Christmas Eve Meditation – The Weary World Rejoices
Sunday, December 24, 2024
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O Holy night! The stars are brightly shining
It is the night of our dear Savior's birth
Long lay the world in sin and error pining
'Til He appeared and the soul felt its worth
A thrill of hope the weary world rejoices
For yonder breaks a new and glorious morn
Fall on your knees; O hear the Angel voices!
O night divine, O night when Christ was born
O night, O Holy night, O night divine!

Let us pray: On this Holy night, loving God, we gather to honor our dear Savior's birth, a thrill of hope and the reason for a weary world to rejoice. Amen.

Tonight commemorates the 190th Christmas Eve for this community of faith founded by Springfield, Presbyterian abolitionists in 1835, and the twelve Lessons and Carols service I have the privilege to lead as your pastor. My heart is full of gratitude, humility, and joy for the honor to serve and the gift of friendship.

The title of tonight's meditation, "The Weary World Rejoices" is a quote from the beloved carol "O Holy Night," which is based on the poem *Midnight Christians* written by the French poet Placide Cappeau in 1847 and set to the music of the gifted composer Adolphe Adam.

Cappeau's poem is based on the Nativity of Jesus, specifically from the Gospel of Luke, and reflects his abolitionist views. When confronted with the thrill of hope in the incarnation, one's sense of worth gives new meaning to life, a reason to rejoice, and a sense of humility which brings one to one's knees.

While sitting in my study during the first week of Advent, I opened an envelope from the Reverend Jihyun Oh, Westminster's 2024 Bay Speaker and our denomination's Stated Clerk and read these words on a simple, yet lovely Christmas card: "The thrill of hope, a weary world rejoices." I sat in silence for a moment because I was so struck by this phrase. At the time I did not realize it was a quote from "O Holy Night," yet I resonated deeply with "a weary world rejoices." I probably knew I was weary following a tumultuous year in our world and the unexpected, added responsibilities that were a part of my ministry in 2024; however, the truth of my weariness was poignantly brought home and the sense of rejoicing amid the weariness spoke deeply to the faith you and I share, which we celebrate this Holy Night.

The Reverend Joann Lee, Associate Pastor of Calvary Presbyterian Church in San Fransisco speaks of what it means to rejoice amid our weariness:

> This kind of joy is more than just circumstantial or a fleeting feeling. The joy of our faith is a way of being in the world, a theological disposition that defies the powers of death

and destruction. This kind of joy is a commitment, a choice to make. Despite all that is painful and broken in the world, this joy is born with new life.

Episcopal priest and theologian, Barbara Brown Taylor, reminds us, "…new life begins in the dark. Whether it is a seed in the ground, a baby in the womb, or Jesus in the tomb, new life begins in the dark."

The prophet Isaiah proclaimed: *The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined.*

Joy is rooted in the beauty and mystery of darkness, as we stretch and hope and long for light. If weary Isaiah could proclaim joy, amid the tumult and devastation of the Babylonian Exile, then, we, too, can rejoice.

American poet, Toi Derricotte, reminds us, joy has implications we may not even consider. "Joy is an act of resistance," a way we say "no" to the powers that be, a way we resist hatred and meanness and supremacy in all its forms. Our joy, our ability to rejoice, is an act of resistance.

If we can still laugh at ourselves and with one another, the powers and principalities that seek to demean and dehumanize have not won.

If we can smile at a toddler dancing to Christmas music, allowing our hearts to warm, the powers and principalities that seek to demean and dehumanize have not won.

If we can sing portions of Handel's Messiah, allowing our voices to rise in harmony with others and our hearts to swell with the thrill of hope, the powers and principalities that seek to demean and dehumanize have not won.

Joy is not frivolous, it is necessary.

Joy is grounded in the faith we proclaim and celebrate this Holy Night: the eve of our dear Savior's birth. In his book *The Mood of Christmas,* American theologian, pastor, and civil rights leader, Howard Thurman, asks about the symbol of Christmas and then reflects on its meaning with these words:

"Christmas is the rainbow arched over the roof of the sky when the clouds are heavy with foreboding.

Christmas is the cry of life in the newborn when, forced from his mother's nest, claims the right to live.

Christmas is the brooding Presence of the Eternal Spirit making crooked paths straight, rough places smooth, weary hearts refreshed, dead hopes stir with newness of life.

Christmas is the promise of tomorrow at the close of every day, the movement of life in defiance of death, and the assurance that love is sturdier than hate, that right is more confident than wrong, that good is more permanent than evil."

Christmas is a thrill of hope. Christmas is the weary world rejoicing. Amen.