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Sandwich, Massachusetts 02563

December 12, 2010
Third Sunday of Advent

Today's sermon is taken from Isaiah, chapter 35, verses 1-10.

O God, we come together because we need you, we need one another, and we need to hear your word. And if we hear it here, let us become so possessed by it that we become servants of it out in your world. Amen

Having attended the band concert here Friday evening, I'm all jazzed up about music. My theme for this third Sunday in Advent is music. When the Messiah comes, there will be singing. I think most of us love the music of Christmas. Of course, I realize that not all of us are musicians. A man and his wife were browsing in a craft store one day when the man noticed a display of country-style musical instruments. After looking over the flutes and dulcimers and recorders, he picked up a shiny one-string instrument he took to be a mouth harp, and he put to his lips, and much to the amusement of others shoppers, he twanged a few notes on it. After watching from a distance, his wife came up and whispered in his ear, "I hate to tell you this, honey, but you're trying to play a cheese slicer." (hearty laughter) Not all of us are musicians.

One woman was talking about her parents who had recently retired, and her mom had always wanted to learn to play the piano so her dad bought her mom a piano for her birthday. A few weeks later the woman asked her how her mom was doing with it. "Oh, we returned the piano," said her dad. "I persuaded her to switch to a clarinet instead." "How come?" the woman asked. "Well," he answered, "because with the clarinet she can't sing while she plays." We're not all great singers, and that's all right. We can still make a joyful noise to the Lord.

I would hate to think of this season of the year without the great Christmas hymns and carols. Of course, times are a changing, except maybe in Sandwich where we have the wonderful carol sing on the steps of First Church. Have you noticed that the great tradition of caroling seems to be disappearing? I remember over thirty years ago Marion and I got together in

our neighborhood with a group of people and went house to house, and we sang carols. It was a wonderful time. There was a time in our country when small groups would go around in neighborhoods, and people would sing carols to their neighbors, but that tradition is almost extinct.

Today's prophesy from Isaiah tells us that when the Messiah comes there will be singing. There are few passages as joyful as Isaiah 35. Isaiah writes, "The wilderness as a dry land will be glad. The desert will rejoice and blossom, and like the crocus, it will burst into bloom, and it will rejoice greatly and shout for joy. And the glory of Lebanon will be given to it, and the splendor of Carmel and Sharon. They will see the glory of the Lord and the splendor of our God, and strengthen the feeble hands and steady the knees that give way, and say to those with fearful hearts, 'Be strong, do not fear, your God will come.' Then will the eyes of the blind be open and the ears of the deaf unstopped; and then will the lame leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. Water will gush forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; the burning sand will become a pool, the thirsty ground bubbling springs; and the ransomed of the Lord will return and they will enter Zion with singing; everlasting joy will calm their heads, and gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away."

It would be difficult to paint a picture in which the joy of the Lord is portrayed more vividly than what Isaiah describes. They will enter Zion with singing. Music is very important to us at this time of year. The gospel of Luke doesn't actually tell us that the angels were singing in the heavens when Jesus was born, but we would like to think they were. And here's how the verse from Luke's gospel actually reads: "Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to people on whom his favor rests.'" Luke tells us they were saying, not singing. I like to think they were singing.

Someone defined the difference between rap music and opera like this: Opera is people singing when they should be talking, and rap is people talking when they should be singing. And maybe the angles were rapping out the message to the shepherds. Probably not. I still would like to think they were singing -- singing in beautiful harmony. If they weren't singing they should have been. Music is a wonderful gift from God.

There's a quote attributed to Victor Hugo: "Music attempts to express what cannot be said about something on which it is impossible to remain silent." I

love that quote. It helps explain why music is such an integral part of this season.

Music gives us the opportunity to express our joy in thanksgiving. In Isaiah's prophesy, Isaiah promises the people that they will one day return to Zion, and Zion is symbolic of Jerusalem, of the promise land. Isaiah was writing during the times of the divided kingdom. The land had been overrun numerous times by their enemies. Prisoners of war had been carried off to become slaves in distant lands. Isaiah promises that one day they will be able to return home to Zion, the city of God. From then this will be a great time of joy and so they sing. For Christians Zion is that city of God which is heaven, and again, when we enter that place of eternal promise, there will be singing. For those of us who know Jesus' love in our hearts there is a need to say thank you to God for what God has done for us.

Last week at the conclusion of the Eucharist here at the altar, I invited people to come up for healing and the laying on of hands. I thought we would have maybe five or ten, or maybe at the most fifteen people, and instead forty-five or fifty people came up, and they were asking for healing in their own life and healing for other people. I was so moved that I wanted to begin singing *Amazing Grace* because God's grace was everywhere, and I just wanted to sing. When you feel like that, when you feel the power of the Holy Spirit and you feel that God's grace is with you, you want to sing. Music allows us to express our joy and thanksgiving.

There's a second thing that I think music does for us. It draws us closer together as a family of God. In my mind I can see that band of refugees Isaiah envisions returning to their homeland, singing as they travel together. And I love to be part of a congregation that is singing the great hymns of the church. When there is a funeral, it is a time of sadness and grief, but the joy comes when we sing together the hymns, and you can feel the spirit in you moving, and you can feel that God is with you and that your loved one is with God. What a time that is!

I love to be at a Christmas party when someone suggests that we sing carols. It's one of the touchy-feely moments that is almost sacramental. We sing together and feel like an extended family, and that's the way the Christmas season ought to be. We know about the power of music to draw people together in worship; it reaches across the boundaries of social status and gender and race.

Under a culture exchange program, a rabbi from Russian was visiting a Christian family in Texas, and since it was Christmas, the family wanted to take him to some of the finest restaurants in Houston. So they all went to a favorite Chinese restaurant, and throughout the meal the rabbi extolled the wonders of America in comparison to the bleak conditions of his homeland. When they had finished eating, the waiter brought the check, a fortune cookie and a small brass Christmas tree ornament as a present for the rabbi. They all laughed when the rabbi pointed out that the ornament was stamped "Made in India." But the laughter soon subsided when they saw that the rabbi was quietly crying. They all thought that the rabbi must have been offended by receiving a Christmas tree ornament as a gift. But, no, he smiled and shook his head and said, "Feh, I was shedding tears of joy to be in such a wonderful country in a Chinese restaurant in which a Buddhist gives a Jew a Christmas gift made by a Hindu!" (hearty laughter)

Christmas reminds us that Jesus came to shine his light in the heart of everyone on this earth of whatever race or creed. When we sing we sing as the family of God. I have often wondered why God created us with voices that are so different. The soprano can hit such high notes, the bass can hit so low, but then we blend our voices into one glorious sound. To me it easily qualifies as proof of God's existence.

Why would blind evolution give us such a gift? It makes no sense. Music calls us together into one beautiful family -- especially at Christmas. We sing *Joy to the World*, *Hark the Herald Angels Sing*, and *What Child is This?* And I believe the angels sing with us. When the Messiah comes, there will be singing. Singing allows us to express our joy and thanksgiving. Singing draws us closer together. And most importantly of all, I think, music speaks to us of God.

Several years ago there was an article I read about a church in Jackson, Tennessee, that used music to help what are called "at risk" children. They used volunteer piano teachers who gave lessons to underprivileged kids, and the idea worked. Pride, self esteem and academic performance among these kids from disadvantaged backgrounds were all enhanced. Not only that, but the program caught the attention of the Rockefeller Foundation for Fine Arts in New York. The Foundation thought the program might be developed nationally, so they sent world-renowned pianist Lorin Hollander to go to Jackson, Tennessee, and to take a look. While Lorin Hollander was there, he

shared something significant with his audience; he shared with them his own experience of being a battered child. He said that there are a lot of children out there who are mortally wounded in the soul. These are children who are battered spiritually and creatively. And then Hollander said this -- he said that music can bring the spirit of love into the lives of these children who had become lost. By allowing them to discover creativity in music, they can begin to express the divine love of God.

And finally, Mr. Hollander had this to say: "When I was a little child and first heard Bach, I told my sister we didn't have to be afraid of the dark anymore; someone is watching over us. I heard it in music." Music speaks to us of God, and that's why music has always been a part of the church. And, of course, that is why music is such a big part of this season.

So let us prepare for the birth of Jesus with songs of joy and thanksgiving. Let us sing as God's people with one unified voice, and let us pray that in music we will sense the Holy Spirit at work in our lives, drawing us closer to one another, to our loved ones and to God. Isaiah writes about the coming Messianic Age: "They will enter Zion with singing. Everlasting joy will crown their heads, and gladness and joy will over take them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away." That, I believe, is the promise of Christmas and that's worth singing about!

Amen

Transcribed by Phyllis K. Briggs