Soaring Souls

A homily for Music Sunday

Rev. Dr. Jim Sherblom

Theologians say a worship service can draw from four aspects of being: sacred texts, tradition, reason and affect, with which being most prominent shifting over the course of the hour, and from week to week. This is music Sunday, and we hope to make your heart sing, but still we began with our traditional worship opening, and I will still appeal to your reason, but most of today's worship will be given over to passages from sacred texts set to soaring music. So, let your heart soar.

Now, I know, not all of us feel entirely comfortable with some of these ancient texts, so I want to tell you a story. For several years I led UU men's retreats at a very conservative Catholic monastery in Stillwater, MA. They were Benedictine monks who had devoted their lives to work, to study, to pray, and to sing to God's glory. From four in the morning to eight at night, we would go seven times a day to hear them sing their Gregorian chants in beautiful Latin, and were transformed.

The third retreat we did this the monastery guest master went to the trouble of translating the texts of these glorious chants into plain English. Reading their words, I was aghast. This chorus of men's voices were singing chants about the pain and suffering of Christ's passion, or enslaving themselves to the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God, words and concepts which I could not get my mind around, so I put aside the well-meaning translation before it destroyed my experience of participating with these holy men seven times a day singing to the glory of God.

In the gospel of Luke, we are told that when Elizabeth confirms that Mary is bearing the long-expected Messiah, Mary breaks into a brilliant oration praising God in the highest. Johann Sebastian Bach set her words to music in what will be our offering music today. A very fitting introduction to the glory foretold in sacred texts of the Messiah's birth.

And then, we'll come to Handel's Messiah, one of the most soul soaring oratorios every composed. Part I, which we'll hear performed today, concerns ancient prophecies and the birth of the Messiah. Parts II and III, perhaps you'll hear in another setting, perhaps Eastertime, for they concern Christ's passion and resurrection. The first three scenes of Part I are the ancient prophecies: comforting people; let every valley be exalted; glory to God; behold a virgin shall conceive; good tidings to Zion; for unto us a child is born. Perhaps if you don't focus on words too much you can allow yourself to be swept along by soaring music.

Part I scene four lifts up the shepherds abiding in the fields and choirs of heavenly angels singing glory to God in the highest. Part I ends with scene five, foreshadowing Christ's earthly ministry: rejoicing greatly, the blind coming to see, feeding his flock like a shepherd, and how taking up his yoke is easy. But because this is the first of three parts, it doesn't feel like it ends on an appropriately soaring note. So, following musical tradition, today we will end with the Hallelujah chorus, which was written as the ending to Part II, but serves us well for ending on a heart and soul soaring note. You might even want to join in singing it.

Whatever your theology of Christmas, for the next hour at least, please let it go. If you have managed to get this far into the holiday season, and are not yet swept into the spirit of Christmas, I trust this music

will help to get us there. It's nine days to Christmas, and the season is merry and bright. I wish you all a chance to spend loving time with families and friends, because in the end that is the spirit of Christmas, so may God bless us each and every one. Amen and Blessed Be.