

Can this be?

Luke 1: 5-25
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“Long lay the world in sin and error pining,
'Till he appeared and the soul felt its worth.
A thrill of hope the weary world rejoices,
For yonder breaks a new and glorious morn;”

The lyrics for the beloved hymn, O Holy Night, provide the framework for our Advent season. Each week we ask the question, How does a weary world rejoice?

How can we - a weary people, rejoice?

And each week we will turn to the Gospel of Luke - who tells the story of Jesus by interweaving Christ's birth with the parallel story of Elizabeth, Zechariah, and John the Baptist. The creative team at Sanctified Art reflected that as they explored these birth narratives told side by side, [they] saw the full scope of human emotions: isolation, fear, disbelief, as well as connection, trust, and joy.

“The Christmas season, they write, is often an emotionally-charged time when we feel many things deeply—sometimes all at once. Many experience emotional dissonance in the midst of joy-filled carols and festivities.”

And sometimes we wonder - is that OK? Can we feel all of this all it once? Should we?

Kate Bowler writes, “Under the weight of our grief, our shame, our pain, or that of the world, we can convince ourselves that joy is the enemy. That to celebrate or feel happiness somehow mocks pain...[the reality is] joy and sorrow simply co-exist.”¹

A thrill of hope - a weary world rejoices...and so we begin in Luke with Zechariah and Elizabeth. Zechariah is a priest and Elizabeth could trace her lineage all the way back to Aaron - the brother of Moses. They are faithful and righteous people. An older couple who have never been able to have a baby. A reality that brought judgment and shame to them - and I have to assume a great deal of sadness, pain, disappointment and grief.

At the time of our story, Zechariah is serving in the temple - and he is chosen to go into the holy of holies in order offer the sacrifice for the people. And while he is alone in this inner chamber, the angel Gabriel sneaks up on him. :-) Gabriel declares that he has good news - Zechariah and Elizabeth's prayers have been answered - they are going to have a son - a special child who will bring them joy and who will prepare Israel for the coming of the Lord.

¹ From her book, “Good Enough”

It's not surprising to me that Zechariah questions this news. How can I be sure of this?, he asks, pointing out that he and Elizabeth are quite old. How is he supposed to believe this? How can it be true?

Often we think about this moment as an example of not believing - of not having enough faith. But this question, How can I be sure, is so much deeper than just belief. I wonder how many miscarriages Elizabeth and Zechariah had endured. How many times had he gotten his hopes up only to have them dashed again? How long had he grieved before he finally gave up?

What if his question is not just about his physical age - but his emotional state? I hear him like this: I am too old for this foolishness - too old to get my hopes up again. So unless you have some proof, Gabriel, I'll bid you good day and finish this offering on my own, thank you.

Maybe you know this place too - the place where grief or pain or loss or disappointment has hardened you against hope. The place where we close ourselves down because the hard emotions are too difficult - and we end up blocking the good ones too. Maybe you have had the experience of simply not wanting any more change - even good change. And the only thing that makes sense is to keep plodding along in the same direction. This is a place where hope is dangerous. It may lead to more hurt.

Gabriel certainly hears Zechariah's question as a reflection of his lack of belief - and he is not happy about it. In fact he responds with a pretty big punishment - or consequence for Zechariah. He will remain mute until the baby comes. For nine months he will be forced into silence.

I wonder if it is possible that this consequence is not just punishment - but is also a gift for Zechariah. What if it is the thing that helps him get to a new place? Periods of silence can help us process our emotions - it can free us from having to answer a bunch of questions from others - it can make us slow down, make room for what is going on in and around us.

In Jewish tradition, when a close family member dies, the family sits shiva. It's seven days where people come to offer their condolences - but they do not speak - they are not allowed to speak until the grieving person gives them permission to do so. But they show up. They sit. In silence. In the midst of the variety of emotions. No one lightens the mood with a joke. No one has to figure out the right words. The silence is a gift.

It allows for space - space for the terrible pain of grief - and...eventually - space to recognize that love is surrounding you in the people who show up. Space to let a little hope in. Or to notice a bit of joy right around the edges of the unthinkable.

As advent begins, what weariness are you carrying? What are the situations in your life or in the world where you feel hardened toward hope?

And how might you seek to let your weariness or grief or pain begin to co-exist alongside your joy and your hope rather than expecting them to cancel one another out? Are there practices you can pick up in this season to facilitate that coexistence?

Zechariah is forced into silence - a practice he does not choose, and yet - the next time we see him, he will have renewed hope. I don't want to suggest that silence is some sort of magic formula - but I wonder how it might create space, if we let it. If we can see the gift of it.

As we take a few moments of silence right now, I hope you'll pay attention to the mixture of emotions that are present for you in this moment - and try not to push any of them away - let them all be there. Notice your hurt, your yearning, your joy, your hope...experience the wise words of Mary Oliver:

We shake with joy

We shake with grief

What a time they have, these two

Housed as they are in the same body.