

# How Does a Weary World Rejoice? We allow ourselves to be amazed.

Third Sunday in Advent

Luke 1:57-66 Psalm 126  
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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This year's Advent theme asks and reflect upon the question: How does a weary world rejoice? You may recall the line in the glorious Christmas song, *O Holy Night*, "A thrill of hope the weary world rejoices." It reminds us that even in the midst of our weariness, we (and the world) can find opportunities to rejoice. And what a timely theme this year, with all that's going on in the world.

On the First Sunday of Advent, a couple of weeks ago, we addressed how important it is to simply **acknowledge our weariness**, and that in and of itself does not negate the opportunity to also experience hope and joy at the same time. For the season of Advent reminds us to **rejoice in a hope that is promised, but not yet realized**.

Last Sunday, the focus shifted to rejoicing during times of weariness through our **connections with others**. A few of you told me after the service it was my best sermon ever. Of course, there was no sermon last week because of the remarkable choral music performance during worship. But I want to share a brief reflection from our A Sanctified Art resource material because I think we are all aware of just how meaningful it is when we share a connection – not only with family and friends, but also together communally here at College Hill. Our chili cookoff earlier this month was a great example of how our joy was expanded in community. It emphasized how meaningful it is when we share fellowship together.

As we all know, however, this can also be a difficult time of year for many. Therefore, the resource adds:

While we want to honor the ways our joy can expand when it is shared with others, we also want to **be mindful of all those who may be experiencing loneliness and isolation throughout the holidays—or those who are deeply missing a lost loved one**. Therefore, it is important to emphasize that joy is fundamentally rooted in connection, but connection expands beyond just human relationships. We experience joy through feeling a deep connection to ourselves, our loved ones, to God, to nature, and to the whole cosmos that surrounds us.

**Let us be compassionately mindful, then, of those who are struggling**, perhaps by finding ways to reach out in connection to them this month. Our Congregational Care ministry team does this each year by visiting and delivering a Christmas Bag of goodies to those in our congregation who are unable to be here in person. And for those of us

who sometimes find it hard to reach out and socialize with others, perhaps we can muster the courage to say “yes” to a few more invitations to connect.

In her book, *Atlas of the Heart*, researcher **Brené Brown** defines **joy as “an intense feeling of deep spiritual connection, pleasure, and appreciation.”** She says joy is “characterized by a connection with others, or with God, nature, or the universe.” Therefore, **connection is fundamental to experiences of joy.** Consider a time when you experienced deep joy. Who or what did you feel connected to? When have you experienced contagious joy?

We move this Sunday into another way a weary world can rejoice. And that is to **allow ourselves to be amazed.** In our Gospel reading this morning, again from the first chapter of Luke, we learn that after Elizabeth gives birth her neighbors and family celebrate with her. When it comes time to name the child, Zechariah affirms the name given by the angel and by Elizabeth. He is to be named John, who will become John the Baptist, the forerunner preparing the way for the Messiah. In that moment of affirming the promise, Zechariah’s speech is restored. Everyone is filled with amazement.

As in any biblical story, how can we find ways to apply what we learn to our own lives and journey of faith? Let’s start with these questions.

- How often do you allow yourself to be amazed?
- Wonder is all around us, so is there anything hindering your ability to recognize it?

In our Old Testament reading from Psalm 126, those who expect to reap tears are granted a surprise: shouts of joy. **Amazement is a comfort and consolation for the weary.** Perhaps you noticed how our sub-theme for today is stated? It uses the language, “**allow ourselves**” intentionally. **That indicates there must be some effort on our part to notice and take in the amazing wonders all around us each day, wonders we can too easily ignore.** Allowing ourselves to be amazed requires a stance of **paying attention** – and then saying yes to wonder when we experience it.

Each of us has our own ways of experiencing awe and wonder. As most of you know, a deep passion of mine is **photography**, and has been since my first Kodak Brownie Fiesta camera back in the 1960s. I have often said to folks that I’ve always had the tendency to look at the world around me as if through the lens of a camera. That focuses my attention to the smallest details, whether it be in a flower, bird, pine cone, insect, leaf, rock, architectural flourish, pottery, a painting, the stars in the sky, a person’s face, the laugh of a small child, and a million other things. This has become a **spiritual practice** that brings me into a deeper connection with the beauty of God’s good creation, and hence a profound sense of amazement, wonder, awe, and thus reverence.

**Amazement most often turns into experiences of joy** – joy in a weary world. And notice it’s not just in the usual experiences of awe and amazement, like gazing upon a snow-covered mountain, a rocky beach with crashing waves, or a brilliant fiery sunset, but **also in what might otherwise be seen as ordinary and commonplace until you look close enough and pay attention.**

What, then, is often our next response? In our biblical story, when the crowd became amazed they responded by sharing the joyous news with others. The **Rev. Cecilia D. Armstrong**, biblical commentator for our resource material adds, “**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.” I tend to do this with some

of my photographs, either on Instagram, or as a “Pic of the Day” post on my Facebook page. **I encourage you to share what amazes you with others. Often they will also experience a sense of wonder and awe.**

Let me, now, reiterate and introduce a few more questions for you to reflect upon during this season of Advent.

- What has, or continues to, lead you to a profound sense of amazement, wonder, and awe, perhaps even reverence?
- When was the last time you were truly amazed?
- Have you ever experienced the feeling of amazement turning into unexpected joy?
- In what ways do you practice awe?
- What habits, rituals, or exercises can allow you to be amazed more frequently?
- How can all of us better share in another person's joy and amazement?

**Wonder, awe, and amazement are essential to our spirituality, in recognizing and experiencing the Sacred Presence of the Divine beyond, among, and within us.** Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel had a deep commitment to what he called, “radical amazement.” Back in 1965 he wrote:

**Awe is more than an emotion; it is a way of understanding, insight into a meaning greater than ourselves.** The beginning of awe is wonder, and the beginning of wisdom is awe. Awe is an intuition for the dignity of all things... Awe is a sense for the ... mystery beyond all things. It enables us ... to sense in small things the beginning of infinite significance, to sense the ultimate in the common and the simple; to feel in the rush of the passing the stillness of the eternal. **What we cannot comprehend by analysis, we become aware of in awe.**

Today, and every day, especially when weary, allow yourself to be amazed!

Amen.

Resource:

A Sanctified Art, Advent 2023.

Brené Brown. *Atlas of the Heart: Mapping Meaningful Connection and the Language of Human Experience* (New York: Random House, 2021). 204.

Abraham J. Heschel, *Who Is Man?* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1965), 88–89.