

2017 Susquehanna Annual Conference
Service of Commissioning and Ordination Sermon (Manuscript)

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Let the word of Christ[g] dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. - Colossians 3:16

Exodus 15:19-24The Message (MSG)

19 *Yes, Pharaoh's horses and chariots and riders went into the sea and God turned the waters back on them; but the Israelites walked on dry land right through the middle of the sea.*

20-21 *Miriam the prophetess, Aaron's sister, took a tambourine, and all the women followed her with tambourines, dancing. Miriam led them in singing, Sing to God— what a victory! He pitched horse and rider into the sea!*

This is such an exciting day. For some of you I know it may have seemed as if this day would never come. But here we are. You are about to be ordained elder in the United Methodist Church. With the laying on of hands, you are about to become a part of the apostolic history of the holy catholic - little c - Church. You are being grafted into the line of Peter and Paul - set apart for a particular work in the church. This is such an exciting day. It almost feels as if it is a wedding. Your friends and family are here. You have on a special gown. You've walked down the aisle. You have some sponsors who have presented you to the church. In a few moments you are going to take a vow, you are going to agree to a covenant. It is almost like a wedding. It is so exciting.

This is what I beg of you. Don't ever let this excitement end. There will be days in your ministry that you will be angry or frustrated. On those days, remember this day, and don't let this excitement end. There will be days that you will be puzzled or stupified. I know stupified is not a word, but there will be days that there won't be any words - or at least any Holy words that will describe what you are going through. On those days, remember this day and don't let

this excitement end. There will be days that you will question the church or question your call or even question God. On those days remember this day and don't let this excitement end.

When ministry starts to lose its excitement recall the miracles that God performed to get you where you are today and sing. This is what the people of God have done for millennia. Charles Wesley wrote a song about it. Oh for a thousand tongues to sing my great redeemer's praise. The glories of my God and king, the triumphs of his grace.

African's working as slaves in the fields of this country wrote a song about it. I'm gonna sing when the Spirit says sing, I'm gonna sing when the Spirit says sing. I'm gonna sing when the Spirit says sing, and obey the Spirit of the Lord.

P. P. Bliss wrote a song about it. Sing them over again to me, wonderful words of life; let me more of their beauty see, wonderful words of life; words of life and beauty, teach me faith and duty: beautiful words, wonderful words, wonderful words of life.

Fanny Crosby wrote a song about it. This is my story, this is my song; I'm praising my savior, all the day long.

Moses' sister Miriam wrote a song about it. Biblical scholars tell us it is the oldest recorded Israelite hymn. We don't know the tune, but we know the words.

Sing to God—

what a victory!

He pitched horse and rider

into the sea!

I can imagine that every time the Israelites sang this song they remembered all that God had done for them to deliver them from the hands of pharaoh. And I can imagine that as they remembered they got just as excited as they were that day when as they were standing on dry land they looked back and saw the greatest army in the world being swallowed up in the sea and they knew their deliverance was at hand. So remember the miracles that got you to this day. And Don't stop singing. I need you to keep singing. The church needs you to keep singing. The world needs you to keep singing.

Remember the miracles that got you to this day. Remember the times you didn't know how that paper was going to get written, but it got written. Remember the moment you

realized you had no idea what the Board of Ordained Ministry was asking you, yet somehow an answer came to your mind. Remember the times God took the tired old sermon or bible study you had prepared and made something beautiful of it. Remember the time God held your tongue in the committee meeting. Remember the grandmother or grandfather or pastor or friend who prayed for you. Remember the phone call or text message or card you got from someone telling you you had made a difference in their lives. Remember the moment you realized you were called to this sacred task. Remember the miracles that got you to this day and don't stop singing.

I'm not asking you to keep singing just so we can hear a lot of people singing. I am asking you to keep singing because the kingdom of God depends on it. As you stay in a spirit of excitement about this day and your ordination, as you sing, you will make yourself available for God to do even more through you and with you. While God can and does use grumpy pastors and deacons to build God's kingdom, God prefers to work with willing, cheerful spirits. If you keep on singing, I guarantee you, you cannot even think or imagine today what God will have done through you and with you by the end of your career. No eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him.

The laying on of hands is a sign act that the power given to Peter, the power given to Paul, has now, by the grace of God, been given to you to do the work of ministry in the church. It is, by the way, the same power that God gave to Moses when through the power of the Holy Spirit Moses led the people to the Promised Land. It was that power about which Miriam sang, that is available to you. You have access to the same power that parted the Red Sea. Take it. Remember it. Keep singing about it so that you won't forget. Keep singing so that your spirit will remain available to God's spirit to do great miracles.

Just as the Hebrew people were in bondage, there are people in this world who are trapped in bondage - in bondage to their own sin, in bondage to chemicals, or destructive thought patterns or spending habits. There are people in this world who are in bondage to

systems of poverty and racism and sexism. There are people in this world who are in bondage to their phobias - xenophobia, homophobia. There are systems and governments and powers that are in bondage to their own inertia. There are churches who are trapped in bondage - in bondage to their own history or way of doing things, in bondage to their buildings, bondage to their fear of the future, bondage to their own destructive patterns of being in life together. We have fellow clergy who are trapped in bondage - bondage to their cynicism of the world or frustration with the church, bondage to their way of doing things, bondage to their fear of the future. There are people all around us who are in bondage and we need you to keep singing so that your spirits will continually be available to be used by the Holy Spirit. We need you to be open to look and see what God has put in your hands to use and to use whatever those things are to set God's people free. We need you to keep singing.

When you look back over the life of John Wesley, if there is anybody who should have stopped singing it was John Wesley. Think about the way he was treated by his beloved church, the Church of England. Think about the failures he had in ministry, particularly here in the new world; think about the crises of faith he had when as an Anglican priest he wasn't sure if he himself had been saved. If anybody had the right to stop singing, it was John Wesley. And yet he kept singing. In fact, John Wesley was big on singing. He wrote 7 rules about singing. Rule #3 Sing all. See that you join with the congregation as frequently as you can. Let not a slight degree of weakness or weariness hinder you. If it is a cross to you, take it up, and you will find it a blessing.

Rule #7 Above all sing spiritually. Have an eye to God in every word you sing. Aim at pleasing him more than yourself, or any other creature. In order to do this attend strictly to the sense of what you sing, and see that your heart is not carried away with the sound, but offered to God continually; so shall your singing be such as the Lord will approve here, and reward you when he cometh in the clouds of heaven.

A couple of weeks ago I was in England on a John Wesley pilgrimage with the ordinands from Western Pennsylvania Annual Conference. We visited some of the sights that were

significant in the life of John Wesley and the Methodist movement. One of the sights we visited was the New Room in Bristol. The New Room is the site of the chapel that was built on the location where John Wesley used to preach out of doors because all of the Anglican pulpits were closed to him. The room was a place for teaching and preaching. It was called the New Room because so many people had gathered when John Wesley was preaching in the original structure that one day the floor gave way. And without missing a beat, Wesley said, "I guess we need a new room."

Rev. Rodger Ducker, who ironically is an Anglican priest serving as the Manager of the New Room, invited me to serve communion at their afternoon community communion service which they have every Friday. As I stood behind the altar that in the 1700's John Wesley stood behind, I felt connected to him. As I was consecrating the elements, I had the sense that John was singing O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing. It was because John Wesley who stayed excited about ministry through his singing that I as a bishop of the United Methodist Church was able to stand behind the altar where he once stood. John fought for my right as a person of African descent to be free - literally.

This work of ordained ministry is not easy. There will be times after you and God have been on the mountain top together that when you come down from the mountain the people will be in chaos. Don't stop singing. There will be times that it will be clear that God has provided for the people and yet they will murmur and complain about what they don't have. Don't you get caught up in a spirit of complaining. Don't stop singing.

Whenever I have the pleasure of officiating over a wedding service of worship, I take time to talk with the attendants and the members of the congregation that has gathered for the wedding. By standing at the altar with the couple or by being in the congregation, I tell the people that they are pledging to do all they can to help the couple continue to make the choice to stay in love with each other. Your attendance here means you are willing to do all you can to

make sure these ordinands keep singing. And by your attendance here today, you are agreeing to work as one to make that happen. If you have to, be Miriam, grab a tambourine and invite these ordinands to join you in song. Remind them of the miracles that God has done for and through them. And sing together. We are better together. John Wesley rule #5 Sing modestly. Do not bawl, so as to be heard above or distinct from the rest of the congregation, that you may not destroy the harmony; but strive to unite your voices together, so as to make one clear melodious sound.

We've got a lot of days ahead of us to sing.

When we've been there ten thousand years, bright shining as the sun, we've no less days to sing God's praise than when we first begun.