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Luke 1:46-55

FILLED WITH GOOD THINGS

'Tis the season for being filled with good things. Like cookies. Lots of tasty cookies are consumed during this holiday season. I was looking forward to eating a few such tasty cookies last Saturday when I went to our church's annual holiday cookie sale. I got my box, made my selections of delicious looking cookies, and paid my \$10 for the pound. When I got home I put the box in the kitchen and then rounded up the family to go buy our Christmas tree, and off we went. But when we got home with the tree in tow, I saw the box of cookies lying on the kitchen floor. I picked it up. It was completely empty! And that was when I realized that the dog was nowhere to be seen. She was hiding in shame, her belly filled with good things alright--*our* good things!

There are many ways in which our congregation is filled with good things--and not just cookies. Each Sunday we are filled with an abundance of good things: beautiful music that helps us feel the presence of God, the community of others gathered in worship, the prayers we offer for one another and our world, the Word of God that fills our lives with purpose and meaning. These fill us with good things. In a short while we will be filled with good food downstairs at our Christmas dinner and the fellowship of one another as we break bread together.

This week I received a Christmas card from a former member who I hadn't heard from in many years. Rose Hoffman and her family worshipped with us for a few years before they moved away. But this week she sent a Christmas card to me and the congregation. And she began by stating, "Just wanted to wish you, your family, and the congregation a wonderful Christmas. Your church was something special. We have never found a church with the special

feeling you gave to everybody that enters your door. Every Christmas your church always comes up in conversation with fond memories. Thanks for being so special."

I think about Rose and her family and many others who have been filled with good things here in our church: university students far from their homes, church members in their times of need, visitors whose needs we have tried to meet, people across the globe who we have helped with our donations. We are far from perfect, but where we have been able to be servants of God in filling others with good things, we have reason to rejoice.

Filling people with good things is an issue that arises in Mary's famous song called the Magnificat. Mary has just learned that she is going to become pregnant with Jesus. Although being an unwed mother in her society would have been personally disastrous for Mary, she nevertheless sings a song of praise for what God will accomplish through the birth of her child. And among God's many wondrous deeds, Mary proclaims that God "has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty." Mary was not speaking about hunger in an abstract way, the way many of us here today might. Mary understood real physical hunger. She and most of the people of her community were extremely poor. Having enough food was a constant struggle and a daily concern. Hunger is still a reality for people all across the globe and right here in our own community. Twenty million people in Yemen, that is 70 percent of the population, are hungry and in need of food. It is a huge humanitarian crisis. Hunger exists close by as well. That is why our church operates a food pantry, so that people in our community might be filled with good things. It is why we raise money this season for Puerto Rico, so among other things, the local Presbyterian church in Lares can continue to help feed hungry people in that community.

Viola Davis is an Oscar winning actress famous for her roles in movies like *The Help*, and *Fences*, and her television series, *How To Get Away with Murder*. As she has risen in celebrity status, Davis has also been open about her childhood growing up in extreme poverty. Most of the time there was no food in her house and the only meal she got was a school lunch. Davis recalls, "When I say we had nothing, I mean zero. I remember one time a friend came over to the house and she opened the refrigerator. There was nothing in it. She said, 'Are you guys moving?'" Hunger was a constant enemy. Davis reflects, "I did everything to get food. I have stolen for food. I have jumped in huge garbage bins with maggots for food. I have befriended people in the neighborhood who I knew had mothers who cooked three meals a day for food, and I sacrificed a childhood for food and grew up in immense shame."

Mary sings about a God who cares deeply about these kinds of people--people with empty bellies. She proclaims that God's choice of her as the mother of the Christ is evidence that God is on the side of the poor. God cares about justice and, as our Advent song proclaims, "the world is about to turn." The coming of Christ calls us all to pay attention and take action for those who are hungry.

God's desire to satisfy the hungry does not, however, only address our physical hungers. For all of us are hungry in some way or another. All of us are hungry. And we seek all kinds of ways to satisfy our hungers. This season is also a time when we fill ourselves with a lot of empty calories. We eat too many cookies. We drink too many cocktails. We give gifts that aren't needed or wanted. We spend too much time in front of our digital screens. We occupy ourselves with too much activity that doesn't bring meaning or joy. All of which offer us empty calories that do not nourish us. We are trying to fill ourselves and our hungers and our appetites,

but we are reaching for the wrong food. Over-indulged in so many ways, we risk being sent away empty because we do not recognize the good things God is offering to us.

The birth we celebrate this season, the coming of Christ we anticipate, is the coming of the One who will fill our emptiness and our hungers with good things. Christmas is fundamentally about our God who sees our emptiness and desires to fill us with good things. In place of selfishness, greed, and apathy, through Christ, God fills us with compassion, generosity, and solidarity with one another. In place of bitterness and anger toward others who have wronged us, in place of self-loathing or shame for our own behaviors or choices, through Christ, God fills us with forgiveness for others and ourselves, freeing us to move forward into the future. Instead of hopelessness and despair, through Christ, God fills us with hope that with God all things are possible. The Christ whose birth we anticipate will lead us on a journey where we will be filled with good things--not always easy things, but always good things.

These are the gifts that God offers us this Christmas: not new laptop computers or Xbox games, or leather handbags or gold earrings, but hope and grace, love and compassion, generosity and solidarity. These are the gifts that come to us from Christ that fill us with good things.

What do you need God to fill you with this season? Is it hope at a time when all seems bleak and heavy? Or is it forgiveness for yourself or the ability to forgive another? Is it joy? Or is it a renewed passion for life, a passion you once had but seem to have lost? Is it love, knowing you are worthy of being loved, or the gift to be able to extend love? Is it generosity--a spirit of giving that does not come easily? Is it gratitude--the antidote to complaining and negativity? Of all the good things God fills us with, what gift do you most need this season?

You know, Mary didn't have a lot of good things taking place in her life at the time when the angel announces to her that she will become pregnant with Jesus. She lived in a harsh world of oppression and poverty and the news of her unwed pregnancy would have compounded her hardships. But what is interesting to notice is that in her song, Mary speaks about the wondrous things God will do through Jesus but she uses the *past* tense. God *has* filled the hungry with good things. So certain is Mary that God will do what is promised, that she proclaims it as an accomplished fact.

Now when you think about it, that takes quite a lot of imagination and faith to believe you *will be* filled with good things at a time when you remain empty. I wonder what we might learn from Mary about a kind of faith that enables us to rejoice ahead of time, even as we await the fulfillment of God's promises, a kind of faith that enables us to trust that God's promises can be counted upon.

Mary not only trusted in God's promises of good things to come, but through her pregnancy she agreed to let herself literally be filled with God's good thing on behalf of others. There are a lot of hungry people out there. There are a lot of hungry people in here. In the example of Mary, we are invited to be part of God's activity in this world of filling others with good things, joining with Mary in saying, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord."