

“How Can This Be?”

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First Congregational United Church of Christ, Gaylord, Michigan

Sunday, December 3, 2023

Texts: Psalm 80: 1-7, 17-19 and Luke 1: 1-23

Perhaps these song lyrics are familiar to you:

When you're weary

Feeling small

When tears are in your eyes

I'll dry them all.

Or from the same song, verse 2:

When you're down and out

When you're on the street

When evening falls so hard

I'll comfort you.

No, that's not all the lyrics from Simon and Garfunkel's *Bridge Over Troubled Water*, but for many of us, this familiar song echoes a reality that is our lives. We are weary. Weary is different from tired. Tired means you lost sleep last night.

many people and not always being able to “get it right”. For some, it’s family strife, job insecurity – you get the idea. Again, I probably don’t need to tell you what weariness is, or where it comes from. And yet, if we don’t acknowledge where and when we are weary, we have little hope of overcoming our weariness.

Zechariah and Elizabeth had another kind of weariness that perhaps some of us understand. They were unable to have children. Elizabeth, as Luke tells is, is “barren”. In those days people believed that it was the woman’s infertility that led to the inability to have children. We don’t have knowledge whether it was Elizabeth, Zechariah, or both, who were unable to conceive. You can imagine the whispers. Clearly, they were people of faith, and yet, as some would say it, “God hadn’t blessed them with a child.” That had to hurt. And they had heard it all over the years from advice on how to make it happen, to well-wishers who inadvertently made it worse. Zechariah and Elizabeth had to be weary from it all.

According to the Gospel, Zechariah is visited in the temple by one who would announce that he and Elizabeth were about to conceive. They weren’t just having any baby, either. It was going to be one named John, whom we later will call “John the Baptist”, whose primary role was to prepare the way for the coming of Jesus. To put it mildly, Zechariah just couldn’t believe it. In case you didn’t

I don't know how we can blame him for his completely human response. When we blame him, we completely miss the rest of his life experience. You've heard the adage, "fool me once..." Zechariah had been fooled into hope many times in his life regarding being a father, I'm sure. And maybe he just didn't have the energy to let it happen again. He couldn't put himself through that and he couldn't put Elizabeth through that. They'd been through so much already. Didn't want to get her hopes up...or his. That sounds bad, but it's also pretty realistic, is it not?

Jurgen Moltmann tells us that anxiety is anticipated terror. He also tells us that hope is anticipated joy. In order to hope, we have to have something to anticipate. And sometimes that's nearly impossible. Guess what else? That's okay. It's okay to struggle with hope. However, if we have nothing to hope for, we move beyond weary to despair – and that can be deadly, literally and figuratively.

In verse 18 of our scripture, Zechariah asks the angel, "How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years." Cecelia Armstrong writes, "When we are weary, we tend to seek clarity instead of

All your dreams are on their way

See how they shine

When you need a friend

I'm sailing right behind

I'm not typically the one in the crowd that says, "buck up" when things go badly. I have a different model. But we need people who help us to see what we cannot see. We need that friend, or loved one, sailing right behind to help us see for ourselves that our time has come. Now friends, I don't know when your time will come, and I cannot promise that those unable to have children will have them, even with today's technology. I can say unequivocally that your inability to believe the impossible is not a reflection of poor faith or some other flaw within you. Sometimes it's just plain hard to see when you are weary – beaten down – and struggling. But I do know that you will not find hope all by yourself – at least not very often. Despite our culture's screaming from every corner that you can do this life all by yourself, I simply disagree. While Zechariah said, "How could this be?" People around him may not have known exactly what was about to happen, but they could tell something was clearly happening. Zechariah had a vision. Something was happening.