



From the Pulpit: December 10, 2023

Fourth Sunday of Extended Lent—Choral Music Sunday

The Reverend Dr. William A. Evertsberg

Mark 1:1–8

The New O Antiphon, IV: O God of words and music, we give thanks...

The Scripture Lesson today comes from the Gospel of St. Luke:

And Mary said,

*“My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has
looked with favor on the lowly state of his servant.
Surely from now on all generations will call me blessed,
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name;*

*He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their
hearts.*

*He has brought down the powerful from their thrones
and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things
and sent the rich away empty.*

In celebration of the one who came down to Bethlehem so long ago and will come again at the end of time, Vancouver poet Diane Tucker prays:

*O God of words and music, we give thanks
for psalms and hymns and spiritual songs
connecting us to long-ago believers.*

*We thank you, Lord of sound and harmony,
for the Church’s many voices raised in praise.
Sing your Spirit in our hearts and voices,
that our gratitude might brim and overflow.*

O God of words and music. They are the two integral components of divine worship. We couldn’t choir the proper praise if one or the other were missing: words and music, sermon and song.

It’s Lisa’s job to make sure that you can hear the **words** within the **music**. She has her choirs ENUNCIATE! “And suddenly, there was with the angel a multitude of heavenly host praising God...”

If it’s Lisa’s job to make sure that you hear the **words** within the **music**, it’s my job to make sure you hear the **music** within the **words**. Because words can sing, can’t they?

*Some say that ever ‘gainst that season comes
Wherein our Savior’s birth is celebrated,
The bird of dawning singeth all night long;
And then, they say, no spirit dare stir abroad,
The nights are wholesome, then no planets strike,
No fairy takes, nor witch hath power to charm,
So hallowed and so gracious is the time.¹*

¹William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, I, ii, 157.

More than anyone else I can think of in the history of the English language, Shakespeare could make words sing.

*When to the sessions of sweet silent thought
I summon up remembrance of things past,
I sigh the lack of many a thing I sought
And with old woes new wail my dear time's waste...
But if the while I think on thee, dear friend,
All losses are restor'd and sorrows end.*²

Shakespeare could make words sing. So could Fitzgerald: “So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.”³ Fitzgerald could make words sing.

The first thing Mother Mary did when she learned that she would bear God’s Messiah into the world is sing a song with inimitable words:

*God has shown strength with God's arm;
God has scattered the proud
in the imagination of their hearts.
God has brought down the powerful
from their thrones and lifted up the lowly;
God has filled the hungry with good things
and the rich God has sent empty away.*

It’s called the Magnificat because that’s its first word in Latin: “My soul magnifies the Lord.”

Maybe she sang it, maybe she spoke it, but every renowned composer in history has set those words to music. It’s the law: if you compose music, you have to set the Magnificat to music.

There are over 250 musical settings of the Magnificat, including settings by Vivaldi, Telemann, Mozart, Schubert, Rutter, and—get this—four different guys named Bach. Palestrina wrote 35 Magnificats all by himself.

²William Shakespeare, Sonnet #30.

³F. Scott Fitzgerald, the last line of *The Great Gatsby*.

Mary was describing the world that would dawn when her eccentric, spectacular son made his appearance on this earth: God has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich God has sent empty away.

Tom Trenney is the Minister of Music at the First Plymouth United Church of Christ in Lincoln, Nebraska. Tom leads one of the finest music programs in the country. Lisa studies him closely because he is the best there is in her business.

Tom also leads the Women’s Chorale at Doane College right outside Lincoln. One year a young woman showed up to join the choir. She had never sung in a choir before, and in fact had been told that she could not sing. But her spirit longed to sing, so she joined the choir.

The Doane College Women’s Chorale performed a cantata or something at Tom’s First Plymouth UCC in Lincoln, and Tom recorded the performance, and on Monday morning he played the recording for the members of his chorale, because when you’re singing in a choir, you can’t really hear it the way the congregation hears it, and he wanted them to hear how beautiful they sounded.

And that young woman who had been told she could not sing raised her hand and said, “I never believed I would ever be part of something that beautiful.”⁴ She’d been told to stay quiet when others sang. But then there she was, just one small piece in something so beautiful.

So we hope you can hear the words within the music, and the music within the words, and when it’s your turn to sing, belt it out, because even if you sound *like a whale with the flu*⁵ when you sing, you can be part of something so beautiful.

⁴Tom Trenney, in his introduction to a choir concert at First Plymouth United Church of Christ in Lincoln, Nebraska, September 29, 2013.

⁵I stole the italicized words from my spiritual mentor Brian Doyle, *A Book of Uncommon Prayer* (Notre Dame, IN: Sorin Books, 2014), 110.

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—Prayers of the People—
The Reverend Dr. Katie Snipes Lancaster

O Boundless One, who, stretching eternity to the limits, let a first century barn harbor the trembling multitude of heaven: we long for your ceaseless presence. We yearn for your word-made-flesh.

We teeter. We sway. We stagger. We ache for worlds to be reconciled: nation to nation at war, parent and child in conflict, we hunger for your way—justice, peace, mercy and a tender way through.

Blunt the sword. Mute the noise. Lessen the fray. For the chaos in our own lives. For the unfolding impossibilities at the far reaches of this planet. We pray to you, O God-to-earth-descendeth.

Spread your wings toward dawn, follow our every step, join our wild wandering and peripatetic journeys, scatter the solstice skies with stars, compose and conduct the melody of our lives, give just the right harmony, dissonance, pleading sharps, and flats to open an unbroken song of our soul's symphony.

Listen to us. And let us be attentive to you. Let us notice and observe the tender, affectionate sacred song of life that unfolds here in our midst, a symphonic sound, resounding. A resonant, soulful, resounding hum of life and love and hope.

Let this advent-waiting-season push us to see the comfort and peace that has already arrived, and push us to live in tune with the comfort and peace that is possible with you. Hear us as we pray, Our Father.... Amen.

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