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How does a weary world rejoice?

An Advent devotional

Art, Poetry, & Reflections for Advent in Luke's Gospel



A Poem for the Theme

How does a weary world rejoice?

The Last Time I Saw God

The last time I saw God
face to face

I was looking at a bed of tulips.
God was every color of red.
I was merely a mortal,
in awe of it all.

The time before that,
we were tying back
the curtains,
looking for stars.
God was the deepest purple
and the brightest light.

The time before that,
the city was soft with snow.
God was the quiet
that tucked us all in.

And in between these
small gifts there were
newborn babies,
and sapling trees,
homemade bread,
the sound of a church
singing on Sunday.

...

Why, yes, we are lucky.
We are more than lucky
for the moments when
delight and awe
unzip the weight
we carry around.

*Poem by
Rev. Sarah (Are) Speed*

Baptism of the Lord | How does a weary world rejoice?

We trust our belovedness

READ Luke 3:21-22

FROM THE ARTIST | Rev. Lauren Wright Pittman

Luke's account of Jesus' baptism is brief and vague. He was baptized among "all the people" (Luke 3:21) by an unnamed baptizer, and until he prays, the scene is rather unremarkable. During his prayer, however, an iconic scene unfolds with the heavens opening, the Holy Spirit descending in the form of a dove, and a voice booming from heaven.

As I considered how I might visually respond to this text, it was difficult to imagine this event with a beginner's mind. I've seen lots of imagery of Jesus in the water with clouds breaking open and a dove descending, or Jesus bursting out of water into a beam of light. These images are powerful, but I wasn't sure if creating a similar image would be helpful, or if I'd be offering insight into the text that hadn't already been visually explored.

I began to meditate on what was unspoken and implied in Luke's account, and one moment that stuck out in my imagination was the moment Jesus was underwater. How did Jesus feel when he held his breath and descended into the river?

This image offers a snapshot of Jesus right before he steps into his calling, on the threshold of spectacular affirmation. He is completely suspended, embraced, and upheld by the waters of baptism. The water's surface is choppy. The future is unknown and precarious. His path is a lonely and formidable one, eventually leading to his suffering and death.

Despite what is to come, Jesus reaches toward the surface. Two fish are drawn to the light of his halo, foreshadowing his companionship with fishers and his miraculous feeding of the five thousand. All of creation is leaning into his call.

This is what trusting your belovedness feels like—muscles and bones relieved of gravity's burden, serenity, weightlessness, oneness with creation, and the warmth of God's love permeating every cell of your body and every corner of your soul.

PRAY

Breathe deeply as you gaze upon the image on the left. Imagine placing yourself in this scene. What do you see? How do you feel? Get quiet and still, offering a silent or spoken prayer to God.



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Beloved | Lauren Wright Pittman
Digital painting and collage

Christ was born into a weary world. King Herod ruled the land with a legacy of ruthlessness. The Romans treated the people of Israel with contempt, imposing harsh taxes and land seizures that forced many into subsistence farming. Poverty and destitution were pervasive. And yet, Christ was born, bringing good news of great joy for all people.

This season, we invite you to look closely at the details in the opening chapters of the Gospel of Luke. Discover where joy is sprinkled throughout the narrative. Identify the moments when joy arrives—despite trepidation, fear, or grief. And consider how joy can be a companion to you this season, for our joy is rooted in the truth that we belong to God. Can you tether yourself to that deep truth? You deserve to feel joy—fully. The world needs your joy, even if you are weary.

This devotional is designed to help you practice joy in a weary world. Each week offers art, reflections, poetry, and hymns. Journey through these pages at your own pace. May each week offer you rhythms for rejoicing—through acknowledging your weariness, finding joy in connection, allowing yourself to be amazed, singing stories of hope, making room, rooting yourself in ritual, and remembering your belovedness.

And so, this Advent, let us hold space for our weariness *and* our joy. Let us seek a “thrill of hope” in our hurting world. Let us welcome joy—even and especially if, like the prophet Isaiah, we cry out for comfort (Isaiah 40:1). In this weary world, may we find many ways to rejoice.

Artfully yours,

The Sanctified Art Creative Team

Rev. Lisle Gwynn Garrity

Rev. Sarah (Are) Speed

Hannah Garrity

Rev. Lauren Wright Pittman

Rev. Anna Strickland



ABOUT THE SA CREATIVE TEAM

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Founder | Creative Director of SA

Lisle Gwynn Garrity (*she/her*) is a Pastorist (pastor + artist), retreat leader, and creative entrepreneur seeking to fill the church with more color, paint, mystery, and creativity. She founded A Sanctified Art with the conviction that, in order to thrive, the church needs more creative expression and art-filled freedom.

Rev. Lauren Wright Pittman

Director of Branding | Founding Creative Partner of SA

Lauren (*she/her*) is an artist, graphic designer, and theologian. She uses paint, metallic inks, and Apple pencil to image the layered complexity she experiences in scripture texts. She also helps faith communities share their vibrant stories through branding & design services.

Hannah Garrity Founding Creative Partner of SA

Hannah (*she/her*) is an artist and an athlete, a daughter and a mother, a facilitator and a producer, a leader and a teammate. She is the Director of Christian Faith, Life, and Arts at Second Presbyterian Church in Richmond, Va, an art in worship workshop leader wherever she is called, and a liturgical installation artist at the Montreat Conference Center, Montreat, NC.

Rev. Sarah A. Speed Founding Creative Partner of SA

Sarah (Are) Speed (*she/her*) is the Associate Pastor for Young Adults and Membership at Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York City. Sarah feels called to welcome people into the church by using her energy and passion for beautifully scripted words, raw and relevant liturgy, and hands-on worship experiences to engage our longing for God and the need for justice in this messy world.

Rev. Anna Strickland

Operations Support | Content Creator

Anna Strickland (*she/her*) looks for the Divine in the everyday like treasure in clay jars and first encountered God in the integration of her spiritual self and artistic self. She is a former teacher and college minister, a proud Texas Longhorn and graduate of Iliff School of Theology, a Baptist to the core ministering in ecumenical spaces, and a lover of chaos anchored by the belief that the Spirit is most active in the spaces between us.

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?

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

Baptism of the Lord | How does a weary world rejoice?
We trust our belovedness

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?"¹² 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.

ABOUT OUR GUEST CONTRIBUTORS



Guest Writer

Rev. Cecelia D. Armstrong



The Rev. Cecelia D. Armstrong (*she/her*) is an energetic national leader within the Presbyterian Church (USA) who preaches often for conferences and groups. She is called "CeCe" by friends and family members. She has never met a stranger and continues to collect friends and family members throughout

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Guest Artist

Rev. Nicolette (Faison) Peñaranda



Rev. Nicolette "Nic" (*she/her*) is a pastor in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America serving as the Program Director for African Descent Ministries. Nic is the creator of MONadvocacy, a racial justice resource grounded in play, as well as the "Talks at the Desk" series

which celebrates the voices of leaders in the ELCA African descent community: livinglutheran.org/2022/02/a-love-letter-to-african-descent-communities.

She is passionate about queer Black liberation, cultivating diverse leadership in faith spaces, and the art of creation. She is also the illustrator of *God's Holy Darkness*, written by Sharei Green and Beckah Selnick (Beaming Books, 2022). The book deconstructs anti-Blackness in Christian theology by celebrating instances in the story of God's people when darkness, blackness, and night are beautiful, good, and holy. She resides in the Chicagoland area with her spouse, two daughters, and two cats, Penne Pablo and Rigatoni Braxton.

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How does a weary world rejoice?
We trust our belovedness



Scan to hear the tune!

From the Waters of Creation HELMSLEY ("Lo! He Comes with Clouds Descending")

Text: Anna Strickland (2023)

Music: Thomas Olivers (1763)

From the wa - ters of cre - a - tion
 In the womb as life's be - gin - ning
 Ho - ly Spi - rit dove de - scen - ding

God com - pels the earth to rise Depths re -
 Am - ni - o - tic flu - id swirls Grace our
 As the wa - ters ebb and flow Voice of

call their own for - ma - tion A - toms
 ev - ery need ful - fil - ling Long be -
 hea - ven the clouds is rend - ing Nam - ing

spread through - out the skies
 - fore we meet the world Al - le - lu - ia,
 God's be - lov - ed own

al - le - lu - ia, al - le - lu - ia! Bless the earth by
 Here bap - tized by our
 tized in

rain bap - tized
 ve - ry birth
 love un - known



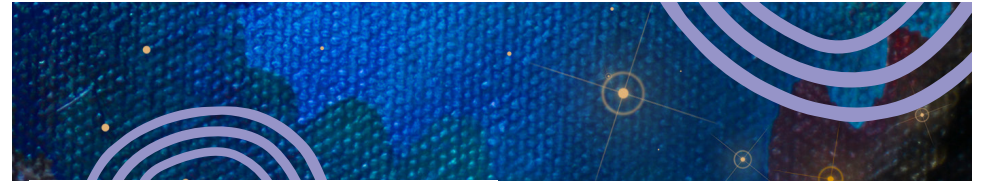
Baptism of the Lord

How does a weary world rejoice?
We trust our belovedness

The Bravest Thing We Can Do

Trust your belovedness.
Let it be a protest,
an act of resistance,
a song of celebration.
Trust your belovedness in a world
that is rarely satisfied.
Wear it like a badge of honor.
Speak it as confidently as your last name.
Tattoo it to your heart.
When outside forces
chip away at your sense of self,
when life asks you
to hand over the keys,
remember the water.
Remember creation.
Remember how it was *good*,
so very good.
Let that truth hum through your veins.
Sing it so loud
that it drowns out the weariness of the world,
for the bravest thing we can ever do
is trust that we belong here.

*Poem by
Rev. Sarah (Are) Speed*



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JOURNALING FOR JOY

Throughout the Advent and Christmas season, return to these pages whenever you want time to write and reflect. Choose from the prompts below.



On a piece of paper, write a list of everything—big and small—that brings you joy. Tape your list to your fridge or display it somewhere you will see it daily. Try to fill your days with the things on your joy list.

Write about a time joy surprised you.
What was unexpected about that experience?



On a piece of paper, write down everything that makes you weary. Then, rip the paper into small pieces as a way to release it all and offer it to God.

Write a kind note for a stranger to find. Place the note in a public place: a park bench, on a car windshield, in a mailbox, etc. Fill the note with a message you would like to hear such as, “You are loved.”

Christmastide | How does a weary world rejoice?

We root ourselves in ritual

READ Luke 2:21-38

FROM THE ARTIST | Rev. Lisle Gwynn Garrity

I wonder what Mary and Joseph expect when they enter the temple to dedicate their newborn son. This customary ritual quickly unravels into an astonishing scene. A stranger named Simeon pronounces Jesus to be a “light” and “revelation,” and his dying wish is fulfilled. A prophet named Anna¹¹ also draws near to the child, praising God for the redemption he will bring.

Simeon and Anna’s words fill Mary and Joseph with amazement. But that can’t be the only emotion taking up space in the room. For Simeon turns to Mary, perhaps privately, to continue sharing his message: the boy will also become the cause of great turmoil, the catalyst for opposition. He will expose the inner thoughts of many. A sword will pierce her innermost being. The mother of God will grieve as she bears witness to the suffering of the child she birthed.

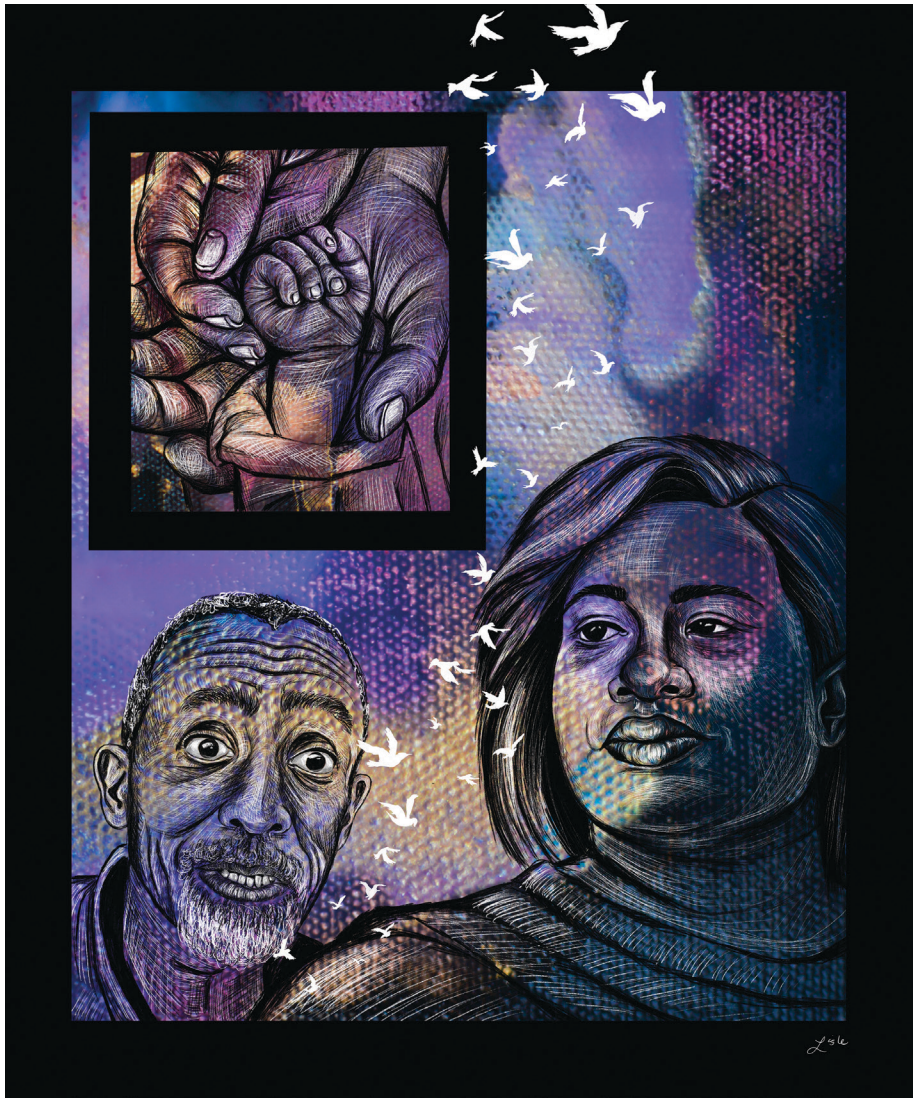
In this image, Simeon bestows his blessing and prophecy with the urgency of a man desperate to say everything that needs to be said before his time runs out. Anna looks off into the distance, as if peering into the future. Her devotion to God over the years has sharpened her gaze; she knows redemption when she sees it.

In the top left, I depicted Jesus’ hand being cradled by the hands of his parents. This tender moment is frozen in time, like a Polaroid photograph placed in a scrapbook. Mary and Joseph treasure their child as they receive the fullness of his calling. I imagine them memorizing each wrinkle and tiny fingernail, treasuring the smallness of a hand that will one day become a strong fist, fighting for justice for the oppressed and liberation for those held captive.

PRAY

Breathe deeply as you gaze upon the image on the left. Imagine placing yourself in this scene. What do you see? How do you feel? Get quiet and still, offering a silent or spoken prayer to God.

¹¹ Note from the artist: To depict Anna, I referenced (with permission) a photo of my friend, Shani McIlwain, who seems to “never leave the temple” (Luke 2:37). She constantly pursues God, and it is holy to witness every opportunity she seeks. shanimcilwain.com



Revelation | Lisle Gwynn Garrity
Acrylic painting on canvas with digital drawing



Write a letter to a loved one who has passed on.
Tell them what you love and miss about them.

Write about the last time you were truly amazed.
How did you feel?



Reflect on 3 things you are deeply grateful for.
Offer a prayer of gratitude to God.

Reflect on the past year. What are the moments
and memories that are filled with joy?



The First Week of Advent

How does a weary world rejoice?

We acknowledge our weariness

Wade In

Over time
wind and water
will sand down the edges of a stone.
For humans,
our wind and water
is the grief of the world.

Stay here long enough
and pieces of you
will be pressed upon
by life's never-ending stream.
It's enough to make you weary.
It's enough to make you question.
It's enough to make you quiet.
And yet, the stream continues.

So do not be afraid to stand in that water.
Wade in. Soak the hem of your jeans.
Drip wet footprints through every room in your house.
Let the water stains tell your story.
And when your body grows weary of swimming,
name the stream.
Acknowledge your weariness.
For eventually,
you will pick flowers from
the opposite bank.
And over and over again, we'll tell this story.
And over and over again,
a weary world will rejoice.

*Poem by
Rev. Sarah (Are) Speed*

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?

Christmastide | How does a weary world rejoice?
We root ourselves in ritual

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.

How does a weary world rejoice?
We acknowledge our weariness



Scan to hear
the tune!

Weary World Rejoice

STILLE NACHT ("Silent Night")

Text: Anna Strickland (2023)

Music: Franz Xaver Gruber (1818)

Wea - ry world, God's own vine
Wea - ry world, bro - ken and bruised
Wea - ry world, out of hope
Wea - ry world, wait - ing still

Tears our on - ly bread and wine
Name of God so mis-used
Dis - be - lief is how we cope
Hold - ing our breath un - til

Cry - ing out to be re-stored
Can we see the light of Christ
We've left faith to rot and rust
Christ re - turns in truth and grace

Des - perate for a break from war
Glow - ing in each per - son we spite?
Dreams are cov - ered in lay - ers of dust
Will we re - cog - nize his face?

Wea - ry world re - joice

Come and raise your voice

The First Week of Advent | How does a weary world rejoice?
We acknowledge our weariness

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.

How does a weary world rejoice?
We root ourselves in ritual



Scan to hear the tune!

Oh Weary Soul Return

BEREDEN VÄG FÖR HERRAN ("Prepare the Way, O Zion")

Text: Anna Strickland (2023)

Music: Swedish melody, arr. American Lutheran Hymnal (1930)



Oh wea-ry soul re - turn to the place your bo - dy
 The dis - or - i - ent - a - tion of mod - ern, fast - paced
 For here the font and ta - ble stand an - chored through - out
 So wheth - er it's your first time or you've been here be -



knows Re - trace the well - worn path - ways deep
 life Up - roots our spir - it's bear - ings and
 time Con - nect - ing us to - geth - er with
 - fore Let this be res - pite for you, a



etched in - to your bones Re - lax your wea - ry
 leaves us with - out guides When ver - ti - go of
 wa - ter, bread, and wine In sim - ple acts re -
 place your soul calls home Come back when - e'er you



mus - cles from dai - ly stress and strug - gles Let
 spir - it has pushed us to our li - mits Our
 - peat - ed we've found what our souls need - ed A
 need to, let this place be what feeds you Oh



mus - cle me - mo - ry lead your soul to what it needs
 ri - tu - als re - store the faith that keeps us moored
 grace in the mun - dane, a bo - di - ly re - frain
 wea - ry soul re - turn for grace you need not earn



Christmastide

How does a weary world rejoice?
We root ourselves in ritual

Muscle Memory

When the world falls apart around me,
when the rug is pulled,
and the house is on fire,
when all I can do
is swallow the cry in my throat,
take me to the table.
Tell me how people have fed each other.
Tell me how they've torn the bread
with wrinkled hands
and children's hands.
Tell me how they've said, *This love is for you*,
as they looked you in the eye.
Then take me to the font.
Float my hands in the pool.
Let me feel weightless.
Tell me to leave my burdens there.
Then take me to the front doors.
Remind me how we throw them open.
Take me to the creaky pews,
pews that have held the straightened spines
and silent prayers of so many.
Take me to church.
Move me through the rituals.
Tell me why it matters,
so that next time,
when someone else's world falls apart,
I will have the muscle memory to share.

*Poem by
Rev. Sarah (Are) Speed*

There is a famous poem by Langston Hughes titled, "Mother to Son."¹ 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?

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



Annunciation to Zechariah | Lauren Wright Pittman
Acrylic & Ink on wood panel

Christmas Eve | How does a weary world rejoice?
We make room

READ Luke 2:1-20

FROM THE ARTIST | Hannah Garrity

Dr. Christena Cleveland published a book in 2023 called, *God is a Black Woman*.⁸ In it, she shares her powerful testimony describing her journey to meet the Black Madonnas carved centuries ago from lava rock. This resonates with my lifelong yearning for Mother God.

Recently, I was standing at The Dwelling at Richmond Hill.⁹ The former slave quarters are open and offered for visitation. After our tour, the idea that one should remove their shoes before entering this holy haven came up. Our tour group was all white people and we discussed this idea from a theoretical standpoint. But earlier, before we entered, I felt it. I was holding a seltzer water can from lunch and felt incredibly rude entering the space with it, so, without understanding, I backtracked and placed my purse and the can outside. I knew not why. After the tour, in our discussion about shoes, our white tour guide mentioned that Black members of the staff felt a great reverence, a holy presence at The Dwelling. The space held the presence of God; it was like entering a sanctuary.

I remember the same feeling when I was young, touring the slave quarters at Monticello.¹⁰ But now, listening to the Richmond Hill staff testimony, I understood these spaces in a new way, with a reverence for the God-like presence of the Black mother in the depths of oppression.

In this painting, Black Mother God has asked her daughter Mary to hold the role of surrogate for the pregnancy of Infant Creator. Mary has carried the child to term. She has given birth. God embraces Mary as well as the Holy Infant in gratitude. For without Mary's surrogacy, the incarnation could not be.

PRAY

Breathe deeply as you gaze upon the image on the left. Imagine placing yourself in this scene. What do you see? How do you feel? Get quiet and still, offering a silent or spoken prayer to God.

⁸ *God is a Black Woman*, by Christena Cleveland. (New York: HarperOne, 2022).

⁹ Richmond Hill is an ecumenical fellowship, residence and urban retreat center in Richmond, VA. On its campus lie the remains of a historic enslaved dwelling. The remains are currently undergoing restoration efforts in order to become a place of learning, reflection, and prayer. Learn more here: richmond.com/opinion/columnists/williams-richmond-hill-seeks-to-uncover-buried-truths-of-enslavement-at-its-site-as-a/article_7b21c63f-3e00-5c86-9e2d-0197ab4ddee1.html

¹⁰ Monticello, VA, was the primary plantation of Thomas Jefferson, a Founding Father and the third president of the United States.



Surrogacy | Hannah Garrity
Oil paint, charcoal, and copper leaf on canvas

The First Week of Advent | How does a weary world rejoice?
We acknowledge our weariness

READ Luke 1:1-23

FROM THE ARTIST | Rev. Lauren Wright Pittman

Zechariah is dressed in a breastpiece, ephod, robe, checkered tunic, turban, and sash, just as the book of Exodus specifies. In my painting, gold, blue, purple, and crimson yarns are woven together and bejeweled with engraved stones which bear the names of the sons of Israel (Exodus 28:4).

Zechariah stands in the Holy Place wearing the most meticulous of garments. Does he expect to encounter the divine? Or is he just going through the motions, lighting the incense as an all-too-familiar scent fills the air?

After all these years of fulfilling priestly duties and “living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord” (Luke 1:6), Zechariah and his wife are still childless. Regardless of their desire for children, in their culture and context, childlessness bore the implication of God’s contempt.

I ruminated on this image... a weary priest wrapped in layered fabrics, colors, symbols, textures, and rare stones that proclaim God’s providence and power. The contrast is not lost on me.

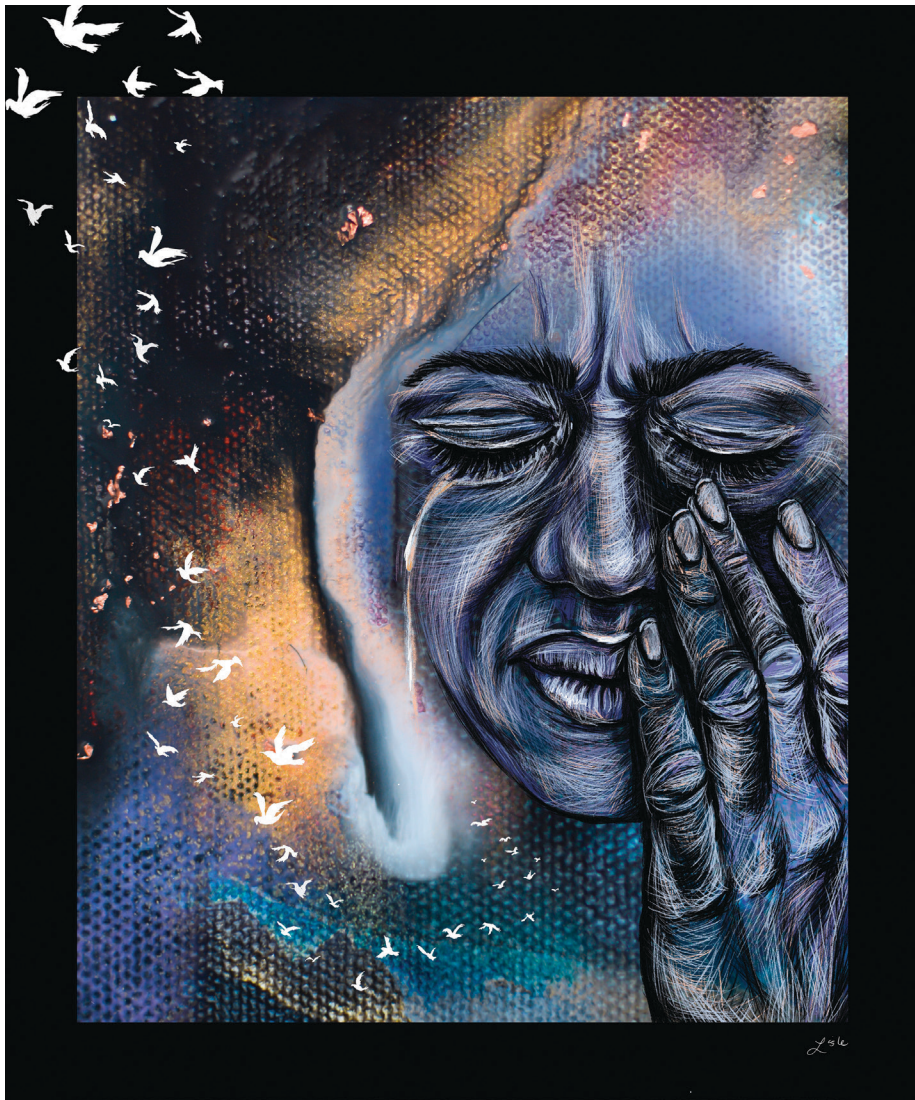
I often try to neglect my weariness by putting on a veneer of unwavering trust in God—while feeling like I may suddenly unravel into a pile of beautifully-curated threads, stones, and gold accessories.

In this image, I decided to depict the angel as smoke from the altar of incense. Zechariah has one hand over his mouth in fear and disbelief, while his other hand cradles the notion—not yet hope—of his son’s existence.

Do you bind up your weariness in a neat and tidy bow, put your head down, and project okay-ness like me? What would it look like to acknowledge our weariness, quit powering through, and open ourselves up to what God might have in store for us? Perhaps we’ll meet an angel.

PRAY

Breathe deeply as you gaze upon the image on the left. Imagine placing yourself in this scene. What do you see? How do you feel? Get quiet and still, offering a silent or spoken prayer to God.



Make Your Face Shine | Lisle Gwynn Garrity
Acrylic painting on canvas with digital drawing

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.

⁷ Learn more about Rev. Dr. James Foster Reese's life and legacy here: presbyterianmission.org/story/october-14-2022

Christmas Eve | How does a weary world rejoice?
We make room

READ Luke 2:1-20

COMMENTARY | Rev. Cecelia D. Armstrong



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,⁷ 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.

The First Week of Advent | How does a weary world rejoice?
We acknowledge our weariness

READ Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19

FROM THE ARTIST | Rev. Lisle Gwynn Garrity

For this Advent series, I created a collection of paintings inspired by the Hubble telescope images of the cosmos. The telescope renderings invite you to peer into worlds unknown. The beauty of it all is a balm for the weary. When you gaze upon the colors of the cosmos, how can you keep from rejoicing? Inspired by the luminescent textures of nebula and star clusters, I painted washes of vibrant colors and metallic gold amidst a backdrop of beautiful blackness. These paintings have become the backgrounds for each of my digital drawings in this series.

The day I began working on this image, another mass shooting terrorized our country. This time it happened at a church preschool.² One of the children slain was the pastor’s daughter. By the time you read this, there will have been more shootings, more unnecessary and completely preventable deaths. The weight of that prediction makes every bone in my body weary beyond repair.

As I read and reread Psalm 80 on that day of mourning, I remembered that politeness is not the language of the weary. The psalmist supplied me with the words I wanted to pray, the words I wanted to scream: *Wake up your power, God! Save us! How long?!*

Then, I began to draw. What emerged was a face shining from the cosmos. I imagined God as Holy Mother or Holy Parent weeping for her creation. I imagined the parents weeping for their children who were so suddenly and brutally taken from them. The mere thought of their grief knocks the wind out of me.

As I completed the image, I added a flock of doves flying out from the void into which God’s tears fall. The doves represent the Spirit let loose in our world, flapping their wings into every desperate corner. I added them not as a statement, but as a plea: *please, God, make your face shine so we might be saved.*

PRAY

Breathe deeply as you gaze upon the image on the left. Imagine placing yourself in this scene. What do you see? How do you feel? Get quiet and still, offering a silent or spoken prayer to God.

² On March 27, 2023, a shooter took the lives of 3 children and 3 adults at The Covenant School in Nashville, TN.



The Second Week of Advent
 How does a weary world rejoice?
We find joy in connection

Lessons in Connection

It's been a long day,
 long enough to complain,
 long enough to wine and dine my
 disappointment,
 to give weariness
 keys to the house.
 But then you get the giggles
 dancing with the dog in the kitchen.
 Paws-sliding, tail-wagging,
 side-cramping giggles.
 I can hear it from across the house.
 Your joy burrows its way
 through the cracks in my armor
 and then we are both laughing,
 gulping for joyous, electric air.
 And that's when I know—
 if you grab my hand,
 if you ask me to dance,
 if our weary human souls can
 make room for connection,
 then we will survive.
 Joy will take root.
 Love will keep
 her keys to the house.

*Poem by
 Rev. Sarah (Are) Speed*

How does a weary world rejoice?
We make room



Scan to hear
 the tune!

Make Room

ST. LOUIS ("O Little Town of Bethlehem")

Text: Anna Strickland (2023)

Music: Lewis H. Redner (1868)

A - lone with - in our sil - oed hearts, the
 In clut - tered minds we heard our thoughts though
 When fear and an - ger lead to walls a -

walls are clos - ing in A co - zy home where
 an - xious or un - true Our past mis - takes, our
 - round our cal - loused souls Where wounds and scars have

all is known, fa - mil - iar as a friend But
 re - cent aches are framed and left in view The
 made us hard and pressed us for con - trol Ex -

through the cracks and win - dows the star - light finds a
 Spi - rit's winds are rag - ing to blow it all a -
 - pan - sive Christ, ex - pand us to ev - er make more

way To break in - to our grief and gloom and
 - way To make more space for love and grace we'll
 room Crack souls a - part and sprout our hearts so

fill it bright as day
 find with each new day
 har - dened seeds can bloom



Christmas Eve

How does a weary world rejoice?
We make room

There is Room

The world may feel like one long stretch of night,
like an endless winter, or a hovering rain cloud.
And life may feel like walking into the wind,
an uphill climb in every direction,
but we can still open the door.
We can't calm every storm,
but we can turn on the porch lights.
We can add chairs to the table.
We can keep clean sheets on the guest bed,
just in case.
We can hold the elevator,
and learn pronouns.
We can tell stories of belonging,
and take turns listening.
We can learn each other's names,
and plant trees for our children.
We can study privilege
and advocate for mental health.
We can insist,
every single day,
in a million different ways:
there is room,
there is room,
there is room for you here.

We can't calm every storm,
but we can turn on the porch lights.

*Poem by
Rev. Sarah (Are) Speed*

How does a weary world rejoice?
We find joy in connection



Scan to hear
the tune!

I Can Celebrate You

CRANHAM ("In the Bleak Midwinter")

Text: Anna Strickland (2023)

Music: Gustav Holst (1906)



I can cel - e - brate you, I can hold your joy
I can re - cog - nize good fruit that you will bear
We can hold each oth - er in our joy and fear



When the load is crush - ing and you've lost your voice
When your own self - doubt hides gifts you have to share
Know - ing that the Spir - it moves when we are near



I can cel - e - brate the pro - mise your life holds
I can re - cog - nize your Christ-light deep with - in
We can hold each oth - er, lift each oth - er up



When the wear - i - ness bears hea - vy on your soul
Ev - ery gift that God has sown wait - ing to be - gin
Fill - ing one a - noth - er from the Spir - it's cup

The Second Week of Advent | How does a weary world rejoice?
We find joy in connection

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

COMMENTARY | Rev. Cecelia D. Armstrong



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.

The Fourth Sunday of Advent | How does a weary world rejoice?
We sing stories of hope

READ Luke 1:67-80

FROM THE ARTIST | Hannah Garrity

This painting engages the flow of Zechariah’s prophecy. I painted in oil on canvas; the copper leaf represents God’s healing love. Copper has qualities that interact with its surroundings. When coiled, it can harness electricity out of thin air. When used in body wrapping, it can support internal self-repair. When used in pots and pans, it disperses heat evenly. When used in the womb, it causes the blood to flow monthly. When used in piping, it allows clean water to flow.

Over the years, I have been drawn to taking away plastics in my artwork. It is not always possible because acrylic paint and PVC pipe are such accessible media. But the natural materials draw me in physically, emotionally. In my work, I return to copper to hold banners up, to build sculpture, to create motion, and to capture light in an installation. It is a natural material that is prevalent in buildings. You can buy it at your local hardware store.

Here, the copper represents aspects of discipleship. It represents the presence of God in our lives and our actions—the presence of God in Zechariah’s prophecy and in John’s life and work.

The image is inspired by waters meeting one another. This intersecting flow portrays Zechariah’s words meeting John the Baptist’s life. It is a crashing toward, a central meeting place, a potential energy meeting a kinetic being.

Holy Mother, your love is mighty—more powerful than all of the forces that act to barricade justice, to block righteousness. Guide us like you guided Zechariah in your ways of peace, in your strength of courage, in your acts of love. Amen.

PRAY

Breathe deeply as you gaze upon the image on the left. Imagine placing yourself in this scene. What do you see? How do you feel? Get quiet and still, offering a silent or spoken prayer to God.



Prophecy | Hannah Garrity
Oil paint, charcoal, and copper leaf on canvas

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?



Two Mothers | Nicolette Peñaranda
Acrylic, ink, and mixed media collage on canvas

The Fourth Week of Advent | How does a weary world rejoice?
We sing stories of hope

READ Luke 1:46-55

FROM THE ARTIST | Rev. Nicolette Peñaranda

Two years before the birth of Jesus, during the Pax Romana, one of the worst public executions happened a half day's walk away from where Mary grew up.⁵ She came of age during a time of occupation, more than likely unable to recall a time of true peace and liberation. Mary's song rings of a dream that not only she but her ancestors dreamed of, and she would be the one to give birth to the savior of her people.

Fast forward thousands of years and the same land where Mary grew up is still being occupied. One can imagine that the cries for liberation and the prayers for justice still ring down the streets of Bethlehem. To me, Mary's song of praise is still valid for the women of Palestine and for the people who still raise their children under the duress of war and occupation.

This image is a nod to Palestine. The background operates as a foundation, built with the colors of the Palestinian flag and with collaged scriptures that celebrate women. Elizabeth and Mary are both in Palestinian regalia but from different generations. Elizabeth, centered and holding her belly, is in an outfit inspired by a photograph of a woman from Ramallah, dated sometime between 1929-1946.⁶ This was intended to emphasize the generational differences between the two. Mary, on the other hand, is in more contemporary Palestinian fashion. A stipple effect was used to highlight the intricacy of Palestinian embroidery in both garments.

What felt important to me is the placement of Mary and Elizabeth. Rarely does Elizabeth get to be the center of the story, as her pregnancy becomes an accompaniment piece to the birth of Jesus. But here, Elizabeth is in the foreground. She gets to be the star while Mary places her arms around her, comforting her, and proclaiming the good news of what is to come. Mary is the hope that we see in all youth.

PRAY

Breathe deeply as you gaze upon the image on the left. Imagine placing yourself in this scene. What do you see? How do you feel? Get quiet and still, offering a silent or spoken prayer to God.

⁵ For more context, read: "Birth of a Revolutionary: The Shaping of Jesus' Politics," in *The Politics of Jesus*, by Obery M. Hendricks, Jr. (New York: Three Leaves Press, 2006).

⁶ "Ramallah woman," photograph taken either by the American Colony Photo Department or the Matson Photo Service between 1929 and 1946. At the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C. commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ramallah_woman_15029v.jpg



Embroidered Borders | Nicolette Peñaranda
Acrylic, ink, and mixed media collage on canvas

The Second Week of Advent | How does a weary world rejoice?
We find joy in connection

READ Luke 1:24-45

FROM THE ARTIST | Rev. Nicolette Peñaranda

A couple of months before I took on this project, I was forced into early labor and birthed our second child. Needless to say, I was still pretty raw with emotions and was processing the trauma. During that time, I found myself in isolation. Our days were spent driving back and forth to the NICU to check on our 3 lb. infant. It was terrifying and tiresome. But during that time, so many wonderful people sought us out. We were gifted food, baby clothes, childcare, and rest. But the greatest gift was the comfort I received from other people who had given birth. There was this sacred sharing of birth stories and postpartum depression. Parents passed on beautiful garments that they, too, received after birthing a preemie. Some of these pieces looked like they had been passed down many times before, like each thread held a memory from a different family. We were connected.

It is because of this connection that parents share that I felt instantly connected to paying homage to Frida Kahlo's *Two Fridas*.³ Rather than being connected from veins of the heart, Mary and Elizabeth would be connected through the uterus.

Nearly a quarter of Black women between ages 18 and 30 have fibroids while also being the racial demographic with the highest maternal death rate in the United States. More than 100,000 women undergo some form of mastectomy each year. Globally, an estimated 14% of girls give birth before the age of 18. Where do these realities meet the heart of scripture? How do we see the struggles of infertility or empathize with the vulnerability that comes with not being a socially-accepted pregnant person?

While Elizabeth is crowned with holy gray hair and a dress marked with the blood of previous miscarriages, Mary sits next to her holding a childhood doll, draped in the jewelry, flowers, and silks of a traditional Middle Eastern Jewish bride. Their stories and experiences are vastly different. But Mary sought out her kin. This reminds me that we do not need to do the hard things alone. There is power in connection. With you, there is joy.

PRAY

Breathe deeply as you gaze upon the image on the left. Imagine placing yourself in this scene. What do you see? How do you feel? Get quiet and still, offering a silent or spoken prayer to God.

³ *Two Fridas* (Frida Kahlo, 1939) is considered to be a self-portrait in which one Frida is wearing European clothes and the other is in a traditional Mexican dress. The two women are connected by their anatomical hearts.



Comfort, O Comfort | Lauren Wright Pittman
Digital painting

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?

4 Read the lyrics here: poetryfoundation.org/poems/48104/lift-evry-voice-and-sing

The Fourth Week of Advent | How does a weary world rejoice?
We sing stories of hope

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

COMMENTARY | Rev. Cecelia D. Armstrong



Have you ever really unpacked the lyrics of “Lift Ev’ry Voice and Sing” by James Weldon Johnson?⁴ 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.

The Second Week of Advent | How does a weary world rejoice?
We find joy in connection

READ Isaiah 40:1-11

FROM THE ARTIST | Rev. Lauren Wright Pittman

I wanted to create an image that spoke tenderly to the viewer as this text does to the reader. “Comfort, O comfort my people” (Isaiah 40:1). When I’ve read this text before, the shepherding metaphor has only yielded masculine imagery in my mind. It makes sense with the text’s pronouns that I would imagine a masculine figure. It was also ingrained in me—through translations, biblical art, movies, children’s pageants, etc.—that shepherds were always men. I learned recently, however, that women were shepherds too. Some young women were trained and worked as shepherds before they were married; this notion completely added new dimension and depth to the shepherding metaphor. I decided to use imagery of modern-day shepherds to inspire this image. A shepherd is at once fierce and tender, willing to face the most dangerous of predators in the dead of night while warmly cradling the most vulnerable of the flock.

In this image, the shepherd nurtures a lamb while leading the flock through fields of tall grasses and flowers. The fuschia flowers in the foreground are marjoram flowers that represent comfort and the steadfastness of God’s word even in the midst of the leveling of the land. The shepherd’s clothes have repeated medallions with simplified imagery of a straight highway in the wilderness. Within the stylized landscape, a voice proclaims the coming glory of the Lord.

PRAY

Breathe deeply as you gaze upon the image on the left. Imagine placing yourself in this scene. What do you see? How do you feel? Get quiet and still, offering a silent or spoken prayer to God.



The Third Week of Advent

How does a weary world rejoice?

We allow ourselves to be amazed

All the Way to Joy

We could play hard and fast,
 not let anything touch us at all,
 keep composure,
 have all the answers.
 Or we could crack ourselves open
 and let everything in.
 We could feel everything,
 every touch, every marvel.
 We could stand gaping
 at the beauty of the world,
 mouths wide open (because sometimes
 a mouth wide open is the very best gratitude).
 We could laugh so loudly
 that the whole restaurant looks,
 and err on the side of goofy
 whenever possible.
 We could put our defenses down.
 We could grow soft.
 We could choose awe.
 We could take her by the arm.
 We could let her lead us all the way to joy.

Poem by
 Rev. Sarah (Are) Speed

How does a weary world rejoice?
We sing stories of hope



Scan to hear
 the tune!

Lullaby of Praise

WARUM SOLLT ICH ("All My Heart This Night Rejoices")

Text: Anna Strickland (2023)

Music: Johann G. Ebeling (1666)

Praise to God, for God is wor - thy
 Praise, my soul, for God is ho - ly
 Praise to God who shows us fa - vor

Seers of old have fore - told
 O - ver - throws lof - ty thrones
 Brings us hope, lifts the low

Cov - e - nants of mer - cy God's great
 Lift - ing up the low - ly God's great
 Sends to us a sav - ior God's great

love for us is ach - ing Guide our feet
 jus - tice roles re - ver - sing Hun - gry fed
 mer - cy here re - deem - ing Set - ting free

in - to peace As the dawn is
 more than bread Rich and haugh - ty
 'til we see earth and heav - en

break - ing
 serv - ing
 meet - ing



The Fourth Week of Advent

How does a weary world rejoice?
We sing stories of hope

The Sound of Hope

We've been singing a sad song
for quite some time,
the melody syncing with our heartbeats,
the lyrics stamped to the front of our minds.
You say, *sad songs are honest*.
It's hard to disagree,
for sad songs tap us on the shoulder.
Sad songs remind us
of the 100 different corners
heartbreak could be behind.

But I don't have it in me
to sing a sad song forever.

So despite the news,
despite the aches in my body,
despite the phone call last night
that says she's waiting for the test results,
despite yesterday's shooting,
despite the unknown and unchanged,
I am going to sing a song of hope.

Like a canary in a snowstorm,
I don't need another song of what is;
I need a song of what could be.
So sing with me.
Our voices may get drowned out by the wind,
but surely someone will ask:
Was that a flash of yellow in the snow?
Was that the sound of hope?

*Poem by
Rev. Sarah (Are) Speed*

How does a weary world rejoice?
We allow ourselves to be amazed



Scan to hear
the tune!

Isn't It Amazing? GLORIA ("Angels We Have Heard on High")

Text: Anna Strickland (2023)

Music: Traditional French Carol



Seeds with-in the so - il grow Deep un - der the
Deep - er, deep-er grow the roots Reach-ing up-ward
Cell by cell a plant is built Toward the sun the
Ev - en when the earth seems bare Plant the seeds of



ground be - low Plant - ed when the earth was bare
grow the shoots Through the earth they weave and snake
leaves will tilt Nour-ished by the sun and rain
hope with care If you wat - er in the drought



No life show-ing an - y-where Glo -
Un - til so - il starts to break Glo -
To bring forth its seed and grain Glo -
You will reap with joy - ous shout Glo -



ri - a Is - n't it a - ma - zing?



Glo - ri - a



Is - n't it a - ma - zing?

The Third Week of Advent | How does a weary world rejoice?
We allow ourselves to be amazed

READ Luke 1:57-66 | Psalm 126

COMMENTARY | Rev. Cecelia D. Armstrong



“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.

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FROM THE ARTIST | Hannah Garrity

This painting is a meditation on the holy watercourses of the Negeb and all of the metaphors within that image. I painted with oil paint, charcoal, and copper leaf on canvas; the copper represents joy in our weary world.

For God, we are weary and we see no end to the weariness. Lament with us. Holy One, you are steadfast in your love like the watercourses of the Negeb. In your name, we call out evil. When we do, we are glimmers of hope. By your example, we act in the ways of Jesus. When we do, we are shimmers of joy. We often fall short; forgive us. We strive on, for when we succeed, your new heaven shines through. Strive with us.

Mother God, in this time of ascending fear, how do we stay aware of the needs of the world, active toward the renewal of your people, and focused on the specifics that are in your control through your call to us? Keep awake with us.

Adonai, it is in your name that we give ourselves time to lament. With you, we cry together. When our ancestors emerged from exile, by the rivers of Babylon, we sat down, and there we wept when we remembered Zion. Cry with us.

Holy Wisdom, we allow ourselves to be amazed, to dream, to lean into your call to garner your gifts the way raindrops become creeks and creeks become coursing rivers. We challenge ourselves to see the glimmers of hope in the murky waters of our current time. We beg you for clarity. We must flow on in endless song. How can we keep from singing? Perhaps our tears and our songs are one. Sing with us.

Holy Word, may our actions match your call, your claim on our lives. May we come together in our lament to sow the change your justice calls forth. Sow with us, that our next generation may reap our tears with shouts of joy. Amen.

PRAY

Breathe deeply as you gaze upon the image on the left. Imagine placing yourself in this scene. What do you see? How do you feel? Get quiet and still, offering a silent or spoken prayer to God.



Watercourses | Hannah Garrity
Oil paint, charcoal, and copper leaf on canvas

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?

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READ Luke 1:57-66

FROM THE ARTIST | Rev. Lisle Gwynn Garrity

When was the last time you were truly amazed? I don't mean surprised; there is much about this world that should shock us. I mean *amazed*—wrapped up in wonder, absorbed in an unexpected delight.

I love witnessing the moments when my one-year-old daughter allows amazement to wash over her like a gentle rain: her jaw drops open, her eyes widen and stay fixed, and for a rare moment, she gets very still. This recently happened when she discovered the kids across the street playing basketball for the first time. Her senses have not yet grown dull to the magic surrounding her.

In this image, I wanted to capture the moment Zechariah's voice returns to him. I decided to depict only half of Zechariah's face; this miracle is not really about him, but about what happens through him. When he confirms John's name, he sheds his distrust of the angel's impossible news. His skepticism and weariness subside as he awakens to the joy in his midst. He allows himself to be amazed.

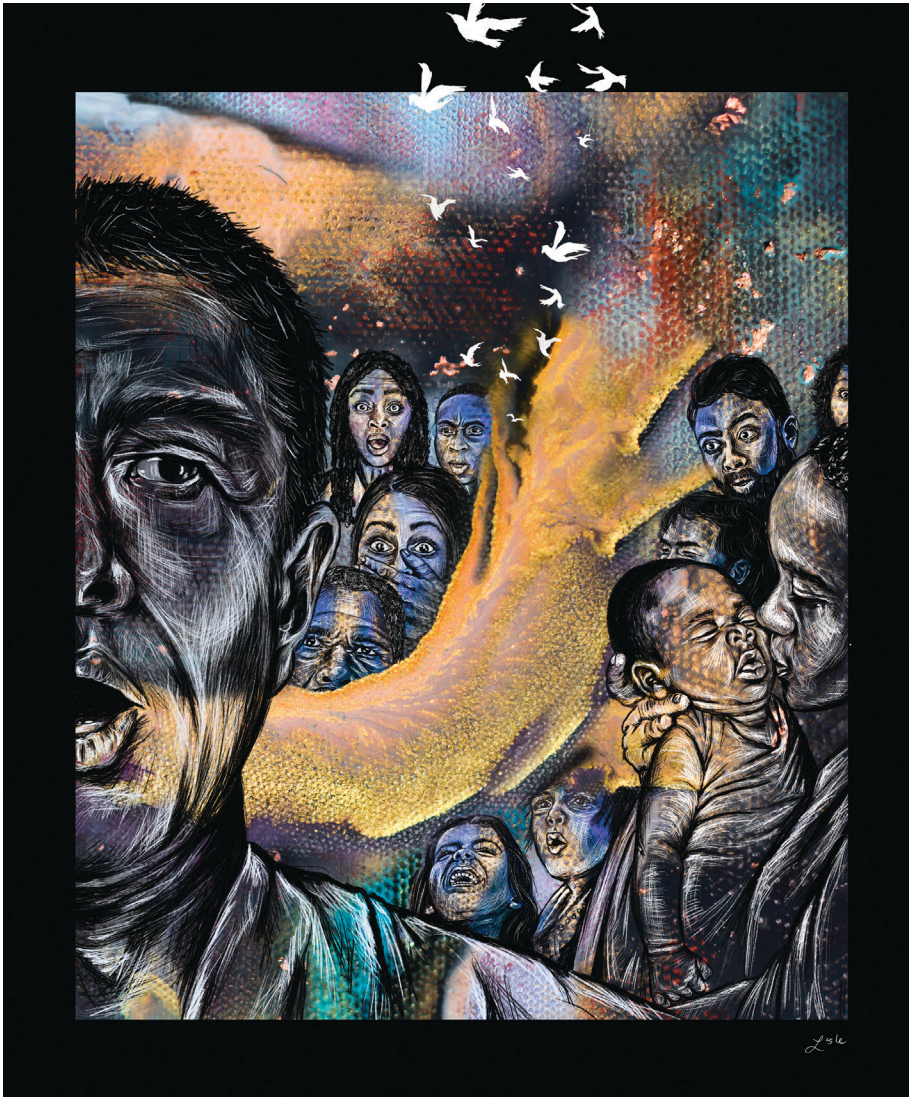
Zechariah's voice pours out of him, parting the surrounding crowd like the Red Sea, stirring each person into confusion and bewilderment. The blessing of his song spills over to his son, who is held tenderly by his mother.

Elizabeth is the only person in this scene who is not presently swept up in wonder. I believe Elizabeth has spent months allowing herself to be amazed. She was in isolation for the first five months of her pregnancy (Luke 1:24). Perhaps she needed that time to go inward—to heal from the trauma of her infertility, to trust the promise of life in her womb, to attune herself to her child. She was capsized with awe the day Mary showed up at her doorstep.

And so, when Zechariah's voice returns, Elizabeth's senses have not grown dull. Instead, her amazement has metabolized into something new: attunement for her child. It has transformed into love and deep trust. It has turned into joy. When we allow ourselves to be amazed, we might be surprised what that wonder can turn into.

PRAY

Breathe deeply as you gaze upon the image on the left. Imagine placing yourself in this scene. What do you see? How do you feel? Get quiet and still, offering a silent or spoken prayer to God.



What Wonder Turns Into | Lisle Gwynn Garrity
Acrylic painting on canvas with digital drawing