



How does a weary world rejoice?

A Sermon Planning Guide for Advent–Baptism of the Lord Sunday

Featuring Biblical commentary
by Rev. Cecelia D. Armstrong

Guide developed by Rev. Lisle Gwynn Garrity

INTRODUCTION

How to use this guide

We hope this guide is your starting point for shaping your sermons, worship services, and scripture study classes. For each Sunday in Advent through Baptism of the Lord Sunday, we have included theme connections, biblical commentary, guiding questions, and links to further reading and materials.¹ We hope these offer a few ways of approaching and thinking about the texts in light of our theme and weekly sub-themes. We encourage you to use this guide as a companion to the poetry, visual art, devotional, and materials in the bundle—allowing all of the words, images, and ideas to cross-pollinate. You can find full-length artist statements inspired by each of the focal texts listed in this guide in our Visual Art Collection. Consider mapping out your ideas in our accompanying Sermon Planning Grid. Additionally, you might use this guide to facilitate adult education sessions or small groups. You could absorb and discuss some of the articles and materials noted in the “Further Reading and Research” with a small group. You could also adapt or use the guiding questions as discussion prompts.

How we developed this Advent series

During our planning for Advent, we felt called to depart from the lectionary and create another narrative-driven series. In this series, we are paying close attention to how the Gospel of Luke begins the story of Jesus: by interweaving Christ’s birth with the parallel story of Elizabeth, Zechariah, and John the Baptist. As we looked closely at both of these birth narratives told side by side, we saw the full scope of human emotions: isolation, fear, disbelief, as well as connection, trust, and joy. We acknowledged that the Christmas season 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.

As we studied the scriptures, we asked out loud, “What is the message we will need to hear this season?” Sarah Speed, one of our founding creative partners, referenced a poem she had written a few years ago titled, “How does a weary world rejoice?”² In it, she lists many seemingly mundane actions that fill our days: stretching your body awake, looking at the night sky, making room on the subway, helping a neighbor on the street, and so on. In the last stanza, she concludes:

*How does a weary world rejoice?
I would guess
soul by soul
and day by day.
But if you ask me,
I bet most of it counts.*

(continued)

¹ Under the “Further Reading and Research” sections, we direct you to the work of authors, scholars, thinkers, and writers who might inform or enhance your sermonic message. We do not own the rights to these works. We encourage you to patronize and support these authors and creators. You may find it helpful to browse through this section for the entire series ahead of time so that you can purchase and read any books that are referenced.

² “How Does a Weary World Rejoice?” by Sarah A. Speed. Published on @writingthegood Instagram page, December 24, 2021. [instagram.com/p/CX3pqGBO0vO/](https://www.instagram.com/p/CX3pqGBO0vO/)

How we developed this Advent series (cont.)

After Sarah read her poem aloud, we heard the answer to our question: we need to hear that it all counts. We need to acknowledge the weariness of our world while also seeking real and daily moments of joy. We need to remember that all of life can be a prayer.

And so, we found ourselves compelled by the question Sarah's poem poses: *How does a weary world rejoice?* In each week of our series, we respond to this question with a statement inspired by our scriptures. These texts bring us into a space of possibility; in them, we find rhythms for rejoicing, even in the midst of difficult circumstances. Each weekly sub-theme is a "we" statement because joy is deeply relational and rooted in the fact that we belong to God. As we move through our series, we hope to create space for acknowledging the weariness of our world while celebrating God's closeness with great joy.

About the theme

Joy is often a companion to many other emotions. We can feel joy in addition to feeling many other things at once: grief, anticipation, anxiety, excitement, disappointment, exhaustion. Perhaps many of us live with the myth that joy is not something we deserve—or that it is wholly out of reach. But 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. Our joy is better when it is shared.

This theme of course alludes to a line in the familiar Christmas hymn, "O Holy Night,"³ which has an interesting history. The song was originally written by a French poet who was atheist, and the music was supplied by a Jewish composer. The hymn was later translated into English by an American Unitarian minister. In the 1800s, it became a popular hymn for Christian abolitionists due to its justice-focused language in verse 3.⁴ Like Mary's song, the hymn reminds us that justice and joy belong together. Sometimes our joy is an act of resistance.

And so, this Advent, we will hold space for our weariness *and* our joy. We will seek a "thrill of hope" in our hurting world. We will 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.

Theme reflections from the Sanctified Art creative team

"I lost my grandfather (Poppa) about 10 months ago. He and I called each other soulmates. He died 17 days after my son was born. As I fell onto the floor in grief, all I could think about was the joy I would've experienced seeing them meet. Joy and grief are dancing partners. Darkness and light cannot exist without the contrast between them. My son and I often sit on our porch swing, and one of his favorite things is to watch the wind chimes my grandfather made twirl in the wind and sing improvised songs. The work of my Poppa's hands delights my son, and in that I find an inexplicable joy. Each Advent we practice rejoicing in a hope that is promised but not yet realized in a world that feels like it is breaking apart in every way. How does a weary world rejoice? I don't know. But, I think I'll start with acknowledging my weariness, finding joy in connection, allowing myself to be amazed, singing stories of hope, making room, rooting myself in ritual, and trusting in my belovedness." —Rev. Lauren Wright Pittman, *Director of Branding, Founding Creative Partner*

"I am concerned, weighed down, unable to solve it all—or really any of it. Mental health crisis, opioid crisis, gun violence, war, illness—we grieve. In grief, we are on edge, more aware of the pain, struggling to be sure that we are thinking clearly. Yet in grief, we also respond viscerally in a loving, more open way. We are attuned to our neighbors' needs, for they seem to be more at-hand, louder in our psyche. We are more able to follow our gut and intuition through challenges that are inexplicable. Perhaps we should have been following it all along. In grief, I find that I am unearthing the positives—not in the realization of life-long dreams and goals. No. The positives are embedded in the minutiae of life—freely and beautifully given. When I cannot see a positive, I take another breath, a slower step, and I look again, more closely. For Her grace—the grace of our Holy Mother God—is found in the details of a moment."

—Hannah Garrity, *Founding Creative Partner*

³ "O Holy Night." Author: Placide Cappeau (1847). Translator: John S. Dwight. Tune: CANTIQU DE NOEL. Public Domain.

⁴ "Reminder: 'O Holy Night' Started Out as an Abolitionist Anthem." Published by *Relevant*. December 9, 2020. relevantmagazine.com/culture/music/reminder-o-holy-night-started-out-as-an-abolitionist-anthem/

Theme reflections from the Sanctified Art creative team (cont.)

“On December 24th, 2021, Omicron was wreaking havoc on New York City. The lines for COVID tests were wrapping around city blocks. Officials were urging people to double-mask. Hospitals were overflowing, and every hour, I received text messages from people saying, ‘I tested positive. I needed someone to know.’ As a pastor in the heart of Midtown, I was washed with fear, anxiety, and grief when I realized that my church would be one of the few Presbyterian churches offering in-person worship that Christmas Eve. Would I be safe? Would people come? Would it feel like Christmas? Once again, COVID was stealing our rituals. Once again, the city was sick. Once again, joy felt out of reach. So I sat down at my computer and wrote a poem titled, ‘How Does a Weary World Rejoice?’ It was an effort to sift through the pain of that day, to still my scattered mind, and to put some words on paper that might serve as breadcrumbs on the way to joy. Two years later, and I’m still asking myself that same question. Fortunately, I have found that our sacred texts provide some answers. How does a weary world rejoice? Day by day, and with God’s help.”

—Rev. Sarah Speed, *Founding Creative Partner*

“I distinctly remember the first time I laughed after my grandmother died. I was standing in my kitchen when joy interrupted my mourning like a loud dinner guest. Almost immediately, I felt ashamed. *This is no time for joy*, I thought. As I processed my emotional dissonance, I wondered why I felt so uncomfortable by joy’s intrusion. When did I decide that joy didn’t belong with my grief? Who told me that joy is selfish? Wouldn’t my grandmother love to hear the sound of my laughter? I’ve decided that joy is a companion emotion. Almost always, it comes alongside other feelings: excitement, sadness, exhaustion, relief, apprehension. It’s also a transformative emotion; joy changes you. It can shift your perspective. It can bring warmth to those around you. It will certainly lighten your load. And so, this Advent season, if you ever find yourself thinking, ‘this is no time for joy,’ then I hope you’ll reconsider. I hope you’ll allow joy to be your surprise guest.”

—Rev. Lisle Gwynn Garrity, *Founder, Creative Director*

“My first pregnancy was due just days before Christmas. I imagined giving birth amidst the singing of ‘Joy to the World,’ but nine weeks into the pregnancy—the Wednesday after Mother’s Day—I miscarried. I spent the long Texas summer mourning the loss. By the time December finally came, I was four months pregnant with a daughter who would be born on Easter. As I prepared the nursery that winter, my joy was interrupted by a wave of grief for the child I never met, the child who would have been arriving in days, not months. In the midst of what everyone saw as a joyous season, for me there was this hidden pain I felt I needed to tuck away. My grief felt so unearned, but so did my joy. So if you are weary this season, if you feel like joy is out of reach, undeserved, or fleeting, if your pain is tucked away in the closet with the Christmas presents, I hope you’ll find comfort sitting with Mary, Zechariah, and the shepherds as angels bring their greetings of ‘Do not fear.’”

—Rev. Anna Strickland, *Operations Support & Content Creator*

General reading & listening recommendations for this series

We encourage you to absorb these materials before the Advent season begins, as each of these may inform your meditations on our theme and weekly sub-themes.

Read *Inciting Joy: Essays*, by Ross Gay. (Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Book of Chapel Hill, 2022).

(Note: In this compilation of essays, poet Ross Gay defines and explores joy. Through short essays that are part memoir, he tries to uncover what habits and practices make joy more abundant, as well as how joy changes and shapes us. This is not a spiritual memoir or book of theology, but it is beautifully-written prose that will help you examine the ways joy permeates—and persists in—your own life. Particular sections of this book are recommended throughout this guide when they resonate with our weekly sub-themes.)

Read “#11: Places We Go When Life is Good,” in *Atlas of the Heart: Mapping Meaningful Connection and the Language of Human Experience*, by Brené Brown. (New York: Random House, 2021). 202-217.

(Note: In this book, social scientist and researcher Brené Brown catalogs and defines 87 human emotions in an attempt to help us accurately name our feelings and experiences. In this chapter, she pulls from her research to offer definitions for joy, happiness, and foreboding joy—all of which provide meaningful insight for this series.)

General reading & listening recommendations for this series *(cont.)*

Read “This Joy I Have” by Austin Channing Brown. *You Are Your Best Thing: Vulnerability, Shame Resilience, and the Black Experience: An Anthology*. Edited by Tarana Burke and Brené Brown. (New York: Random House, 2022). 13-21.

(Note: In this essay, Austin Channing Brown explores the phenomenon of “foreboding joy,” which Brené Brown defines as the feeling that joy won’t last, or that allowing ourselves to experience joy will invite disaster and disappointment. Austin Channing Brown takes this a step further to describe how racism increases foreboding joy, and yet, Black joy persists. This posture “lives paradoxically at the intersection of joy and pain, realistically acknowledging that pain may come, but that pain cannot permanently drown out joy” (18).)

Listen “The Bravest Conversation We’ve Had: Andrea Gibson.” Episode 215. *We Can Do Hard Things with Glennon Doyle*. Podcast hosted by Glennon Doyle, Abby Wambach, and Amanda Doyle. June 1, 2023. momastery.com/blog/we-can-do-hard-things-ep-215/

(Note: In this episode, spoken word artist and writer Andrea Gibson describes how they are cultivating joy in the face of a terminal diagnosis. Gibson reflects on their journey of discovering bliss and astonishment while being hyper aware of mortality. In the interview, Gibson frequently talks about joy: “I refuse to spend the end of my life no matter how much time it is, whether it’s two months or it’s 20 years, I refuse to spend it not loving my life, and that doesn’t mean not feeling. My therapist taught me years ago that you can’t shut yourself off to grief without also shutting yourself off to joy. You have to think of it like a kink in the hose. You stop the flow of sadness, you stop the flow of happiness at the same time. So I’m crying about twice an hour and then I’m bursting into laughter. So it’s feeling it all to be open to this moment and to the aliveness of this moment.” Listening to this conversation will break your heart open and stitch it back together all at once. If you begin this Advent series believing that joy is a standalone emotion removed from pain, this podcast will change your mind.)

Watch “Theology of Joy & the Good Life: Building a transformative movement driven by a Christian articulation of the joy that attends the flourishing human life.” Yale Center for Faith & Culture at Yale Divinity School. yale-cfc.webflow.io/legacy-projects/theology-of-joy

The First Sunday of Advent | How does a weary world rejoice?

We acknowledge our weariness



Focus Scriptures Luke 1:1-23 | Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19

Theme Connections

As Advent begins, we start by acknowledging the weariness, grief, rage, and hopelessness we carry—and we also affirm that we are made for joy. Joy is designed to live in a full house of other emotions. We start the season with Zechariah and Elizabeth; they have battled infertility and have lived many years steadfast in their faith. Perhaps they feel the weight of hopes and dreams unattained. The angel comes to Zechariah with a promise of good news, but Zechariah can't fully receive it, and he is cast into silence for the duration of Elizabeth's pregnancy. Sometimes weariness can harden us and prevent us from living fully. We've had hard journeys. Grief has left a scar on us. This is how we show up to Advent. Let us acknowledge the ways we, too, are hardened by disbelief. Like the psalmist, let us ask, "how long?" and plead for restoration.

Considerations for this Week

As you begin the series, you may want to spend some time introducing many of the concepts within the overall theme, *How does a weary world rejoice?* You might acknowledge that this line comes from the famous hymn, "O Holy Night", and share some of the history of that hymn (see the "About the Theme" section of this guide). You could prompt worshipers to consider how they define joy. What brings them joy? How is joy different from happiness? What is the relationship between sorrow and joy? When do we resist joy, and why? We hope you will emphasize that joy can be expressed alongside many other emotions, which is why we begin by acknowledging our weariness. Additionally, as you dig into the Gospel scripture, be mindful of the ways birth stories—particularly ones that include experiences of infertility—can be triggering to some.⁵ We can't avoid the way birth stories—and the birth of Jesus—are the focal point of the Advent and Christmas season, but we can acknowledge the weariness, grief, and trauma related to childbearing that many people carry. Acknowledging our pain can allow us to recognize where joy—and God—may also be present alongside our grief.

Commentary | Luke 1:1-23 & Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19

by 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. *(continued)*

⁵ This blog post may be helpful to you as you consider ways to be pastorally sensitive: sanctifiedart.org/blog/a-resource-for-pastors-addressing-infertility-miscarriage-child-loss

Commentary (cont.)

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.

There is a famous poem by Langston Hughes titled, "Mother to Son."⁶ 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. —Rev. Cecelia D. Armstrong

Guiding Q's

- As Advent begins, what weariness do you carry—in your body and soul? What does it look like for you to rejoice when you are weary? When have you welcomed joy while simultaneously feeling anxious, afraid, alone, sad, or overwhelmed? What does joy do? How does it change you?
- When the angel delivers news to Mary (Luke 1:24-45), she responds, "How will this be?" Then the angel describes how everything will come to pass. However, in response to the angel's news, Zechariah asks, "How will I know? How can I be sure?" (Luke 1:18). Then the angel makes him silent. What is the difference between these two questions? One could argue that Mary responds to the angel's impossible news with trust and curiosity. Her response presupposes that the news will come true; she simply wants to know *how* it will come to pass. In contrast, Zechariah wants certainty. His question implies that he can't be sure of what the angel is telling him. The angel gives him explicit details about what will come to pass: his wife will bear a son named John who will be a joy and delight; John will be filled with the Holy Spirit, but he must not drink wine or liquor (an interesting detail to include in a birth announcement); he will bring people back to God and fathers back to their children; he will prepare people for God. In other words, the angel presents Zechariah with a detailed vision of what will come to pass and Zechariah essentially says, "I can't accept this to be true." When in your life have you been like Mary, curious about the impossible? When in your life have you been like Zechariah, unwilling to believe in news that seems too good to be true?
- What do you make of Zechariah's time of silence? Consider all the ways Zechariah's muteness could change his daily life and routines as a priest. What do you imagine he gleaned from that season of silence? Have you ever been forced into a time of solitude or silence, or have you willingly attended a silent retreat? How did those experiences shape you spiritually?
- Cultivate imagination for Elizabeth and Zechariah's story. What is the story they had dreamed for their lives? What is the story they had accepted or resigned themselves to? How does the angel's news disrupt this? Similarly, are there limiting narratives about your life that you have resigned yourself to? How is God disrupting those beliefs and inviting you to live into a new story?

⁶ Read the full poem here: poetryfoundation.org/poems/47559/mother-to-son

We acknowledge our weariness

Guiding Q's (cont.)

- In [this short video](#),⁷ author Kate Bowler challenges the notion that people in pain can simply “choose joy” and “white-knuckle” their way out of suffering. In what ways does toxic positivity create harm for those who are hurting? How do you define joy? How is it different from happiness?
- In her artist statement for *Make Your Face Shine*, Rev. Lisle Gwynn Garrity asserts: “As I read and reread Psalm 80 on that day of mourning, I remembered that politeness is not the language of the weary.”⁸ What is the language of the weary? Outrage? Desperation? Activism? What scriptures or creative outlets provide you with words for your weariness? Where do you see modern-day psalms of lament?

Further Reading & Research

Read “#3: Places We Go When Things Don’t Go as Planned,” in *Atlas of the Heart: Mapping Meaningful Connection and the Language of Human Experience*, by Brené Brown. (New York: Random House, 2021). 38-55.

(Note: In this chapter, Brené Brown explores how too many people in the world prefer to live disappointed instead of risking the feeling of disappointment. She references an interview she did with a man later in his life who had always believed that expecting the worst was the best way to live. He described how this outlook made him feel prepared for bad things if they were to happen. Then, his wife died in a car accident and his perspective completely changed. Expecting the worst didn’t prepare him for that loss, and worse, he grieved that so many of his memories with his wife were ones when he was not fully enjoying the moment. He admitted, “My commitment to her is to fully enjoy every moment now” (50). As Advent begins, consider how weariness might be showing up as foreboding joy or worst-case-scenario-thinking, preventing you from living fully.)

Listen “Life Worth Living with Miroslav Volf.” Season 10, Episode 13. *Everything Happens with Kate Bowler*. Podcast hosted by Kate Bowler. May 30, 2023. katebowler.com/podcasts/miroslav_volf/

(Note: In this podcast, host Kate Bowler talks with Miroslav Volf, a professor of theology at Yale Divinity School. They discuss what makes for a good and meaningful life. Near the end, they discuss joy and how it often coexists with suffering. Volf says: “... joy is an emotion about something in our lives. And there can be many things, often conflicting things in our lives. I can rejoice in my child, but can be miserable because my friend is undergoing cancer treatment or something like that, right? And both can be true. Even when I am at the funeral. I could be profoundly sad for the loss, but also joyous for that person having lived such a rich life, or having impacted me or others with his life. So there is a sense in which I can rejoice and I can mourn. I can empathize and I can still rejoice. And these two things live together.”)

Read Pages 1-27 of *Inciting Joy: Essays*, by Ross Gay. (Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Book of Chapel Hill, 2022).

(Note: In this book of essays, author Ross Gay explores what incites joy—what practices and habits make joy more available to us—as well as what joy incites—what the feeling of joy makes us do. In these opening essays, he asks, “What if joy and pain are fundamentally tangled up with one another?” (4) He explores this further by personifying sorrow, inviting it in, ultimately concluding that he thinks of joy “as being a practice of survival” (10). Consider how joy and pain are not necessarily enemies, but instead, like cousins—emotions that live together.)

⁷ “Choose joy,” an Instagram Reel featuring Kate Bowler, posted by @katecbowler on February 20, 2023. [instagram.com/reel/Co4w47bOrwH/](https://www.instagram.com/reel/Co4w47bOrwH/)

⁸ The art and artist statement are included in our *How does a weary world rejoice?* Visual Art Collection.