

How Can This Be?; Luke 1:5-23; Advent 1B
Second Presbyterian Church
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Today is the first Sunday in Advent; the beginning of a new year in the Church calendar. Advent is a time of preparation marked by the first 4 Sundays in the new church year. It's a time to prepare our hearts for the coming of the Christ Child; Emmanuel, which means "God with us."

This year for our Advent theme we turn our hearts to ask the question: How can a weary world rejoice? Although many of us have been taught that questioning, especially questioning God, is a bad thing, today we're going to challenge this teaching.

Scripture:

⁵ In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. ⁶Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. ⁷But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.

⁸ Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, ⁹Zechariah was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. ¹⁰Now at the time of the incense-offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. ¹¹Then there appeared to Zechariah an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. ¹²When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. ¹³But the angel said to Zechariah, 'Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. ¹⁴You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, ¹⁵for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; for even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. ¹⁶He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. ¹⁷With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.' ¹⁸Zechariah said to the angel, 'How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years.' ¹⁹The angel replied, 'I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. ²⁰But now, because you did not believe my words,

which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur.’

21 Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah, and wondered at his delay in the sanctuary. ²²When he did come out, he could not speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the sanctuary. He kept motioning to them and remained unable to speak. ²³When his time of service was ended, he went to his home.

Sermon:

When we want to know something, we question. When we are confused, we question. When we are anxious, we question; perhaps, anxiety makes us question the most.

Some of us were taught as children not to question. Don’t question your parents; do as I say. Don’t question adults; you are only a child. Don’t question authority; it will get you in trouble. And especially, don’t question God, because questioning means you don’t believe.

This teaching is the most dangerous. Oppressive governments, dictators, and cults all teach acceptance without questioning. But, we only learn, and grow, and understand by questioning. We can only form our own opinions and thought patterns when we question.

I would dare to say that we cannot grow spiritually and theologically without questioning. Because when we question, we are examining our own beliefs, most taught to us by those who love us, others taught to us who want to control us. If we don’t question, we don’t really know why we believe what we believe. We can’t know bad theology, hurtful words, or oppressive behavior. How can we or others know what we believe if we don’t question?

The Bible is replete with questions from many of our religious heroes who questioned God. Adam, Eve, Abraham, Sarah, Moses, David, Elijah...and the list goes on.¹ One website called the Bible, “a dump truck full of doubters.”² Today in our psalm the psalmist questions: how long, O Lord? (Psalm 80:4). How can this be?

Today we have yet another person who questions God, a priest, Zechariah. He is told by the angel Gabriel that his wife, who is old and considered barren (sounds like a continuing Biblical theme to me), will have a son and his name will

¹ Rob Wegner,
<https://www.westsidefamily.church/blog/a-dump-truck-full-of-doubters-and-god-doesnt-give-up-on-any-of-them#:~:text=Adam%2C%20Eve%2C%20Abraham%2C%20Sarah,family%20thought%20He%20was%20crazy> accessed 12/1/23.

² Ibid.

be John. Not only will he be “great in the sight of the Lord...he will be filled with the Holy Spirit” (v. 15) and turn many “people of Israel to the Lord” (v. 16).

Zechariah is no pushover. He asks Gabriel, “How will I know that this is so?” (v. 18) How can this be?

The theme we’re using this year for Advent is also a question: How does a weary world rejoice? Put another way. How do we find hope for the future in such a messed up world?

Let’s face it. The holidays are hard for many of us. Grief. Pain. Estrangement. Addiction. Loss. Sickness. Anger. Loneliness. Financial struggles. Loss of control. Bad memories. Longing for the past good times. We all struggle in some way, and it affects how we enter into this time of waiting, of Advent, which means to wait.

Notice that when Zechariah questions the angel, he is not chastised. He simply asks for a sign because Gabriel’s revelation does not make sense to him. He gets a sign. His voice is taken away for the duration of his wife’s pregnancy. Is it punishment for questioning? What if having no voice for nine months, gives Zechariah the time to hear God’s answer. Zechariah is now forced by his silence to ponder the very question he asked of the angel. How can this be?

I believe as we wait during Advent, questioning is a great use of our time. Asking questions is the first step to dispelling our sense of weariness. Spending time in discernment with one another and with God is a very appropriate way to help prepare ourselves for Christ’s coming. What does it mean to prepare ourselves? How do we find hope amidst the suffering in our world. How do we find hope in our own suffering, our own troubles? What do we need to let go in order to receive the Christ Child? How is weariness overwhelming your sense of hope? Of joy? All excellent questions to ask God and to ponder.

You should have received a thin piece of paper when you came into worship this morning. I’d like to invite you to think about hope. What is giving you hope as you enter Advent this year, or conversely, what is preventing you from hope? Or maybe you are like Zechariah and need to ask God something on your heart. How can this be (whatever “this” is for you)? How long, O Lord? When will you hear my cry, O Lord? What is that spark, that tiny thing that gives you hope amidst the clamor of despair and weariness in our world? Put your thought about hope on that slip of paper place it in the offering basket and the liturgical arts team will create something beautiful out those slips of paper about hope.

My children could tell you that my favorite movie to watch at Christmas is How the Grinch Stole Christmas. Not the remakes, but the original 26 minute version from 1966 with the unmistakable voice of Boris Karloff.

You probably know the story. The Grinch doesn’t like Christmas because his heart is two sizes too small. Having enough of it, on Christmas Eve the Grinch

goes to Whoville and steals what he thinks is the Whos' Christmas, all their things, gadgets, and whatchamacallits. At dawn, he is at the top of a mountain waiting for the Whos to cry, "Boo hoo". But something else happens? The Whos wake up and go to where the community tree used to be and they start singing. The Grinch then asks the same question as Zechariah:

To quote from the 1966 version:

But this, this sound wasn't sad,
 this sound sounded glad.
 Every Who down in Whoville
 the tall and small
 was singing without any presents at all.
 He hadn't stopped Christmas from coming.
 It came.
 Somehow or other
 it came just the same.
 And the Grinch
 with his Grinch feet ice cold in the snow,
 stood puzzling and puzzling;
 how could it be so?
 It came without ribbons.
 It came without tags.
 It came without packages, boxes, or bags.
 He puzzled and paused
 till his puzzler was solved;
 then the Grinch thought of something
 he hadn't before.
 Maybe Christmas he thought,
 doesn't come from a store.
 Maybe Christmas perhaps
 means a little bit more.³

How could it be so? He asked. How did the Grinch find hope and joy in a weary world? He questioned, then he listened for the answer. He went to the top of that mountain and listened. But he didn't hear what he thought he would. He heard joy, he heard singing, and that joy of the Whos changed his life.

So, my friends, you have permission during this Advent season to ask questions, even hard questions. But be sure to make time and space to listen for God's answers. You just might hear something amazing that could change your life.

³ Dr. Seuss, Irv Spector, Bob Ogle, "How the Grinch Stole Christmas," TV Movie, 1966.

In the name of our Triune God, who can handle all our questions. Amen.