something. It means, "greatly agitated or troubled; anxious or distressed." It's about agitating something by shaking it up. Mary is shaken up.

She understandably questions the angel's words. "How can this be, since I'm a young woman who is not married?" I want you to see the parallels here. Zechariah is visited by an angel and told of a baby. He questions it and is made mute. Mary is visited by an angel and told of a baby. She questions it and gets an explanation. Might seem a little unfair, but she *is* the one who has to deliver the baby, while Zechariah does not, so she gets a little grace for that. And let's be honest, all that men really need to do during a pregnancy is just shut up, right?

Elizabeth is old and has been praying for a baby for years, so this is a cause of great joy for her. Mary is young and unmarried, so a pregnancy that is *not* from the man she is engaged to is a cause of great *fear* for her. She could be killed for this according to Jewish law, but even if she isn't, in that culture, her life would be ruined. Elizabeth has been in seclusion and is very isolated and alone. Mary is terrified. No one is going to believe her, and she must feel very isolated and alone. They have both got to be pretty weary from carrying the weight of this news by themselves. How do *they* find joy in the midst of their weariness?

A couple of years after we had Brandon and Ryan, we found out we were pregnant with Emily. And while we were overjoyed, we had also lost three children before her. So there was a part of us that was very scared. We went over one night to have dinner with our friends Sean and Megan and their kids. They had walked with us through all of our pregnancies and the adoption process with Brandon. They had been our people through all of that. We got to their house, and Sean and I were talking in the kitchen while Jen and Megan went into the other room, and all of a sudden we just heard Megan *scream* (like a *good* scream, a *happy* scream). Sean looks at me and says, “Pregnant?” I said, “Yep.” He hugged me. Megan hugged Jen. We all hugged each other. In the midst of our fear, we were able to rejoice *together*.

And that is exactly where Mary and Elizabeth find joy. After the angel delivers this news to Mary, she goes to visit Elizabeth. When she walks in the house and greets Elizabeth, it says that the baby in Elizabeth’s womb leaps for joy. Mary had been shaken up inside with fear and anxiety. Elizabeth was shaken up inside with joy. Mary’s arrival is what pulls Elizabeth out of her seclusion, allowing her to experience that joy. And Elizabeth’s joy pulls Mary out of her fear and loneliness. Even if they cannot feel joy for *themselves*, they rejoice for *each other*.

In the midst of our weariness, we find joy in *connection*. Connection with each other and connection with God.

Cecilia Armstrong describes this encounter between Mary and Elizabeth as “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...It is when they are connected that they experience shared joy. It is when they come out of 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.”¹

We can absolutely experience joy on our own. But in order to *rejoice*, that joy needs to come out. It needs to be shared with others. It can be shared with *God* through prayer or singing or dancing or writing or any number of other ways. And it can be shared with *other people*. But we cannot just keep our joy to ourselves. It is meant to be shared. Because it is in the sharing of it that we realize we are not alone. That we don’t have to bear the weariness of life by ourselves.

I know someone (and I’m going to keep this anonymous so that I don’t embarrass anyone) who had been looking for a job for around six months and just found out the other week that they got one. And that’s a long, hard, weary process, trying to find a job when you *need* one. This person could have just kept that good news to themselves and been happy and relieved on their own. But they texted a friend and said, “Hey, just wanted to let you know that I got that job that I was telling you about.” And the friend texted back, “I am so proud of you! That company just got the best team member they will ever have. You are one in a million! Congratulations!” How much *better* does getting a message like *that* make the news of a new job? How much better does it make your connection with that other person? And how much more dose it *amplify* the joy you were already feeling?

In the midst of our weariness, we find joy in connection. And that is one of the reasons that the church exists. We all experience the weariness of life. And so many people are so isolated and alone in their weariness and anxiety and fear. But we can come here, together, and connect with

¹ From *A Sanctified Art*, “How Does a Weary World Rejoice?” commentary, the Second Sunday of Advent.

each other and with God. We can share our weariness and our joy with each other. We can celebrate together and cry together. We can wait together and pray together. We can sing together and just sit silently together. We can lift each other up and encourage each other and love one another. We can share life together, and there is *joy* in that connection.

If there is something that has you weary or anxious or afraid, don't just keep that to yourself. Share it with someone else. Who knows how that other person might help you find joy? If you are celebrating something, don't just keep that to yourself. Share it with someone else. Who knows how that other person might help *magnify* your joy?

You are part of a community of faith that *wants* to find joy with you. We are all here because we are looking for connection, with God and with other people. And the good news that we celebrate in this season is that even when you feel isolated and alone, *you are not*. Because in the birth of Jesus Christ, God has come near to us to live life with us and share a connection with us. In Jesus, God has promised to be with us *always*. And sometimes the way that we *experience* God's presence and love is through the presence and love of other people. You are *never alone*, because *God* is with you, and *we* are with you. So bring your weariness and your anxiety and your fear, and God will help us find joy together. Amen.