

## **Filled with Good Things**

Luke 1:46-55

It is the first Sunday of Advent and this is the first sermon in a series that will walk us through many of the Christological hymns of the New Testament, all the way to Christmas Day. When we say “Christological hymns” or “the Christ hymns,” we’re talking about the handful of places in the New Testament where biblical scholars think that the language about Jesus Christ isn’t just beautiful, theological writing, but transcriptions of the songs that the early church actually sang about their experience of God on earth.

Which is very appropriate, because this is the singing-est time of year in the Christian Church, the world over. And not only is it the time of year where we sing *more*, but it is the time of year where Christians across denominational divides are singing the exact same songs. There are something like 50 English-language Christian hymnals in print today and, if you log onto your average online Christian bookstore, the available variations on those hymnals number in the hundreds. There is a church gathering right now, somewhere in the United States, opening their hymnals to sing a song that no one in this room has ever even heard of. But during the Advent and Christmas seasons, an amazing thing happens. The singing starts to become more unified. The beloved verses

are the same. I would bet that most congregations that gather on Christmas Eve will sing Silent Night. And how many congregations do you think will sing Joy to the World this December? And so, this Advent, the sermons will also be filled with song.

This morning we're opening with a hymn that isn't usually counted among the "Christ hymns" of the book of John and the letters to the Philippians and Colossians. In some ways, though, this is the inaugural Christ hymn. The first time someone is moved by the presence of God to open their mouth to profess that God has come to join the condition of humankind and what that will mean for the fate of the world. It is the spontaneous song that leaps out of Mary's mouth when she meets with her cousin, Elizabeth – two women experiencing miraculous and meaningful pregnancies. "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. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed."

That's the beautiful song that calls us to the season of Advent, the resounding song of "Yes!" Yes to God, yes to justice, yes to beloved community. You can picture Mary with her arms thrown open, like Julie Andrews in *The Sound of Music*, magnanimous, welcoming the God of the universe into her body—into her being—with joy. "The mighty one has done great things for me!" It's so good she's got to sing about it.

Now, there is a lot I don't understand about Mary. My experience of faith has been less like dancing in a field; maybe more like falling down a hillside. When I was about her age, I remember weeping with disappointment when heaven was described in a sermon as a clean, bright place where we would stand and sing forever at the throne of God. I cried. Because it sounded so, so boring. And I didn't want to go to hell, probably, but hell sounded like where all the fun, interesting people ended up. Where the agitators are. In my life of faith, I don't really feel at home in Advent, in the automatic, faith-filled song of "Yes!" If an angel had visited me when I was a teenager and told me I was going to experience a socially complicated and biologically impossible pregnancy, I do not think my answer would have been, "Let it be with me according to your word."

In fact, for those us of who are a little uncomfortable with the enthusiastic "Yes!" of Mary's song, we might want to look back several verses and encounter the silence of the "No" that comes right before it. Because the angels were very busy that year, making nighttime proclamations, and before Gabriel visited Mary, Gabriel came to an elderly priest named Zechariah to give him a very similar message. Luke chapter 1, verse 13: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son and you will name

him John.” The announcement of the conception of John who would be known as “The Baptizer.” But Zechariah – this is my guy – questions the word. *Really? I am too old. Elizabeth is too old!* (Luke 1:19-20) “The angel replied, ‘And I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God. I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until these things occur.’” And his mouth was shut until the day of his son’s naming.

If you can’t say something nice, then you’re not going to say anything at all.

But I wonder if this imposed silence of the doubter is not simply punitive; that Gabriel didn’t get little huffy and do a magic trick. I wonder if, instead, Gabriel knew which message they would deliver next. And that this little girl, with the world heaped upon her shoulders, would seek comfort and safety and encouragement at the home of her older, wiser, well-respected cousin, Elizabeth. Because Mary, of course, was a terrible choice for the mother of God. She had no money, she had no husband. She had no social status or control, she was a teenage girl. It’s 2021 and teenage girls are probably still the weakest members of our society. They get taken advantage of, pushed around, lied to. We were taken advantage of, weren’t we? We were told we couldn’t do things.

Think about how vulnerable we were, at 13, 14. Multiply that lack-of-power by two thousand years, Mary was a nobody. And can you imagine if Zechariah, though he was surely a decent and good man, had been allowed to sow that doubt into the heart of someone so much weaker? To let his own fear spill over onto someone who needed his protection?

No. Not this time.

When Mary runs into her cousin's home, when she is taken into her cousin's arms, laughing about little John jumping with joy in-utero, they are uninterrupted by the barbs of a fearful unbelief. She gets to sing her whole song without anyone jumping in with all the reasons why she's wrong. Why she's stupid. Why this whole thing doesn't make any sense.

There's a lot I don't understand about Mary. But I actually think Mary knew her own mind quite well. She knew who she was. And why she would be called blessed, through all generations. It's a miracle because this is the place, the time, the woman, to whom the Messiah would definitely NOT come. She can't even get a room at the inn. And yet, this is precisely where the birth of Jesus CAN happen. Blessed is Mary because she is the divine benchmark of what we must be to carry Christ:

His mercy is for those who fear him, or, put another way, his mercy is for those who know he is greater than all other fears.

He lifts those who have been brought low.

He fills those who are hungry.

He is faithful to the ones who are servants at heart.

She is announcing a new world order. Wherein a teenage girl carries the God of the universe while the life-long priest sits in the corner and is forced to listen.

It is a challenging word for those of us who have worked to earn a place in this world; that the space in our lives that is of use to Jesus is going to be where we are most empty. Most lowly. Where we are hungry.

Wherever we are not too full of ourselves. This is the first song of Advent. That Christ comes to us before we are worthy. That we often don't even know what worthiness looks like. And that the angel of the Lord runs before us, working to protect us in our vulnerability if we can manage an even half-way enthusiastic "Yes."

Zechariah can't speak for about nine months. Eight days after the birth of his son, his community gathers for the circumcision and naming of the baby. They give Zechariah a tablet and ask him to write down the name, you see, they expect him to write "Zechariah" – to name his firstborn after himself. But just as the angel told him that the baby would be called John, Zechariah writes, "His name is John." Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue freed and he began to speak, praising

God. Scripture tells us that this really freaked everybody out, that Zechariah and his family became objects of gossip and fear. He was no longer the respectable, well-thought-of, pious man that he had been. His only child would become a wandering locust-eater, his legacy has been upended. And in that space. Where his reputation had been. Where his pride and piety had shaped his identity, it says, he was filled with the Holy Spirit and he sees it, like a vista, he sees now the world that Mary was singing about in his kitchen months before and he lifts his voice and sings a song of his own: “By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

*In the name of the Father who moves beyond us, the Son who dwells among us, and the Holy Spirit who is asking to fill the spaces within us, Amen.*