



## **“Music in the Air”**

*Zephaniah 3:14-20 and 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13*

**Julie R. Harley – November 29, 2009 – First Sunday of Advent**

### **First United Church of Oak Park**

The great lesson plan of the Christian year begins again today. This is the first Sunday of Advent, the first class in a new year as students of Jesus. We arrive with fresh notebooks and newly sharpened pencils.

So where do we begin: with the birth of Christ, his first sermon, an overview of the parables? Surprise! We spend the first month of class time waiting for Jesus to arrive. We do not begin with the fulfillment of the ages, we begin by waiting four Sundays for Christ to come.

As we wait, we recall the hopes and fears of all the years as our ancestors longed for the coming of the Messiah. As we wait, we become aware that our own spiritual lives are still incomplete, still a work in progress. And as we wait, we sing.

“Sing aloud!” the prophet Zephaniah cries. “Shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your hearts! The Lord your God is in your midst.” (Zeph. 3:14-18)

You may have noticed that in our worship services, we open our hymnbooks more often than we open our Bibles. Perhaps there’s a good reason for that. The spoken word informs us, but music moves us. Our sacred story unfolds in music.

During the month of Advent, we hear and sing more music than at any other time of the year. As the days grow darker, our radio stations bring us Christmas songs 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Music provides hope for the return of the light. Music sustains us as we wait for the dawning of a new day.

When my daughters were babies, I spent many midnight hours carrying them in my arms, trying to rock them to sleep when they were restless. Over and over, I sang to them. *Tell me why the stars do shine, tell me why the ivy twines, tell me why the sky is blue, and I'll tell you just why I love you.*

Those were some of the most precious hours of my life. The words of that simple song expressed more than I could say about the deep bond my children call forth from my body and soul.

In old English, the word for singer is “*scop*” (pronounced shop). The singer or *scop* had very a important responsibility in northern European life. The *scop* was a shaper---one who was called upon at times of trouble to bring shape and order to a time of grief and confusion.

During times of war, when a battle was over and many were lying dead, the *scop* would gather with the community in a mead hall to share food and drink. Then the *scop* would strike a note---a familiar note---and the *scop* would transform that note into a verse. And the verse would include some words about grief and death, but it would also include words about the one who had perished.

And when the day of mourning was over, people later would remember the song. Not the words, but the song. And that song would give them hope.

*Over my head, I hear music in the air. Over my head, I hear music in the air. Over my head, I hear music in the air. There must be a God somewhere.* The powerful spirituals of African-American slaves helped them endure suffering, knowing there was a transcendent spirit present “over my head” that would eventually set things right.

Slaves would steal away together to sing songs that expressed their deep sorrow and lament, but they would always follow these with songs that equipped them to confront the structures of oppression. Harriet Tubman and other preachers sang songs of faith as resistance music. “*Go down, Moses, way down in Egypt's land. Tell old Pharaoh, let my people go.*”

Music has the power to comfort, to heal, and to give hope.

Our reading for this first Sunday of Advent comes from the prophet Zephaniah, whose name means “Yahweh protects.” He lives in Judah during the 7<sup>th</sup> century BCE. It is a time of deep uncertainty for his people. The long line of Davidic kings that brought

Israel great power and prestige has come to an end. A century before, the northern kingdom of Israel was destroyed at the hands of Assyria. The nation of Judah is now a shadow of its former self. And their troubles are far from over.

Like most prophets, Zephaniah begins with the bad news in chapters 1 and 2. “The day of the Lord is coming, when God will utterly sweep away everything from the face of the earth.” Yahweh is outraged by the evil that people do to one another: committing violence and fraud; hoarding silver and gold; cheating the poor; living with bloated pride and corruption; and profaning God’s laws.

The city of Jerusalem---once known as the sacred epicenter of the world---has become a wicked place in God’s eyes: “Soiled, defiled, oppressing city! It has listened to no voice; it has accepted no correction; it has not trusted in the Lord; it has not drawn near to its God.”

Then in chapter 3 the prophetic message suddenly changes course. Zephaniah says that if even a few people listen and change their ways, God will save them. “Wait for me, says the Lord, for the day when I arise as a witness. I will gather the nations together. I will remove the proud and haughty from your midst, and I will leave a people humble and lowly. With those faithful few, I will transform the entire city. They will lie down, and no one will make them afraid.”

Like a *scop*, the prophet Zephaniah takes this note and sets it to music. This is the source of Advent hope: though we have sinned, all is not lost.

“Sing aloud!” the prophet Zephaniah cries. “Shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your hearts! The Lord your God is in your midst. He will rejoice over you with gladness; he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing, as on a day of festival.” (Zeph. 3:14-18)

In the time to come, Zephaniah says, God will deal with all of Judah’s oppressors. God will save the lame and gather the outcast and change the people’s shame into praise. They no longer need to fear God’s judgment, for God will bring them home and restore their fortunes. Just when all seems lost, music helps us make a way out of no way.

Music gives us courage to face the storm without flinching, and then to see hope at its center. The power of music as a source of resistance is expressed in this hymn by Robert Lowry: *My life flows on in endless song, above earth’s lamentation, I hear the*

*sweet, though far off hymn that hails a new creation. Through all the tumult and the strife, I hear the music ringing. It finds an echo in my soul. How can I keep from singing?*

William Harvey was a young violin student at the Juilliard School of Music when planes flew into the Twin Towers on Sept. 11, 2001. As rescue workers labored at Ground Zero in the days following the attack, the violinist played for hours to give them the strength to endure.

William said: *I played everything I could do from memory: Bach's B minor Partita, Tchaikovsky's violin concerto, the Dvorak concerto, Paganini Caprices 1 and 17, Vivaldi's "Winter" and "Spring," the theme from Schindler's List, "Amazing Grace," "Turkey in the Straw," and "My Country 'Tis of Thee." Never have I played for a more grateful audience. Somehow it didn't matter that by the end, my intonation was shot and I had no bow control. I would have lost any competition I was playing in, but it didn't matter."*

It is not technique that counts, but the music that reaches out to our shattered souls and reminds us there is something greater than ourselves, that God will take care of us, and even bring us back to life.

Music has the ability to move us beyond time and space---to connect us on a deeply spiritual level with people who lived centuries before we were born. Music can construct in the air an invisible and yet very real bridge that bonds us to other ages, languages and cultures.

Music speaks to us at every stage of life.

A man in his 50s developed Alzheimer's disease. His wife and children decided he should stay home as much as possible and rarely took him out, even to church. It was a relief, because going out made him confused, and they were embarrassed when he could no longer remember the names of longtime friends.

Then one Sunday when his daughter and son were home from college, the family decided to go to church together. The man had almost stopped speaking and usually could not even recognize his own children. They sat in a back pew, and the man was silent through most of the service. Then suddenly, when the congregation rose to sing

after the offering, he too stood up, straight as could be, and joined in: *Praise God from whom all blessings flow*. He didn't miss a note.

Tears streamed down the faces of his loved ones, because they had witnessed a small miracle. For one glorious moment, their husband and father was alive to them again and to something outside himself—all because this doxology and these words were imprinted so deeply inside of him. Through that music, he remembered who he was and to whom he belonged.

Music allows us to transcend this earthly frame for an all-too-brief moment so that we can gain a glimpse of the world as God sees it. Praising God is one thing we do on this earth that we know we will also do in the life to come.

It is music that gives us hope to endure and a reason to be transformed, knowing that this imperfect world is coming to an end and the advent of a new world is waiting.

And as we wait for the coming of the Christ child, we sing. Amen.