



From the Pulpit: May 5, 2024

The Sixth Sunday of Easter—Choral Music Sunday—George Frederick Handel's *Dettingen Te Deum*

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Revelation 4:8–11

What's Saving Your Life Right Now? V The Practice of Paying Attention: Reverence

Scripture lesson for today comes from Revelation chapter 4. In this passage the author, St. John of the apocalypse is in a trans and these are the works he hears in his dream. You will notice Frederick Handel borrowed this vocabulary for his *Messiah* piece especially the piece called *Worthy is the Lamb*.

*John writes day and night without ceasing the
creatures of God sing,
“Holy, holy, holy,
the Lord God the Almighty,
who was and is and is to come.
You are worthy, our Lord and God,
to receive glory and honor and power,
for you created all things,
and by your will they existed and were created.”*

An Alabama priest once invited Barbara Brown Taylor to speak to his parish. When she asked him, “What do you want me to talk about?” he replied, “Tell us what’s saving your life right now.”

One of the things that’s saving her life right now is reverence. Reverence she says, is the recognition of something greater than the self—something that is beyond human creation or control.... God certainly meets that criterion, but so do birth, death, sex, nature, truth, justice, and wisdom.¹ Also night skies, oceans, thunderstorms, grizzly bears, earthquakes, and rain-swollen rivers.²

¹Paul Woodruff, *Reverence: Renewing a Forgotten Virtue* (New York: Oxford, 2001), p. 4. Quoted by Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith* (New York: Harper One, 2008), 21.

²Taylor, p. 22.

We know that reverence is one of the things that is saving our lives right now. We know what makes us flourish. We know what’s good for us. We know what we need, because every day as we scroll through our media, we encounter a swollen, grotesque, vainglorious ego scowling out at us from the screen, reverencing nothing and respecting no one, and we know instinctively that that is exactly what we **don’t** want to be.

It’s ironic: to live large, to live up to the towering stature of our full humanity, we remind ourselves now and then that we are in fact small, contingent, unnecessary creatures, living only by the grace of that Crafty Wizard who threw a hundred billion galaxies across vast eons of emptiness.

And so now and then we pause from our daily round to hear something like George Frideric Handel’s *Dettingen Te Deum*, a staggering paeon to the matchless majesty of God Godself, the “luminous deep being a lofty light,” as Dante puts.³

The words of the ancient Christian hymn *Te Deum* are among the oldest we still speak in exactly the form they came down to us in the fourth century. Think about that: we’ve been singing these words for 1,600 years.

In a list that is far from exhaustive, Wikipedia mentions 37 prominent composers who have written musical settings to the *Te Deum*, including Britten, Dvořák, Haydn, Holst, Mendelssohn, Mozart, Pärt, Rutter, and Verdi.

³Dante Alighieri, *Comedy, Paradiso*, Canto XXXIII, ll. 115ff.

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

Even Puccini wrote one. If you are an opera aficionado, listen to the conclusion of the first act of *Tosca*; it is a *Te Deum*. The First Act takes place in the Church of Sant' Andrea della Valle, after all.

Maestro Handel composed five settings of the *Te Deum* all by himself, including the *Dettingen Te Deum*, written to celebrate a great victory of the English and their allies over the French in 1743.

So Lisa, Eun Ju, Choristers, Musicians, thank you for expanding and enriching our capacity for reverence today. What's saving my life right now? Maybe the *Te Deum*, that ancient encomium to God's matchless majesty.

Maybe that's not literally true. Maybe that's a bit of an exaggeration. If I'd never heard a *Te Deum* in my life, I'd probably still be here.

But my existence would be smaller, thinner, paler, duller, and flatter. But because you all sing and play, I can shine my small light out to the world, like the moon, who borrows her sheen from that greater light, the luminous, deep being of lofty light.

See if it isn't true for you too. Maybe reverence is saving your life right now too. Listen. Listen to the words:

Vouchsafe, O Lord, to keep us this day without sin.

O Lord, have mercy upon us.

O Lord, let Thy mercy lighten upon us, as our trust is in Thee.

O Lord, in Thee have I trusted; let me never be confounded.

Holy, Holy, Holy Lord,⁴

Heaven and earth are full of your glory,

Our sanctuary is filled with the gift of music today, our mid-west landscape is suddenly green and alive again: The orioles have arrived, the oaks are budding and the redbuds flowering, tulips stand at attention and trillium dot the woods. The very air is filled with the sound of your creation, the pollinators emerging, flitting from plant to plant enabling new life. Thanks be to you, God. And bless those who suffer and sneeze through this season of vitality and growth.

By your will you created all things, all that was and is and is to come. And so we approach your great throne in anticipation of your mercy. We recall the unexpected graces of this last week: the places where justice was carried out, where new possibilities emerged, where suffering was relieved, and hope renewed. Forgive us our surprise when you turn our impossibilities into your reality.

We join your faithful, eternal choir in prayer today, naming before you the needs of the world and the aches of our heart that we name before you.

Lord, hear our prayers for creation. The water, air, soil, and all living creatures who groan from the weight of our overuse. Help us to steward your gift.

Holy One, when our despair grows over the state of the world and fear wakes us in the night,⁵ when war will not cease and conflicts erupt over the slightest things, grant us places of rest where we feel your presence. Renew us to follow your greatest command to love you and others.

Spirit of gentleness, hover over those who hurt today. Hold the hearts of the grieving. Grant hope and peace. Lift up those who face disappointment. Turn us from our vices and addictions toward life and connection. Be present with those who are healing. Abide in the waiting, surgery, and recovery rooms. Strengthen those in physical therapy and rehab. surgical wards and the recovery rooms.

Eternal God, as we enter into May, we ask for your blessing upon the end of school year festivities, the university graduation, prom and finals, the last meet, the gathering of friends and families. Bless the return of college students.

Hear the unspoken prayers of our hearts, O Lord, and gather them up into the prayer Jesus teaches us to pray: Our Father.... Amen.

⁴Phrases from Revelation 4 are woven into this prayer.

⁵Wendell Berry, "The Peace of Wild Things."