



BIBLE STUDIES THAT WORK

Advent 4 (C)

December 19, 2021

RCL: Micah 5:2-5a; Canticle 15 (or 3) or Psalm 80:1-7; Hebrews 10:5-10; Luke 1:39-45, (46-55)

During Advent and Christmas, we will be using study prompts and other activities tied to the sermon for the week. Read the sermon aloud and follow-up with spoken responses to the two questions at the end. Find our full sermon compilation for individual, small group, or congregational use, *Sermons for Advent and Christmas 2021* at www.sermonsthatwork.org.

The Hope-Song

by the Rev. Phil Hooper

The Rev. Pauli Murray once wrote that “hope is a song in a weary throat,” and amid this hopeful season, amid this weary age, we would do well to consider what such a song sounds like. It’s easy to miss sometimes, the hope-song, because it doesn’t always sound the way we might expect. We are too easily distracted by the proud aria or the ironic riff to listen for the soft, tremulous music that hope makes.

Hope is the song of empty karaoke bars, of late nights and of last dances, of a husky voice crying out a melody to defy the encroaching night. It is the song one sings under the breath, an insistent memory, perhaps, or a reassurance on the lonely walk home. It is the warbling note that has no obvious splendor other than its defiant insistence to be heard. The hope-song is not elegant, but it is faithful. It is honest. It is the song one offers up when the song is all that’s left to offer.

Consider this music, then, as we travel with Mary to Elizabeth’s house. Forget for a moment the lush choral arrangements of the *Magnificat*. Don’t be fooled by the prophetic boldness of the words alone. Remember that there is a fearful precariousness to her position. She is a young woman walking uphill in every sense of the word, seeking the comfort of a familiar face when everything else has suddenly become so very unfamiliar. We might wonder: did Mary sing to herself on the dusty road to the hill country? Was it a song that her own parents once taught her that she practiced on parched lips? Or did she call it up from somewhere deeper within, from the Spirit-infused cells of her very depths, determined to give voice to what was true, even when her life seemed to be caught in uncertainty?

Regardless, she sings, and it is indeed hope in a weary throat, reverberating into eternity: “My soul magnifies the Lord.”

Like any hope-song, there is defiance here, along with the joy and the fear. Yes, Mary says, yes, *my* soul, *my* very self magnifies the inexpressible holy name of God. The soul that belongs to this body in all its frailty and in all its fecundity—this is a place where God is revealed. Obscure, vulnerable, enmeshed in the tragic

history of my people—I may be all of those things, but God is disclosed in them, not despite them, and God has chosen to take part in this world through me.

And so, I will sing!

I will sing though I am weary, though I am frightened, because in the singing I place myself within a story, not just a circumstance. I sing a song of victory, not of victimhood. I am a teller of hard truths and I am the bearer of hard hope, the type that survives—it is my people's hope, and my own.

Do we sing a new reality into being, or do we sing to pierce the veil of delusions, to uncover what is already true? The Kingdom is already, and it is not yet, but either way, Mary knows what must be sung, both because she carries the King within her womb, and because she is herself the Queen—a wisdom-figure, worthy in her own deep humanity, as each of us is, to discover and proclaim the hidden, unfolding power of God. Her song belongs to her ancestors, and it belongs to the child she will nurture. It belongs to all of us. It is ancient, and it is new. It is forever.

And thanks be to God for that, because we need hope-songs now, just as desperately as Mary did then. We need to be reminded of the dream that is encased in the tender core of humanity—the dream that God has placed therein, the dream that God invites us to bear into the world, the dream which refuses to be dispelled even by centuries of disappointment and degradation.

And it is especially important for us to remember, in the cacophonous holiday season, that the song that tells of this dream is not always the loudest or the most popular. It is, instead, the one borne of deep, soul-stirring wisdom. The one that, when you hear it—even when the throat is dry and the voice is garbled by tears—still the melody is recognizable because we have been singing it forever.

His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.

He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly.

He has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.

But what do we do with this song of Mary's? How do we make it truly our own in a new and urgent time? Do we put it on a t-shirt or a bumper sticker? Do we write a few more books about it? Host a conference to assess the meaning of the words? Arrange it into a new musical setting?

We could. We do. We protect ourselves, sometimes, by turning Mary's song into an ornament when, in truth, it demands everything we have.

Because that's the thing about the hope-song: you don't really know it, you can't really claim it until you yourself have sung it with a weary throat. You can't grasp the words until life has grasped at you, until you have been forced to walk up a few hills of your own, whether by choice or chance. And so, if we really want to sing the song, if we really want to mean it, we must first ask ourselves how attuned we are to the precarity of our lives and those of our neighbors. We must examine how vulnerable we are, and how open we have been to the risk of Jesus' invitation to follow him, on the path first trod by his mother.

And in our self-examination, we might find that we have indeed been brought down low by life, that we are hungry for good things, and that this song of hope will lift us up if we have the courage to trust in its promise and lend our voices to its chorus. For the weary among us, the challenge is to show the world that we are more than our present despair.

Or it may be, for many of us, that we find ourselves to be the ones already in high, comfortable places, the ones who have never relied so much on hope as we have referred to it, because we are ensconced in other, richer melodies—the ones that lull rather than vivify. If so, it is time for us to wake up. It is time for us to come back down to earth and stand on holy ground. Because it is only from there, where Christ abides, that we can truly begin to live in the way God dreams we might.

Either way, Mary’s voice is calling out to you. So, whoever you are, wherever you find yourself, follow the sound of the hope-song. Let it guide you into the place of encounter with your most unencumbered self, and into relationship with the Holy One who calls you onward.

Mary has shown us the way, she has shown us the words, and she has shown us that while hope may be well-acquainted with weariness, it points beyond it, too, toward the place and time when a new song will be born—one of hope fulfilled, of rejoicing, and of rest. We are still learning how to sing that new song, but it is coming. And it is now here.

The Rev. Phil Hooper was ordained to the priesthood in 2019 and currently serves as Curate at Trinity Episcopal Church in Fort Wayne, Indiana. A native of the west coast and a graduate of Church Divinity School of the Pacific (M.Div., 2019), he is passionate about spiritual formation, contemplative prayer, and the ways that these things impact our discipleship. Outside of church, you will likely find him in a local bookshop or on a road trip exploring the Midwest. His sermons and other writings are available at www.byanotherroad.com.

1. Use the space below to write out the Magnificat in your own handwriting. You can find versions in both the Book of Common Prayer (p. 65 or 119) and in the Bible (Luke 1:46-55).

2. What do you think the Rev. Pauli Murray meant when she wrote, “Hope is a song in a weary throat”? Learn more about the story of this Episcopal saint and her joy. Where do you see similarities between her life and Mary’s song?