



From the Pulpit: May 1, 2022
Third Sunday of Eastertide—Choral Music Sunday

The Reverend Dr. Katie Snipes Lancaster

John 21:1–19

A Collective Murmuration, II: The Murmuration of Song



Christine Hides and I are preaching an Easter sermon series called “A Collective Murmuration.” Murmuration is the word given to the swooping, diving, fluttering flock of starlings at dawn and dusk. “No one is in the lead, everyone is in the lead,”¹ coming to agreement about where to fly when by a network of consensus building, balancing both group cohesiveness and individual effort.²

It is an apt metaphor for the art of conducting, the ebb and flow of melody and harmony in choir and orchestra. No one voice is the most important, but all influence one another. Our collective song becomes a murmuration in the direction of God’s love.

1 Catherine Keller, *Political Theology of the Earth: Our Planetary Emergency and the Struggle for a New Public*, 2018.

2 George F. Young, *Starling Flock Networks Manage Uncertainty in Consensus at Low Cost*. January 31, 2013 <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pcbi.1002894>

Today’s short sermon, *A Murmuration of Song*, stands alongside the Choir’s (now 2 years postponed) performance of Schubert’s *Mass in G Major*, to the glory of God, and in honor of our late friend and choir member David Honoré. More on Schubert and David in a moment.

John, Chapter 21

Afterward Jesus appeared again to his disciples, by the Sea of Galilee...Early in the morning, Jesus stood on the shore, but the disciples did not realize that it was Jesus. He called out to them, “Friends, haven’t you any fish?” “No,” they answered. He said, “Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some.” When they did, they were unable to haul the net in because of the large number of fish. Then the disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, “It is the Lord!”



“Schubert’s Mass reminds us, but Schubert also reminds us to rely on those who have come before us, to find inspiration from the saints of light who illuminate the path, to find broad shoulders on which to stand, for none of us do this on our own.”

As Lisa pointed out, Schubert wrote this when he was just 18, serving as a reminder to the young artists among us to take biblical advice from First Timothy who says, “Don’t let anyone look down on you because you are young.” As a young artist, you join the ranks of Mozart, Mendelssohn, Shostakovich, and Schubert—famous composers who also got their start composing symphonies before they were old enough to matriculate at New Trier, and if you permit me a more modern musical comparison, so did Katie Perry, Billie Eilish, Justin Bieber, Stevie Wonder, Aretha Franklin, and Elvis Presley.

“Don’t let anyone look down on you because you are young,” Schubert’s Mass reminds us, but Schubert also reminds us to rely on those who have come before us, to find inspiration from the saints of light who illuminate the path, to find broad shoulders on which to stand, for none of us do this on our own.

Schubert wrote this piece when he was 18 years old, and it only took him one week, but it was his father who taught him music as a child, and his brothers and sisters who would begrudgingly agree to serve as his musical guinea pigs, playing through pieces of chamber music he wrote in his early teens. Without them, no *Mass in G Major*.

And the *Mass in G Major* did not arrive *ex nihilo* as if out of nowhere, but instead is a variation on an ancient theme, a modification to an established musical form, like a poet writing a sonnet or ode. Schubert made brilliant unique musical decisions in composing his Mass, but it is still, yet a Mass, a form that offered a scaffolding for his musical talent, a clothesline on which to hang his quick melody and unconventional harmony, a form virtually unchanged from the fourth century until 1966 when it was finally translated into the vernacular, the mother tongue, but even then the text remained the same. The Mass always contains the same text, always proclaiming “Lord have mercy,” “Glory to God,” “Holy, Holy, Holy,” and always tracing the ancient text of the Nicene Creed, “I believe in one God... maker of all things visible and invisible.”

Maybe for some of us, the Mass feels foreign, literally in a foreign language, or in a musical style that feels distant from our own favorites: he is no Bob Dylan or Willie Nelson or Lady Gaga or Beyonce. But here’s what I know, just as Schubert would have sought comfort in the Mass when he read news reports of Napoleon fighting at Waterloo, and when he heard reports of friends dying of the then-incurable typhoid fever (which was the cause of Schubert’s own death at the age of 31) or cholera, so too do we have the capacity to find comfort in the Mass when we read reports of a still-unfolding war in Ukraine and a global pandemic that refuses to let go. We need the words “Lord have Mercy” as much as we need the words “I believe.”

And that's what I know about our friend David Honoré as well. He held the words "Lord have mercy" as close to his heart as he held the words "I believe." The song in his heart, and the one pouring from his operatic tenor voice, was tuned to the language of God's glory. He relied on the ancient language of faith, like a tree planted by streams of water, rooted, grounded, prepared, in harmony with the divine in a way that brought peace, even to the last.

David died before first light on the Monday after Easter but I like to think of it as a long Easter evening. Some semblance of peace comes to me knowing that he found his way toward resurrection hope on the day of resurrection.

For us he now stands in an unbounded ever-expansive chancel alongside Midge, Joyce, Jan, and Jeanne—a heavenly choir with John at the organ. And it is always this way, it always has been: each choir performance, each worship service, each family gathering in an earthly way is incomplete, an empty chair, a tenor part unsung. Our flock in flight united across the veil with the murmur of heaven, a murmur of eternal song.

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At the end of the gospel of John, Jesus appears to his disciples one last time. It takes a few tries for them to notice him. He calls out. He offers wisdom. They listen. But only when their net is full of fish do they *remember* him, *recognize* him. But today I am thinking about music and so I'll say this, "I don't think the gospel has enough singing in it because if Jesus had sung to them across the sea, even if he had just hummed a melody, they would have known him instantly."

Enough of us here have walked alongside loved ones and friends suffering from dementia to know that music lives in a different part of our body, untouched by our own forgetting. Maybe that is part of why Schubert and centuries of others have set the Mass to song, have matched melody and message across the ages.

English poet Percy Bysshe Shelley puts it this way, "Music, when soft voices die, vibrates in the memory." Last week during the sung choral amen, I could hear David's voice there, in an instant, or maybe his absence. This sanctuary vibrates in the memory.

May we be drawn in by the song of God's love, by melody and memory that unites us, and may a holy echo remain, vibrating through us. Amen.

—Prayers of the People—
By The Reverend Christine V. Hides

Most holy God, maker of heaven and earth, Lord of all things visible and invisible,

You regather us, your church for worship, outreach, and growth, inviting us into a collective movement of hope, a murmur of justice, peace, and love. You invite us into the beauty of the world, to stand in awe of the budding flowers, as the promise of spring wafts on the warming air, and the puddles beckon our inner child to jump.

On beaches, in backyards, and by beautiful places you assure us of your love. So we give thanks to you, holy God for the gifts of special music today and the heavenly chorus who joins us in worship.

We are grateful for all those who supported the outreach benefit, that agencies can provide life changing, and life saving services to those in need. May the work of the outreach committee enable the agencies to widen their reach as it deepens our generosity.

We give you thanks for successful surgeries and procedures in recent days which bring health and healing to those we care about. For those in the medical profession who answer your call to provide skilled care, we say thank you, Holy God.

And as the school year draws to a close we are grateful for a year of growth. Amidst the flurry of end of year activities we give thanks for students, teachers, crossing guards, administrators, volunteers, and parents who nurture safe learning environments.

On beaches, in backyards, and in beautiful and broken places you assure us of your love, at the same time asking us to love others. So we turn our hearts and minds to the places in our world, the people in our lives, and the portions of our hearts in need of transformation.

This Sunday after Holocaust Remembrance Day, we ask that the memory of the millions who died and the stories of those who came to the aid of Jewish neighbors inspire a love of God and neighbor so overwhelming that hatred and evil will one day be no more.

Bring your peace to Ukraine and every nation, city, and street where there is violence. Make tools of terror into tools of transformation, swords into plowshares. Protect those in harm's way. Surround those impacted by violence with your presence and strength; bring justice to victims and their families.

Draw near to our hearts and homes O God, where we remember those facing surgery and illness this week, those who walk the winding path of grief and loss, and those who struggle to find true friends. Let your healing and grace move between and among us, a murmur of grace, a soothing balm for every ache.

On beaches, in backyards and by beautiful and broken places you assure us of your love, O God. And so we seek to walk in the steps of Christ, who says "follow me," Jesus the one who teaches us to pray: Our Father... Amen.

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