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## Hymn Sing

Luke 1:46b-55

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on December 11, 2016,  
by the Rev. Dr. Luke A. Powery

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My father once told me to take a song with me on the journey of life. I not only take a song with me but this particular story with me wherever I go because young girls have their special way of truth-telling. In the Fall of 2006, some of the children from the Dupree Center for Children, the daycare/preschool of Princeton Seminary, participated in the daily chapel service. There was a livelier buzz than usual in the frozen chosen Reformed tradition's air on this day. For that service, I was asked to lead the congregational singing of the hymn, the spiritual, "Guide My Feet." I was happy to do this and thought it would be cool for my daughter Moriah, who was 4 at the time, to see daddy in action; she's now 14 so you can really pray for me! I came up front in Miller Chapel and took my place. As I led that hymn, Moriah stood in the front row staring at me, not singing a lick. No lips-moving, no smile-making, no eye-winking, just a numb stare. I knew she could get easily embarrassed by me in public by what she considered to be my lack of wardrobe sophistication. But that wasn't it this time. Knowing Moriah, I thought her countenance in the service was pretty strange for her personality. I couldn't wait to get home to ask her about it. So when I got home, the first thing I did was to ask her, "What did you think about daddy's singing today, sweetie?" She said something I'll never forget, "You sing like the cookie monster."

Yes, the cookie monster. The one on Sesame street. The one with blue fur and googly eyes. The one who says, "me want cookie." That one. Young girls have their special way of truth-telling. Pavarotti, Michael Jackson, Paul Robeson, Sting, Johnny Cash, even Dolly Parton, but cookie monster?! Forest Gump was right: "Life is like a bunch of chocolates; you never know what you're gonna get." I didn't know what I was gonna get on that day.

And Mary had no clue what she was gonna get from the angel of God. Let's just say that Mary didn't jump up and down as if she'd just won the Holy Ghost lottery when the angel tells her that she's going to give birth to God's Son. Maybe the angel thought this was going to be good news. But that's not how it's received. In today's world when one hears "the Lord is with you" or "you have found favor with God," there may be a hand raised in praise, a loud amen, or at least the Presbyterian amen. But Mary does no such thing. She's perplexed and has a hermeneutics of suspicion, questioning what it all means. She says to the angel, "How can this be since I am a virgin?" Mary is not in a singing mood unless it's the blues. But we can't blame her, can we?

Our perception of her as *theotokos*, the holy mother of God, the virgin mother, may place her in a sanitized heavenly spiritual realm at a distance from our human situation. But remember Mary is an engaged teenage girl who just found out she's having a baby and not from her fiancée, Joseph, a man with royal blood working on Wall St. She's pregnant before she even gets married. Can you imagine the gossip spreading at the coffee hour after worship? If it wasn't bad enough to be in a society where a woman needed a man to be worth anything, now this happens? As she receives those words from the

angel, I can hear her catch a lump in her throat. “How can this be since I am a virgin?” How can this be? Haven’t we asked that before? How can this be happening my life? It’s unbelievable.

Mary struggles and I’m not sure when and what makes Mary shift while she waits—whether it’s receiving the news about her once barren cousin Elizabeth’s conception or hearing that “nothing will be impossible with God”—but Mary transitions from “how can this be” to “let it be.” “Let it be with me according to your word,” as she waits for the divine promise to be fulfilled in her life. This young girl is betwixt and between in a liminal space between yesterday’s promise and tomorrow’s fulfillment of that promise. It’s a time of uncertainty and anxiety, a time of being unsure about the future of this country, a time of being unsure about the future of the church as we know it, a time of being unsure about the future of your current life situation, whatever that might be, betwixt and between, a season of waiting to see if God will still make a way. And as she waits, it may surprise you to see what Mary does. Mary begins to sing and that starts a revolution of redemption as God overturns our expectations in tough circumstances of life and does the unexpected through the form of a song.

What do you do in seasons of waiting and transition when the future is unknown? Mary could have done many things while waiting for the promise to be fulfilled—she could have put her head in the sand, pouted, doubted, shouted in desperation, throw herself a pity party, indulge in overeating, overdose on pills, read Karl Barth’s *Church Dogmatics* or one of the volumes of *Chicken Soup for the Soul*. She could have yelled out for help and lifted her voice in despair, cookie monster style— “me want help!” Instead, God lifts up a hymn through this teenage girl to let us know that singing is still possible and preferable in these kinds of predicaments. To many, singing is a royal waste of time. But young girls have their special way of truth-telling—to sing in the midst of unsure times, to sing while you wait for God to do something, to sing at these moments is the ministry of ‘prisoners of hope.’ As we’ve heard oft-quoted— “hope is a song in a weary throat.” And Mary’s situation is no different, revealing how at transitional and uncertain periods in life, singing is an art form that will take you from one place to the next as you migrate with God. It’s true for Mary and true for us during Advent. We sing as we journey because one thing is for sure, music is portable ministry and bearers of God sing.

So Mary holds one of the world’s greatest hymn sings. St. Augustine, in his *Expositions on the Psalms*, defines what a hymn is. He says, “It is singing to the praise of God. If you praise God and do not sing, you utter no hymn. If you sing and praise not God, you utter no hymn. If you praise anything which does not pertain to the praise of God though in singing you praise, you utter no hymn. A hymn then contains these three things: song, and praise, and that of God. Praise then of God in song is called a hymn.” What Mary does by singing a hymn is a revolutionary way of living the Christian life and responding to uncertainty. To sing a hymn when life sucks. That’s the challenge. To sing a hymn to God when you’re not even sure you trust God with your life anymore. That’s the challenge. To sing a hymn when you’re in the waiting room of life not sure what the future holds. That’s the challenge. To sing a hymn when you discover a loved one or friend has been diagnosed with cancer. That’s the challenge. To sing a hymn when it seems as if the tune of hate is the societal melody of the day. That’s the challenge. To sing when all is well and life’s computer has not crashed is not a challenge. The courageous miracle is to sing a hymn when all hell is breaking loose and it seems as if all you have is the song itself. Mary’s anxious lump in her throat becomes a song. Mary was maybe weary from worry but hope still makes a melody in her heart that crescendos thru her voice and we hear it echoing as the *Magnificat* down the acoustical corridors of church history.

This ancient hymn is not what was expected in these circumstances and functions as a song of resistance to cynicism, negativity, and hopelessness. Mary is not out of touch with the reality of her situation because she sings. That she sings demonstrates she's in touch with a Reality greater than her own life. She's in touch with God and sings to reach out to God in order to transcend the difficult circumstances of her life. She is a kind of caged bird of sorts but her song, her hymn, is a sign of her freedom even amid uncertainty and liminality.

*The caged bird sings  
with a fearful trill  
of things unknown  
but longed for still  
and his tune is heard  
on the distant hill  
for the caged bird  
sings of freedom.* (Maya Angelou)

Our wings may be clipped. Our feet tied. But as long as we can open our throats to sing, we are free and alive. Mary doesn't allow the unknown to hem her in; rather, she trusts God enough to raise a hymn when those around her may think it's insane to do so. She doesn't have all the answers or understand everything that's happening but "[she] doesn't sing because [she] has all the answers; [she] sings because [she] has a song" (Joan Walsh Anglund).

And as appropriate with a hymn, this song is about God, not Rudolph the red-nosed reindeer or seeing mommy kissing Santa Claus underneath the mistletoe last night. "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant...for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation." God is the theme of this song. God is in this song. That's why hope sings. That's why this hymn is still being sung all over the world generation after generation. Because "God has shown strength with his arm. God has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. God has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly; God has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty. God has helped his servant Israel."

Christian hope magnifies God in the middle of anxiety and uncertainty. The music of Advent has a God focus and rightly so and this intoned hope anticipates the future through hymn sings. Mary sings the future of God and when she sings, she starts a revolution because as Bernice Johnson Reagon of Sweet Honey in the Rock reminds us, "You can't sing and not change your condition." As she sings, she prepares the world for the entry of the incarnate Hope it needs. As she sings, she declares that the world is about to turn and in fact, an eschatological reversal has already begun even with the virgin birth itself. God doesn't come as a king on a white horse or cruisin' in a flashy Mercedes Benz. God comes in the form of a baby. This hymn foreshadows God's overturning of human expectations. For what is up will come down and what is down and low will be brought up and put on high. The empty will be filled and the full will be emptied. God will turn our world upside down and it happens even as we sing. Worlds crumble in the face of singing doxology.

A hymn will rock and revolutionize your Christian faith and the world because this is God's song. How do I know this? Who else could it be that would use the art form of a song to usher God's hope into the world? Who else could it be to use a teenage girl from an insignificant village to give birth to God? Who else would lead you to sing amid earthquake rubble?

Of all the things that one could do when a 2010 earthquake destroys a country like Haiti, singing is not necessarily at the top of the list. It was incredible to see and hear the singing of our brothers and sisters in Haiti singing on the streets day, noon, and night. This was not the expected response to catastrophe. Of course, there was crying and screaming and groaning and moaning, but there was also lots of singing. Ena Zizi, a 70-year-old woman, had been buried for a week in earthquake rubble that was at least 3 stories high from the ground. When she was pulled out of the rubble, she was seriously dehydrated, had a broken leg and dislocated hip. But that didn't stop her. When they pulled her out of the rubble, this lady began to sing. Her body was worn and her throat was weary but hope was singing.

This Advent, let the songs rise out of the rubbles of your existence even as you wait for God's intervention. They sang in Haiti because they were still alive and their singing meant that God was still at work somehow somewhere. Their songs were an invocation for God to intervene and their songs indicated that God had already come and God was in the song.

God isn't finished with us yet. Their singing, our singing, Mary's singing, all say that Death will not play the final musical postlude, which is why we continue to sing during this interlude waiting period of life. It doesn't matter what you sound like or if you think you have a good voice or not. It doesn't matter if you have a weary throat that can't hold a note. It doesn't matter even if you sing like the cookie monster. I'd rather be a cookie monster for Christ than a Divo for the devil. So this week, begin your cookie monster ministry and sing like the cookie monster because he's unashamed in front of other people. Sing like the cookie monster because his voice is raw and rugged which shows us that he knows something about struggle in life. Sing like the cookie monster because we don't know what Mary sounded like or if she was a soprano, alto, tenor, or bass but we do know she sang in the tune of God and others leaped for joy. For all we know, she might've sounded like the cookie monster. And remember, "he who sings, prays twice."

Lift every voice and sing. O for a thousand tongues to sing. How can I keep from singing? I can't keep from singing. Let's have a hymn sing! "I'm gonna sing...."