



From the Pulpit: December 11, 2022

Third Sunday of Advent—Choral Music

The Reverend Dr. Katie Snipes Lancaster

Isaiah 9:6

In the Meantime, III: I Long for Always!

Praise God for the gift of music. Our scripture passage for today is brief, it's one verse long, and it is one you will know from every beloved Christmas Season.

Victor Hugo says, "Music expresses that which cannot be put into words and that which cannot remain silent."¹

*For unto us a child is born,
unto us a son is given:
and the government shall
be upon his shoulder:
and his name shall be called
Wonderful,
Counselor,
mighty God,
everlasting Father,
Prince of Peace.*

"So, here we are, amid a miracle, the impossible made possible, the speech of angels hanging in the air, the Incarnate-God alive within us."

In that way, the melody already performed the sermon today. The voice raised already preached the Prince of Peace. The familiar musicality already moved you that much closer to the divine. So, my work here is done, even before it begins.

One person put it this way: music hovers between spirit and matter... between thought and phenomena."²

Another says, "Music is well said to be the speech of angels: in fact, nothing among the utterances allowed to us is felt to be so divine...music leads us to the edge of the Infinite and lets us gaze into that."³

Music speaks the unspeakable, says the unsayable, and names the unnameable. There is something about melody rising up to the rafters that reaches a deeper place within us where our hearts swell, and our pulse races, and we are connected to the ineffable.

¹ Hugo, Victor Marie, *William Shakespeare*, 1865.

² Heine, Heinrich, *Letters on the French Stage*, 1929.

³ Carlyle, Thomas, 1899, p. 397, 1840, p. 99.

Another says, “Music is a continuous miracle that with every step accomplishes the impossible.”⁴

So, here we are, amid a miracle, the impossible made possible, the speech of angels hanging in the air, the incarnate-God alive within us.

The ancient One, the Christ child, long foretold, sings us toward the very edge of the Infinite, wrapping us in the ancient hope of the indwelling presence of our Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Music bears us toward the very edge of our longing: our longing for another way, another time, our longing for reconciliation or safety or thriving, our longing for this or that to be the way it was or the way it could be or the way it will be or might be. Music bears us toward every kind of hope, wistfully demanding that we stand in the already-not-yet of the kingdom of God. Music places us betwixt and between, waiting.

What I love about this piece Lisa Bond chose for us today is that, it unites us across so many centuries and so many cultures, and helps us to remember that, in every time and place we have been people, who long for God and who long for God’s way.

Especially on a day like today, in the season of Advent, when winter circles round and nostalgia hems us in, and our personal and collective struggles feel uniquely impossible, and we find ourselves again waiting.

Music transports us, moves us, carries us into the future, and lets us equally feel homesick for days past, even as we hold dear this very moment, here, exactly where we are. What I love about this piece Lisa Bond chose for us today is that, it unites us across so many centuries and so many cultures, and helps us to remember that, in every time and place we have been people, who long for God and who long for God’s way.

Today’s text is influenced by the most ancient promises from Isaiah on which we hang our Christmas hopes, six, seven, eight centuries before Christ. The people of Isaiah’s day had their own struggles—wars and rumors of wars, illness, infighting, injustice—their story can so easily be our story when we open our ears to it.

Then, we move centuries ahead, to the story of the Christ child himself, two thousand years ago, and there the text lingers,

telling us that familiar sacred story with word and melody.

⁴ Jankélévitch, Vladimir, 2003, p. 18.

Then, unexpectedly, we take a turn north. As Christianity meanders its way from Bethlehem to Rome to Germany and then to the Nordic lands of Northern Europe, this piece of music comes alive, in what was likely the Medieval Era, and then passed down generation to generation.

A few centuries after that, it was collected up into a book of Christmas carols by a priest in Finland who longed to log the songs of his own childhood and partnered with a publisher across the Baltic Sea in Sweden in order to catalog, and distribute, and preserve the melodies he held so dear.

But the journey did not end there. For years, the hymnal was held in the hands of Finnish Catholic school children, but as the Protestant Reformation swept across Europe it fell into disuse.

In the late 1800s a copy was unearthed by the British ambassador to Sweden who found it during his years of service and carried the hymnal home to London.

He handed it over to two friends: a scholar of hymnody and an expert in medieval melody, and they popularized these songs, this time in English and Latin taking a few artistic liberties along the way to bring us classics like *Good Christian Men Rejoice* and *Good King Wenceslas*,

melodies that now ring out in shopping malls and on radio stations every November and December.

The texture of this story lives almost invisibly among us, but somehow came to life across oceans and cultures and centuries we have never known.

“this piece of music reminds me that our own longing is shared across all these decades, centuries, millennia, all of us standing between what is and what might be.”

Just a few decades ago, a Peace Studies major from California came across that 19th century British collection and published his own rendition in 2012, only for it to be performed ten years later here today, in our sanctuary amid our own hopes and dreams for a new joy to arise among us.

I don't know what new joy you long for today. I don't know what stands in the way of such joy. But this piece of music reminds me that our own longing is shared across all these decades, centuries, millennia, all of us standing between what is and what might be.

We hold today's melody and story with the ancients, and here, our deepest longings meet, and with them across time and place, we see again through the unspeakable experience of music, this God in whom our hope relies.

May the melody continue to find you, and may you know the deep peace held within.

—Prayers of the People—
The Reverend Dr. William A. Evertsberg

Alpha and Omega God, the one who is, and who was, and who is to come, thank you for bringing us together as community to this place of joy and peace and light.

Thank you for all that is bright and sacred about December: the splendid musicians who bring their voices and their instruments and their heaven-sent expertise and their rare craft to share the good news in melody and meaning; the bracing, polar, almost-winter wind; a candle in every window; pines and spruces clad with stars like the night sky itself; Rudolph and Scrooge and George Bailey and Kevin McAllister and all those hapless, distracted Hallmark characters with misplaced priorities who improbably find love before the credits roll.

Thank you for the season of babies. For that God-with-us infant who came down to Bethlehem so long ago. For our own reminders of innocence and goodness and new life like Brooke Farley and Audrey Markson. Christmas itself has come to those happy homes this year.

Patch up the broken hearts of those who notice who's missing this Christmas, all those for whom the holidays are more about loss than love, more about lack than joy.

Joseph and Mary were far from home when their baby was born, and they remind us of all those who can't be home for the holidays—because of illness, or distant responsibilities, or military service, or estrangement from those they once loved. Show them a place of shelter and welcome.

All this thanks, and all these pleas, we offer to your throne of grace in the name of the One who came down long ago to a tiny town, and will come again in glory, and who taught us all to pray together, saying: Our Father...Amen.

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