

**Time Matters**  
**A Homily by C. Michael Hawn**  
**for the Installation Service**  
**of the Dallas Chapter, AGO**  
**September 18, 2007**

**Deuteronomy 31:14-22**

**Revelation 19:1-5**

I am grateful, though somewhat surprised, to be in the capacity of Chaplain to the Dallas Chapter of the AGO. If I recall correctly, the last time that I had an official connection at a Dallas AGO function was over ten years ago at Robert Anderson's retirement celebration. Here I was, in the presence of a colleague who had perhaps more than anyone else accounted for the rise of the organ in the Metroplex. For reasons beyond my imagination, **I** was asked to play—of all instruments—the **accordion**. Although I make the claim that accordion players can do anything an organist can do, only more obnoxiously, I am aware of the limitations of the instrument of my sinful youth and find the Polka Mass to be a questionable liturgical concept. Either my role in the event celebrating Bob Anderson has been forgotten or I have been forgiven. Either way I am humbled to be with this gathering of organists, organ lovers, and clergy this evening.

There are many ways to read the Bible. I like to think of scripture as the great drama of salvation, punctuated by canticles. Perhaps an analogy can be made with a grand opera where moments of action are interspersed with arias that allow the characters to reflect on their circumstance. Arias (aka canticles) abound in scripture—the song of Miriam and Moses celebrating the escape from Egypt found in Exodus, Hannah's song in 1 Samuel, Jonah's *Kyrie* in the belly of the whale, the song of the Three Holy Children in Daniel, just to name some from the First Testament. Events surrounding the Incarnation are the source of four canticles that we know best by their Latin names: *Benedictus*, *Magnificat*, *Gloria in excelsis*

*Deo*, and *Nunc dimittis*. Church traditions throughout the ages have lifted some of these canticles—biblical arias, if you will—to become staples of its liturgy. Virtually all of them have been set to music in anthem form or even larger works.

The lessons for this evening highlight two of the important musical themes found in scripture. In the Deuteronomy passage, we find that Moses, the flawed but chosen leader of Israel who guided his people out of oppression in Egypt, who led them through the desert and demonstrated infinite patience and forbearance as Israel complained and turned away from God—this bigger-than-life patriarch of Israel is told by God that he would not continue the journey—he would not enter the Promised Land. Just as Israel was to continue on to the Promised Land, just as the long, hot difficult journey was about to be over, Moses will find his resting place and continue no further. But God has one more thing for Moses to do: he is to teach Israel a song—a song that will be a witness against Israel when they do not follow YHWH—a reminder of God’s covenant with Israel. This song is to be taught by Moses to Israel and Israel in turn is to teach it to their children and their children’s children—indeed to all future generations as a witness to God’s covenant.

Then, fast forward to the book of Revelation, a book that reaches ahead to the end of time, a book that appears very little in the three-year lectionary save a few passages found mostly in Year C during Eastertide. Several of these passages are the words of hymns whose music will not be heard until we all gather around the throne of God where song will shape our praise to God for eternity. Our lives exist in between this canticle and hymn. Our ministries fill out the time between these two songs—a canticle of a covenant from God in the past and a hymn of praise to God for a covenant to be fulfilled in the future. It is our vocation to sing the songs that fill in this great gap in time.

You may have noticed that I have been speaking of music in terms of time. Isn't music an art of sound? Don't we work primarily with melodic line, harmonic complexity, metrical shape, and secure musical pulse? Interestingly enough, for many centuries those that spoke of the theory and philosophy of music made little reference to actual sound. They were much more concerned with music in a broader metaphysical sense. I can hear your thoughts—my congregation is not going to pay me to make metaphysical music. You are right!

A number of musical philosophers in the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century found that it was futile to describe beauty in terms of sound. Even the Bible doesn't do this. The nature of worship is described in terms of “the beauty of holiness” in Psalms 29 and 96, and in terms of a quality of human relationships in Psalm 133. I Corinthians does use the metaphor of a “noisy gong and clanging cymbal” to describe a relationship without love. The fact is that beautiful sounds are quite culturally conditioned and very difficult to describe.

We are in the season between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur—the Jewish High Holy Days. For nearly a decade it was my privilege to sing in a Reform Synagogue during this high season. I recall the first time I heard a shofar—the ram's horn. I am ashamed to say that I was not sufficiently aware of the context of the instrument and listened only with aural and not liturgical ears. It is not a sound that I associated with musical beauty. By the time I finished my years in the synagogue, the sound of the shofar communicated a faith heritage much older than my own, the identity of a people, and the promise of future fulfillment. It was through the shofar that I began to understand the “beauty of holiness.”

Several musical philosophers have turned from the quagmire of describing music in terms of sound and have examined an

underlying assumption about music—music fills time. Music has the potential of enhancing the quality of time. Music enhances the quality of time like liturgy enacted faithfully shapes the faithful in community. For a few moments, let us look at how we might fill out the musical time God has given us between Moses' canticle and the hymn in Revelation.

Any of us involved with musical rehearsals know how important time is. Either individually or with others, we value deeply the time of preparation—hours of practice that lead to the presentation of music in worship—the presentation itself often taking relatively little actual time. Yet it is worth it all when, for both those who lead and those who participate in the assembly, there is a transformation of the actual time into something much greater than what we could have hoped—something that we cannot control—a moment when the time between our canticle from Deuteronomy and hymn of praise from Revelation collapses and we feel a oneness with God, a unity with the created order and the cosmos. I believe that this Oneness is perhaps the result of living fully into the tension between the memory of Moses' canticle and the imagination of what it will be like to sing the hymn in Revelation. Through this Oneness we have the potential to experience NOW the timeless—the time beyond actual time. We cannot manufacture such timeless experiences though there are some who try. God chooses to be revealed to us when God pleases—not upon our demand. Our vocation is one of perpetual Advent time—prepare and wait! We prepare and wait for the moments of time beyond time. We wait for the moments when we are no longer slaves to the clock, but one in the Spirit.

We do not know the hour: it may be in a majestic European cathedral, or it may be in a humble rural parish church with few resources. It may be on Easter Sunday or on the last Sunday of July when the choir is on vacation. Sometimes those who lead may be

blinded to those moments while those who actively participate in worship from the pew encounter them often.

As you go about your vocation of filling in the time between our canticle and hymn, permit me to offer a few suggestions.

Becoming absorbed only in the pressures of actual time—matters of musical administration, teaching notes, musical style, dealing with personality conflicts, finding time to practice—though necessary, may inhibit us from being aware of time beyond time.

- 1) I invite you to covenant with yourself this year that you will examine the quality and nature of the practices that make up your use of actual time. If we are to be honest with ourselves, as a group we are an extremely compulsive bunch. On the door of my office is a sign given to me by a clergy friend. On the sign is the outline of a robed figure kneeling in prayer. This figure, presumably a clergy member, prays the petition: “Dear Lord, deliver me from this totally unnecessary and self-imposed challenge.” There is the possibility that our compulsiveness and desire to control (although for the best of intentions) is impeding our ability to become aware of time beyond time. While what we do is important, those of us whose vocation is musical time should be humbled by Isaac Watts’ paraphrase of Psalm 90 where the timelessness of God is placed in stark contrast to the limits of humanity:

A thousand ages in Thy sight  
Are like an evening gone;  
Short as the watch that ends the night  
Before the rising sun.

Like Charles Wesley, I stand before you as “the chief of sinners” in this regard. I suspect, however, that the quality of humility is one of the primary attributes for experiencing time beyond time.

2) Because our weekly liturgies are public and experienced in common, they need to be planned as much as possible in community. I am not naïve at this point. I realize that it takes much less actual time to plan a liturgy alone at the computer following a template. I am not suggesting a process that paralyzes worship planning. I am suggesting that liturgical preparation is best served when, as often as possible, it is done in community. For the clergy present, we are grateful for your partnership and hope that you will help those who minister through music create a time for listening to each other and to the One who is the source of worship. For the musicians, I encourage you to come as listeners and learners regardless of your expertise and experience. Sometimes we create so much sound that we take little time to listen to the listeners. To both clergy and musicians, I encourage you to involve other voices in the liturgical planning process on a regular basis. In Christ's realm, the concept of who is first and who is last is called into question. Sharing in liturgical planning is neither an abdication of our vocation nor denial of our expertise. Furthermore, sharing leadership within the liturgy itself, rather than keeping ourselves at the center of attention, is also part of our vocation. Liturgical sharing is not only a quality of servant leadership, but also a potential pathway to time beyond time. The more selfless we become, the more likely we may become attuned to the Spirit.

3) Finally, do not pander to the sirens of the sensational. Regardless of what musical style or styles we employ in worship, the sirens of the sensational distort time. Those falsely attuned to the sensational are absorbed only with the present reality. They have forgotten the songs of the saints; they have developed amnesia. They have substituted the temptation of temporary relevance for the canticles of our liturgical heritage. Instead they are so mesmerized by the sounds of the present that they have no imagination for the

songs that point toward the hymns of Revelation. They have substituted a self-absorbing relevance in the NOW for the creative tension between the memory of our heritage and the hope of time fulfilled.

Rather than opening us to the time beyond time, the sensational sirens swap the bombastic for the beauty of holiness, the self-concerned for the selfless, and the haughty for the humble. Seeking the sensational—regardless of musical style—substitutes circus for sacrament and immediate gratification for the possibility of experiencing time beyond time. None of us want to be boring. Tom Driver, retired professor at New York’s Union Seminary, reminds us: “To be boring is to bear false witness; but to be sensational is to bear no witness at all.”

As you know we are on the safest ground when musical time serves liturgical time. The sacraments that we share remind us that our roots are deep. We not only remember, but relive a time past, one just as vibrant as if we were physically present—the heart of the Greek word *anamnesis*. Our sacraments also remind us that the fullness of time is yet to be. Our present time is affected by our future together. After all, the Eucharistic acclamation that we share encompasses the spectrum of time—Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again!

In the Eucharist we “join with the faithful of every time and place” singing “Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might. Heaven and earth is full of your glory. Hosanna in the highest!” The breaking of bread is not only with those who are physically present, but with all who have ever shared this table throughout the world. It is not just for the present time, but a foretaste of cosmic glory.

So, let us sing our songs in the interim between the canticle in Deuteronomy and the hymn in Revelation. Through our music, let us reach toward the mystery between a living heritage and the future. Such music, regardless of style, will not see the church's musical heritage as a museum to be defended, but a living legacy of the saints to bring into the present. Neither must we ever forget that all of the music we offer in our current interim time is penultimate. We must have songs that reach toward a future hope, but we practice our art with the humility that the ultimate expressions of praise are yet to be composed.

So, our vocation is to be the interim custodians of sacred time through music, and even our best songs will be penultimate in the grand opera of salvation. Do not be so consumed with actual time so that you are robbed of time beyond time. I invite you to be open to the ineffable moments when eternity collapses for an instant into our present and the earthly and the cosmic form for a split second... a perfect unison.

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