

Pastor Jamie's Sermon

Good Shepherd Church, December 31, 2023

“How Does a Weary World Rejoice? We Root Ourselves in Ritual”

The Message

How does a weary world rejoice? This week is the last week in our sermon series addressing this question.

And in this final week, we answer this question with “we root ourselves in ritual.”

As I was thinking about the theme this week and reading the scriptures, I realized that, at least for me, it doesn't feel like rooting myself in ritual would help me rejoice through my weariness.

And this could be partially because I just moved here not too long ago, and this was my first Christmas in a totally new place and with a totally new church, and it just didn't feel like I've established any rituals yet.

But as I thought more about it, I realized that I actually *do* root myself in ritual, often without even realizing it, if we can expand on our definition of ritual for a moment.

When I go to bed at night, I always get into bed on the same side, and I stay on that side all night, even though the rest of the bed is empty – except of course when Kanyon decides to sleep on the bed, too.

When I wake up in the morning, I always get out of bed and immediately tidy up the side of the bed I slept in.

I prepare myself to take the dogs outside, and then I take them outside using the same morning ritual every day.

Partially I do this for the benefit of my dogs – they know what to expect if we do things the same way every day.

But, they're adaptable. Mostly, I do these rituals for myself.

I can be on autopilot if I maintain a morning ritual that makes sense to me.

After I finish with the dogs, I go to the bathroom, and brush my teeth.

I don't know if you all do this too, but I use the same pattern for brushing my teeth every single time I do it.

If for some reason that pattern would change, I would feel so strange that I am not even sure what I would do!

At this point, my morning ritual might change depending on what my day looks like.

But even still, there are so many things that I do throughout the day in exactly the same way every time I do them.

And I realized as I was thinking through this notion of rooting ourselves in ritual, that we likely do this because it helps us feel comfortable and safe.

It also helps us to be able to let go of putting a lot of effort into *thinking* too much about things that we can put onto autopilot.

I never think about which leg to put into my pants first when I put them on. To be honest, I am not even sure which leg I do first, but I am sure I do it the same way every time and I don't even realize it.

So, even on a very basic level, there is comfort and possibly even joy in the very simple rituals we perform on a regular basis.

But of course, when we talk about ritual, especially as it relates to religious or spiritual rituals, we are typically referring to something very different.

And yet, also similar, at least in terms of how religious or spiritual rituals make us feel.

In our scripture today, we heard that eight days after Jesus was born, his parents participated in a naming ritual.

Then, following the ritual demanded by the Law of Moses, they "took Jesus to the temple in Jerusalem and presented him to the Lord."

They then offered a sacrifice on his behalf.

It might be hard for us to relate to this ritual today, or to understand how participating in it helped them to find joy.

But when we think about other religious rituals that we participate in that help ground us in our faith, or bring comfort when we are troubled, or simply bring a sense of nostalgia, comfort, and safety, we can see why and how these types of rituals benefit people – then and now.

How thrilled would we all be to witness a baptism in our church? That would be amazing, and there would be tons of joy – not just for the parents, but for all the members of our church.

When we accept the grace of God and remember the sacrifice of Jesus through Holy Communion, it can bring a sense of joy and peace to many who participate.

But, even if sacramental rituals do not do much for you personally, most of us feel comforted by the ritual of a candlelight Christmas Eve service.

Or, we feel comforted by reciting the Lord's Prayer, which is another ritualized prayer that is almost on autopilot for those who learned the prayer as a young person.

Religious rituals are fascinating because often, we find them so meaningful, or we feel so attached to them, that we struggle to change them or adjust to something new.

I have a hard time when other churches recite the newer words to the Lord's Prayer.

I learned "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us."

When I hear another version – "forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us," or something different, my brain can't adjust very easily.

And yet, if that was the version this church used regularly, I would accommodate and change my ritual.

So, I would encourage you to think through your own rituals – both personally and spiritually.

What rituals are meaningful to you? Have any changed over the years? Are there any you miss or long for?

Sometimes, we don't even realize a ritual has changed until we are taken back to it somehow, and we fall into a comfortable pattern that we haven't been in for years.

This happened to me during COVID when my grandmother passed away.

I went to her funeral, which was held in a Catholic church.

I will admit that there are things I do not necessarily appreciate about the Catholic church.

But, there are things that I very much loved about being at her funeral, and many of them had to do with the rituals that I remember from my childhood in the Catholic church.

Even though I wasn't magically convinced to switch denominations permanently, I felt a sense of calm and peace and yes, even joy, when I was taken back to some of those Catholic rituals I learned and witnessed as a kid.

Those rituals helped with my grief, they helped me to feel connected to my grandmother and my family, and they helped me to find a sense of peace and joy, even through the sadness and the weariness of losing someone I loved dearly.

So rituals are important, and in times of need or times of distress, overwhelm, or weariness, we tend to fall back on our rituals.

I did not realize how many rituals I participate in, both on a personal level and on a spiritual level, on a daily basis.

But, now that I have thought through it a bit, I do realize how much rituals and patterns of behavior affect our daily life.

I can see how rooting ourselves in these rituals of spiritual or personal comfort can be helpful when we become overwhelmed.

I can also see how it might be easy to root ourselves in unhealthy rituals or patterns of behavior as well.

So, as you leave here today, I encourage you to become more aware of the rituals you participate in regularly.

Recognize those rituals that bring you life and energy, and become aware of those that might drain life or energy from you as well.

And then, bring those that give you life and energy to the front of your consciousness when you feel weary, run-down, or overwhelmed.

Learn to rejoice through use of rituals that bring life and energy to your spirit. Sing praise to God for the joy that these rituals bring, and experience joy through the process.

So, how does a weary world rejoice?

We acknowledge our weariness.
We find joy in connection.
We allow ourselves to be amazed.
We sing stories of hope.
We make room.
And we root ourselves in ritual.

May you leave here today armed with tools to help you rejoice through your weariness, and to help others do the same. Amen.

Let us pray.

God of hope and joy, today we are grateful for the lessons in the Gospel of Luke that help equip us with ways to rejoice in a weary world. We ask for your guidance and wisdom in helping us to find our own ways to rejoice and experience joy through our weariness as we move through our own lives. God, sometimes we don't even recognize how weary we are, so we ask that you would help us to acknowledge our weariness when we are struggling to see and know it.

We are grateful for the people around us who are there to provide connection, and we pray that you would guide us to community when we feel weary and need to find joy in connecting with others.

We ask that you help us to allow ourselves to be amazed - that you would help us not to forget to take the time to see and know the amazing things around us.

And we ask that you would help us to sing our stories of hope.

God, we also need your help to make room - for you, for Jesus, for other people, and for ourselves.

Finally, God, we thank you for helping us root ourselves in rituals. We thank you for the rituals we learned as young people, and for the more recent rituals that help us experience joy and give us life and energy.

God, you amaze us every day, and our gratitude is eternal and unending. We pray all of this in your name. Amen.