



**“VOICE LESSONS”**  
**SCRIPTURE: ISAIAH 35: 4-7a ; ACTS 16: 19-34**  
**GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC**  
**September 9, 2018**

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**Acts 16:19-34**

MMS: Acts tells the story of Jesus followers journeying, seeking connection, finding ways to share the good news.

SGB: In chapter 16 alone we meet Timothy and Lydia (the woman with the purple cloth)

RC: And an enslaved girl who made her enslavers a lot of money because she had the spirit of divination and she could tell fortunes.

MMS: She shouted at Paul and the Jesus followers: “These men are slaves of the God most high.”

SGB: Paul was annoyed and ordered the spirit that was in her...

RC: “I order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her at once.”

MMS: and that’s where we meet our forebears in the faith in our reading today--right after the enslavers of that young girl realize they just lost their money making scheme.

RC: But when her owners saw that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the authorities. They said to the magistrates, “These men are disturbing our city; they are Jews and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe.”

SGB: The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates had them stripped of their clothing and ordered them to be beaten with rods. After they had given them a severe flogging, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely.

MMS: Following the magistrates instructions, the jailer put Paul and Silas in the innermost cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.

SGB: About midnight they were praying

MMS: And singing hymns to God

RC: And the prisoners were listening to them.

MMS: Suddenly there was an earthquake!

SBG: So violent that the foundations of the prison were shaken.

RC: And immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's chains were unfastened.

MMS: When the jailer woke up and saw the prison doors wide open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, since he supposed that the prisoners had escaped.

RC: But Paul shouted in a loud voice, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here."

MMS: The jailer called for lights, and rushing in, he fell down trembling before Paul and Silas.

SGB: The jailer brought Paul and Silas outside and said,

MMS: "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"

RC: "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household."

SGB: They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house.

MMS: At the same hour of the night the jailer took Paul and Silas and washed their wounds

RC: And he and his entire family were baptized without delay.

SGB: The jailer brought Paul and Silas up into the house and set food before them; and he and his entire household rejoiced that he had become a believer in God.

MMS: The Word of the LORD

Congregation: **Thanks be to God**

Choir sings anthem "How Can I Keep From Singing?"

## **Introduction**

*(JJ ends anthem and puts up the stand. MMS and SGB go towards the piano, RC stops at the pulpit and starts talking before MMS and SGB get to the piano).*

RC: Four score and seven years ago our forefathers...

MMS: Richard!

RC: What? (irritated)

MMS: What are you doing?

RC: You all said we needed to come up with something powerful to start off this new fall season--I thought some Abraham Lincoln might be exciting.

SGB: You can't be serious!

RC: I just remember last year, I had barely gotten here, and you all made me sing in the Palooza.

MMS and SGB: Oh yeah! That's right, "Oh sing to the LORD, O sing God a new song, O sing to the LORD, O sing to the LORD."

RC: I'm sensing that my diversion isn't working. Am I going to have to sing again?

JJ: *(holding an open hymnal and looking at Richard)* Um . . . Maybe!

MMS: Our theme this fall IS based on a hymn called, "How can I keep from singing."

RC: It sounds like I have to sing a whole hymn. That's too much!

SGB: Don't worry Richard, we'll help you!

MMS: We need your voice in the song!

JJ: Richard, take a deep breath. . . let's not try to tackle the whole song. . .why don't you just start off with the first line . . .

*(MMS and SGB sit down; RC goes in front of piano)*

**RRC:** My life flows on in endless song, above Earth's lamentation.

I am stuck in a memory, of standing right here, last year, on Fall kick-off Sunday. It's vivid in my mind: my first dialogue sermon. I was excited and so nervous, searching for my voice, learning how to connect with you. It feels like it was yesterday, like it was a dream I had last night. Can you believe it's been a year? There's comfort in the familiarity of the church year that cycles; things end and they return. Already again, fall kick-off. September will blow past us. Soon we will say, "The fall leaves are so beautiful." Soon so many of us will not be ready for Advent. These movements come and go. We find ourselves right back where we were.

But look around the sanctuary (pause). I realize, things are not as familiar as they seem. Thirty-one new members have joined the church since last Fall kick-off. Four babies born. Three young adults moved out of state. One staff member moved on and two have come. We've had six funerals since last September. There are people, who have been here for decades, who will not be with us this year. These cycles of birth and death, people joining, people leaving. We're not the same Grace Covenant that we were a year ago.

Your stories are behind these numbers, far more stories than we can tally. Long nights, weighing life decisions. Moments stepping out in faith. Hours and hours of care for others, in all the transitions of life. And more subtly, every day, examinations of our Christian lives, in an age of anxiety, asking who we are, and who we are called to become.

The church year repeats, and it does so in song, in prayer, in thoughtfulness, in love and care, because throughout the year, you and I carry our weights, our worries, our losses into this space. "My life flows on in endless song, above earth's lamentation." I know, I'm not a strong singer. But you are here. This place is here. This mighty Spirit that holds us together is here. And it all helps me carry the tune of praise; it all reminds me of the love God, in every season of life, even in those moments when my voice wants to break.

*(MMS and SGB stand up and go to piano after RC says "it all helps me carry")*

All sing: *"My life flows on in endless song, above earth's lamentation."*

## **Section 2**

SGB: I love that verse, but you know, it doesn't feel finished.

JJ: That's because musically it ends on the dominant chord, and needs to be resolved.

SGB: ...Well, I knew that....

RC: But things aren't always resolved. Take Paul and Silas. They were thrown into prison without any promise about what the future would hold. There's still tension there.

SGB: They were prisoners. And the thick prison walls were meant to muffle their voices and cripple their spirits, but somehow it didn't.

RC: Their song was more powerful than chains or jail cells. They sang, in the midst of it all!

JJ: Above Earth's lamentations.

*(MMS and RC sit down; SGB moves up in front of piano)*

**SGB:** *I hear the clear, though far off hymn, that hails a new creation.*

My Grandmother Eloise never sang.

I don't know if she could carry a tune or hit a high C

I don't know if she could sing harmony or if she knew any songs by heart.

She never sang one note.

This never really phased me until one day when my family was sitting together crooning old Frank Sinatra tunes. "Why aren't you singing with us?" I asked "I know you know these songs."

She looked at me and said sternly, "When I was in the first grade, my choir teacher heard my voice and told me to lip sync. I haven't sung ever since."

I have always been haunted by this.

One person's words had silenced an entire voice for eighty-eight years.

My grandmother was a woman with *much* to say, *much* to sing about.

She could bridge divides, lift people up.

An unassuming revolutionary, this wife of a World War 2 vet would open her door to anti-war protestors seeking refuge for the night.

An inclusive love, when my father brought home his Puerto Rican *Shikha* (non-Jewish) girlfriend, I am told she welcomed my mother in with open arms.

A true ecumenical soul, in preparation for her own funeral, she asked that the rabbi be sure to include her two favorite songs: Amazing Grace and Ave Maria.

There were so many songs within her - radical, righteous melodies - lyrics of hope, of struggle, resistance, delight. I would have loved for her to put her story to music - to belt with the same powerful energy in which she lived her life. To be free to express herself in absolutely every way.

So often in community, there are voices that are given space and support to sing loudly, and there are voices that get lost in the mix - voices that are told to hush up, keep silent. Here in THIS community, here in this season, we are challenged to center those voices that have long been told to lip sync.

We are here to offer each other accompaniment - a listening ear willing to honor our unique songs, a companion to harmonize with when the road is unsteady, and a family to remind us that we can trust in a God who frees us from our chains and invites us to sing boldly and without ceasing.

*(MMS and RC stand up and move to piano after SGB says "unsteady")*

All sing: *"I hear the clear, though far-off hymn, that hails a new creation."*

### **Section 3**

RC: Paul and Silas had no idea what their future would hold and they sang.

MMS: They sang songs they knew by heart--songs they learned in community.

*(MMS, SGB, RC, and JJ walk in front of piano and speak to congregation)*

JJ: Exactly! They had a shared repertoire of songs, not from a hymnal and not from iTunes. They grew up going to Temple. They internalized their faith just like our children do when they grow up coming to worship.

SGB: Songs we know by heart are immensely powerful. They sustain and inspire us during life's most painful and important challenges.

RC: "Lift Every Voice and Sing," during the Civil Rights Movement.

MMS: Psalms sung by jailed French Huguenots

JJ: Luther's "A Mighty Fortress" in the turmoil of the Reformation

MMS: "Wade in the Water" on the underground railroad.

RC: God's people bearing witness to the hope that faith brings.

MMS: Bearing witness to God's power to redeem. The jailer's world was tangled up with a system that held him captive to the powers and principalities.

RC: But when his world fell apart, and he couldn't see a way through--it was the community that sang together that welcomed him and gave him a new story of who he was and who he could be.

SGB: And it is faith that sustains us when life takes an unexpected turn.

*(JJ moves forward, MMS, RC, and SGB go sit down)*

*JJ: No storm can shake my inmost calm, while to that Rock I'm clinging*

If there's one thing I've learned about storms living here in mountains of Western North Carolina - It's that they can come up quickly with little or no warning.

I've learned that same lesson in life.

The doctor spoke a word we'd never heard before: "Amyloidosis", . "Primary Systemic Amyloidosis." Seven months of declining health, visits to specialist after specialist: Neurologists, GI, Infectious disease. . . and no answers. A 38 year old man who had been in perfect health; David was losing weight, suffering fatigue, and battling a host of physical issues which were rapidly diminishing his quality of life. We'd ruled out cancer, HIV, and host of other horrible diseases and still no answer --Then, at the MAYO Clinic on the Tuesday before Thanksgiving, 2008 we learned about this rare, fatal disease. An unexpected storm: Two lives with a decade of hopes and dreams derailed in a single moment.

In the time we had left my partner David and I wrestled with a lot of life's issues: The words of Flannery O'Connor reminded us that Illness before death is one of God's good

graces. A mercy not afforded to all. One of those graces was the opportunity to support each other as we faced the inevitable through our shared faith. We laughed and we cried during the weeks that followed. Fears and joys -- We reminisced about the good times and bad. We prayed . . . and we sang.

Our God, Our Help in Ages Past,  
Our Hope for years to come;  
Our shelter from the stormy blast  
And our eternal home.

Bedside. Six stanza. No hymnal. From the heart.

Eventually, frail and weak--David could no longer walk: A shadow of his former self, the man I loved, who at one time had run half-marathons,-- in a little more than 9 months from his first symptoms, was now 100 lbs lighter, wasting away, bed-ridden, blind, and in diapers. The disease had taken everything away from him . . . everything that is, except his faith and his ability to sing.

In the Lord I'll be ever Thankful  
In the Lord, I will rejoice  
Look to God, Do not be afraid,  
Lift up your voices; the Lord is near,  
Lift up your voices; the Lord is near.

Faced with death: David sang - I was privileged to be there to sing alongside him. David bore witness to that "inmost calm." In the face of illness and death I saw first-hand how a person of deep faith responds to the storm. A reservoir of song: An abiding hope: A Rock and a refuge -- unshakeable. All with the assurance that:

No storm can shake my inmost calm, while to that Rock I'm clinging.

*(SGB, RC, and MMS get up and move to piano; JJ move to piano)*

All sing: *No storm can shake my inmost calm, while to that rock I'm clinging.*

#### **Section 4**

*(Everyone at the piano)*

MMS: Songs can be instruments of freedom and healing. Some of the most holy moments in my life as a pastor have been singing to people who are making their transition into death.



SGB: Voices joined together for justice can change the course of history. Voices joined together in compassion can be a source of deep healing.

RC: And singing with children can teach them about our faith and love in ways that spoken words never can.

JJ: This hymn we're learning by heart was written in 1869, when our country was desperately in need of justice and healing. The Civil War had ended, and countless families and lives were deeply wounded.

RC: The war our country fought against itself had the most US casualties of any war.

MMS: And the wounds still haven't healed.

RC: The music of our faith can fill us with feelings of strength and resolve in life's most challenging moments.

*(RC and SGB sit down; MMS moves forward; JJ stays at the piano)*

*MMS: Since Christ is Lord of heaven and earth, how can I keep from singing.*

Apparently after midnight at Tampa General Hospital, they lock the front doors. That is information John and I don't have--having only lived in Tampa for going on 7 weeks.

So my labor kicks into a different gear behind the hospital where the garbage dumpsters circle the smoking area for employees. A lone hospital worker is having her 4:30am smoke when she hears me having a contraction--and probably sees a look of panic on John's face. I hear her voice speak sternly to John, "What are you doing back here with her?! She needs to be upstairs. She's getting ready to have a baby."

The next thing I know we are on a freight elevator lurching up to the maternity ward.

The corridor is dark, not welcoming. Things aren't as we had planned they would be back in Chicago with a doctor I loved and a community to support us. Instead I am in this unfamiliar place.

John is giving me a pep talk--you know, like an NFL coach would: "You've got this Marcia. You're showing people how this is done! Let's do this!"

I get a momentary flash that everything could go wrong, that I might not be able to do it. That this is too much, too hard, that something isn't right, that I don't have what I need.

We've all been through births--some of us only our own, which we have no conscious memory of--but all of us have been in that thin space, between life and death--that place of transition where things could go either way.

I lean over with the next contraction and a deep power wells up from inside me--without thinking or deciding to, I sing-- "When I walk through the shades of death, thy presence is my stay. One word of your supporting breath, drives all my fears away."

I feel no fear. I feel no fatigue. I feel things changing, transforming, emerging.

And Mary Elizabeth is born. I see a whole new person before me--someone fresh to the world!

Grace Covenant, we sing because we trust the new thing that God is doing in and through us. We sing because God has promised to provide for us. We sing because God is God--because Christ shows us the power of being brave in thin spaces, in spaces of tension, in spaces where things could go either way.

And our singing is somehow a messenger, a carrier, of God's power to transform the world, to give birth to something new.

*(SGB, RC, JJ come to the front when MMS says "And our singing is somehow...")*

*All sing: Since Christ is Lord of heaven and earth, how can I keep from singing.*

### **Banter Section 5 Conclusion--Marcia**

MMS: The music of our faith empowers us to be more than we are--it strengthens our relationships with each other, our connections to our ancestors, and our capacity to trust the mysteries of our very existence.

SGB: Singing freedom songs, singing healing songs isn't just about our faith right now, these songs are about our faith in what we are becoming.

JJ: This is a singing congregation and this is a growing and transforming congregation.

MMS: The fact that we come together on a regular basis and sing with such gusto means God is up to something.

*(JJ move down to floor)* JJ: When we live into the confidence of this hymn. How can we keep from singing?

*(MMS move down to floor)* MMS: When we live into the mystery of God with us. How can we keep from singing?

*(RC move down to floor)* RC: When we live into the beauty of life unfolding. How can we keep from singing?

*(SGB move down to floor)* SGB: When we live into who God created us to be. How can we keep from singing?

*(RC moves to left of pews)* RC: My life flows on in endless song, above earth's lamentation.

*(SGB moves to right of pews)* SGB: I hear the clear, though far off hymn, that hails a new creation.

*(JJ moves to side and then behind font)* JJ: No storm can shake my inmost calm, while to that Rock I'm clinging

*(MMS moves down the center aisle)* MMS: Since Christ is Lord of heaven and earth, how can I keep from singing.

*(JJ motions for congregation to stand. All sing STANZA ONE of "How Can I Keep From Singing")*

**My life flows on in endless song, above earth's lamentation.**

**I hear the clear, though far off hymn, that hails a new creation.**

**No storm can shake my inmost calm, while to that Rock I'm clinging**

**If Christ is Lord of heaven and earth, how can I keep from singing.**