

# Singing the Blues

*Isaiah 5:1-7*

A sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Luke A. Powery on May 10-11, 2013 for Duke Baccalaureate Services

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“Singing the blues” may seem to be a weird sermon title for such a glorious occasion as a baccalaureate service. A time of singing, yes. But the blues? You may not have leaped tall buildings in a single bound to reach this special day or even endured many amazing dangers, toils, and snares. But you have taken many exams, written many papers, performed many lab experiments, endured many sleepless nights, been hooked up on Starbucks coffee intravenously, worked in study groups where studying wasn’t always the priority, engaged in service-learning projects, took advantage of international learning opportunities, completed your curricular goals to be pre-med, pre-law, pre-business or just pre-working world. This is a day to celebrate your accomplishments--to look back over your journey here and to sing with the Cameron crazies one last time and cheer with the “crazy towel guy” one last time, or even dance Gangnam style. This is the weekend to do it as you end one chapter in life and begin another.

I’m also pretty sure that you’ve discovered these past four years that what we expect is not always what we get. This has nothing to do with Tim Tebow being released by the NY Jets (we expected that!). Rather, pulling an all-nighter and oozing blood, sweat and tears, for that final exam but still not getting the grade you hoped for. Or, investing yourself in a relationship, but not sensing that the same level of love was being reciprocated. What we expect is not always what we get. Life is full of surprises. Even as you look around you might actually be a little surprised by who actually made it to this day and are graduating (don’t turn around and look at the back row). It could also be surprising, however, that even on this day of great celebration, some of you may be “feeling blue” because you have to leave the protected confines of Duke and along with that, your established friendships and supportive networks from club sports or Greek life and now you find yourself at a crossroads and even uncertain about your next steps. So in the midst of this great weekend full of joy and dancing and laughter, we should remember as poet Langston Hughes wrote, that the blues is a kind of “humor that laughs to keep from crying.”

The laughter expressed this weekend may actually be an expression of the blues. Singing the blues is more than complaining about how “Suzie left me, my dog Booboo died, my acoustic guitar broke, and UNC beat Duke in basketball.” It’s more than that.

The Hebrew prophet Isaiah is case in point. I was expecting him to rain down doom and gloom because isn’t that what prophets do? But, this prophet sings. He hums. He chants a warm melody of a love song for his beloved. Isaiah surprises me. But what we expect is not always what we get. Isaiah’s in love and love will make you do things you don’t normally do. Love will make you go coo coo for coco puffs so he croons a beautiful ballad for his beloved God and God’s vineyard.

At the beginning, Isaiah sings his heart out with lyrical poetry and hopeful expectations. His song speaks of how the beloved plants a vineyard in a fertile place with choice vines and does everything to protect it and makes it ready to produce sweet wine. The beloved does

everything according to environmental sustainability standards. He does everything by the book.

At that point, Isaiah's vocal ecstasy of love crescendos to the anticipated climax in volume and energy, as we, the listeners, await the inevitable - the yielding of grapes. For even the beloved expected the vineyard to yield grapes after all of his efforts. God *expects* the best from the vineyard. Who wouldn't after all of that work? Yet what the prophet sings is that the beloved 'expected [the vineyard] to yield grapes but it yielded wild grapes.' Uh-oh. We can expect the best and still get the worst because what we expect is not always we get.

This ballad then experiences a mood swing from sweet expectations to bitter disappointment. Is this song still about love? Yes. And it is about life as well. As one philosopher reminds us, "lament is a love-song." Isaiah sings the blues about love gone wrong at this point. We don't need to hear the latest news about Kim Kardashian. Hear the newsflash about God. The beloved 'expected [the vineyard] to yield grapes but it yielded wild grapes.' Unrequited love.

The beloved then asks the blues question, *'When I expected it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes?'* Unmet expectations, in what Cornel West calls, a "blues-inflected" world. The world in which we live. The world in which you will work. Just this academic year alone-- Innocent children go to an elementary school like any other normal day to learn in Newtown, CT. But some of these children and their teachers never return back home to their families because of a senseless shooting. ***'When I expected it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes?'*** Excited to run in a great race called the Boston Marathon, only to end with a big bang due to devastating bombs planted near the finish line, changing the lives of many forever. ***'When I expected it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes?'*** And there are some who entered Duke with you but are not present today for various reasons. ***'When I expected it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes?'***

Unmet expectations are the stuff of life. No one can predict the exact twists and turns on the road of life. Things will not always turn out the way you thought they would. And so you'll find yourself, graduates, at times, interrogating yourself in the courtroom of your heart asking, *'When I expected it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes?'*

I don't believe there's a university initiative or program that will help you answer this question. You've learned how to harness your intellectual gifts to help solve real-world problems, knowledge in service to society. You've grappled with tough questions in science and technology and medicine and the arts, and have been engulfed in a Duke universe of interdisciplinarity. Yet, the existential blues question from the song of Isaiah does not have easy answers and more likely no answers at all. But it teaches a lesson of how life's pilgrimage is full of unmet expectations and surprises and disappointments.

This is why it is important for you to learn how to sing the blues as a spiritual response to life circumstances as you face a world of much tragedy and agony. Alongside your major field, my hope as you graduate is that you might become a "blues-ologist" (Gil Scott Heron). One who understands the blues sensibility of our human reality and is able to express it artistically. Writer Ralph Ellison says, "The blues is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to

transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism. As a form the blues is an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically.”

To sing the blues is to willingly inhabit the world of sound to interrogate life and to tell the truth about it while transcending it in order not to be destroyed by it. To sing the blues is to demonstrate that you are not just living in a world of ideas as a head on top of a stack of books , but you are in touch with and touched by life and the suffering of the world. The blues helps us remain human with a blues impulse—a prophetic intentionality to speak truth, even to power.

Singing the blues also reveals that you understand love and how love can be blue, full of questions and contradictions. To sing the blues is to recognize that life and love are complicated. That what you love the best can hurt you the most (Henry Townsend). Loving someone or something so hard that you turn blue and are willing to be courageous enough to sing even when it hurts. To sing no matter what.

To sing the blues does not mean eternal happiness but it is a way of transcending tragedy through a mood and melody. Singing the blues is a prophetic form of courage and survival. It is “fortitude in the face of a broken existence.”(James Cone) One takes the risk that one may survive only to sing the blues again. Musically, the blues notes are sometimes called bent notes. The flat 7<sup>th</sup> or the minor 3<sup>rd</sup> bend down from the major 7<sup>th</sup> or the major 3<sup>rd</sup>. They bend but are not broken. So when life bends you with heavy winds, the blues allow you to still sing and make melodies as a sign of life and resilience. To sing means that one refuses to be silenced. It is a prophetic calling. And if civil rights activist and singer, Bernice Johnson Reagon is right, “you can’t sing and not change your condition.”

Just ask 70 year old woman, Ena Ziza, who, in the aftermath of the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, found herself buried for a week in earthquake rubble 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 a dislocated hip. She was suffering. When they pulled her out of the rubble, she didn’t ask about her 401K or her unread emails or the blog chatter about Oprah Winfrey’s TV network. When they pulled her out of the rubble, this lady began to sing. What we expect is not always what we get. Even a blues note is hopeful because “hope is a song in a weary throat.” (Pauli Murray)

So sing the blues because it is an essential ingredient for anyone who wants to prepare for the unmet expectations, the wild grapes, of life. Be encouraged, because you’re not alone. As the prophet showed, God is a blues God who will sing right along with you. And you are already blue anyway. In other words, the blues will always be in your blood.