

"As We Sing..."

Christmas Eve
The Reverend Glenn E. Ludwig

Friday, December 24, 2010
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Luke 2:1-20

Do you feel it tonight? The hum in the air as all our preparations come to an end and the celebration begins. I don't think it is just us, either. I think all of creation is buzzing, when the membrane between heaven and earth is so thin you can almost see through it.

Can you hear it? The music of the spheres -- the angel chorus in praise and adoration of the birth of the newborn king. We are captured by this music tonight, not mere spectators at an event that is far removed from our lives, but participants, angel choir members in a world-wide chorus proclaiming God's great love for us and this world in the birth of his Son. This incarnation, this coming in the flesh of our God to live among us, is a mystery best encased in music, not mere words.

Music is contagious, is it not? You don't even know you've caught a song until you find yourself singing it in the shower, or humming it while driving. And who doesn't know the frustration of getting an annoying song stuck in your head, a song that keeps popping up throughout the days and weeks? That annoying song this year for me was *Grandma Got Run Over by a Reindeer*, which I thought was funnier before I became a grandparent.

But who can deny that there is power in music and it is that power that holds the mystery of this night for us. You know, no one ever says "You know what I love about Christmas Eve? The Sermon!" No one ever says that, because this night is more than any preachers' words can capture. It is about deeply felt meaning, about experiences of Christmas' pasts that help define who we are; it's about undaunted hope for a better world, and most of that is conveyed in the sensual experiences of Christmas Eve -- the smell of pine, the green and the red reflected in our eyes, the candles glow and warmth, and in the song the angels invite us to sing with them as heaven and earth touch this night.

I know that not all of us are great singers. There is the story of a man who walked by a woman who was singing, and she had a terrible voice. The man asked her why she was singing. The woman said, "I sing to kill time." The man replied, "Well, ma'am, that's quite a weapon you have there."

No, tonight is not about the sounds we make, but what happens in and through us as we sing.

As we sing, memories and feelings are *evoked*. Music has the power to change our moods, our minds, our very hearts, and what better music for that to happen than the music of the angels announcing the birth of God's Son among us? Because of the emotional impact of some hymns, people tell me that when we sing them in

church they get tears in their eyes and lumps in their throats. I tell them they are not alone. Sing *Amazing Grace* at a funeral of a loved one and you will never sing it the same way again.

The same is true of this night, and more so. Christmas carols bring back a flood of memories and feelings. For instance, sing with me, softly, one of my favorites, *O Little Town of Bethlehem*.

Did you hear the angels singing with us? Did feelings get stirred? As we sing, that's part of what happens to us, and why we gather more for the experience of this night than for any words I can offer. The mystery of God's incarnation is more felt and experienced than understood and explained.

But music does more. As we sing, we not only evoke, we *provoke* – we express our deepest yearnings and prayers. Sidney Lanier once said that music "is love in search of a word." Charles Kingsley called music "the speech of angels." Luther held music in such high regard that he once said: "after theology, I accord to music the highest place and the greatest honor." Music was for him God's creation, and he called into question any who disregarded it. "A person who gives some thought," he wrote, "and yet does not regard music as a marvelous creation of God, must be a clodhopper indeed and does not deserve to be called a human being." There's a word you never expected to hear on Christmas Eve – clodhopper.

And did you notice, it was impossible for the world to remain silent on that Christmas Eve of long ago, and it has been impossible ever since for those of us who love the story. The angels sang. They sang of a God who is not out there somewhere, but of Emmanuel, God with us. In the Old Testament, God revealed himself as the great "I am." In the birth of Jesus, God changes the message to "I am here!" "I am here, and I want to walk your paths. I am here, and I want to feel your hurts. I am here, and I want to give you the best of myself. I am here, and I want to show you how to love me and your neighbor. I am here, and I want the world to sing."

Yes, the angels sang of hope, and that is what we still yearn for this night. Hope for a brighter tomorrow. Hope for a world of peace, where children don't go to bed hungry, and everyone is treated as a child of God.

As we sing, we evoke memories and provoke yearnings, and finally, as we sing, we *invoke*. As we sing, we help create that which we sing about and that which we long for. It is a great mystery, but it is truth. As Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann has so wisely written, "The words with which we praise God shape the world in which we shall live." You see, when we join the chorus of angels in singing, our lives are transformed. Why, after all, do tears come when we sing? Why do lumps clog our throats? It is our hearts being touched, changed and transformed by God.

Probably most of you have never heard of Alfred Anderson. He died in November 2005 at the age of 109. He was the last surviving participant in an infamous event

that took place 9 decades before and that serves this night to remind us of the truth of the power of music.

You see, Alfred Anderson was a young British soldier fighting in the trenches of World War I. It was Christmas Eve 1914 along the Western Front in Belgium. A German soldier was heard singing *Silent Night* in German. British soldiers began to sing back, in English. Soon both sides were singing and an unofficial truce was declared as soldiers, under white flags, joined each other in between the two lines and sang carols and exchanged gifts. When they sang *Silent Night*, it became a reality for them that night – “all is calm, all is bright.” Alfred Anderson was there, a mere 19-year-old soldier, sharing songs with an enemy that now had a face.

Now, many of you have no doubt heard this story, but there is an interesting ramification of this encounter that many don't know. You see, an amazing thing happened after that night of singing; the troops on both sides of the lines had to be replaced after that unofficial truce, because, you see, they wouldn't fire on one another any more. They had created, in their night of surrender to the power of carol and song, the conditions they had sung – "Silent night, holy night, all is calm, all is bright. . . Sleep in heavenly peace." As we sing, we help create that which we sing.

So, can you “hear the Christmas angels, their great glad tidings tell?” I can, because heaven is that close tonight. And we who sing with them, as we sing announcing the good news of the birth of the savior, are touched by God.

What a powerful chorus we are tonight. So, let us sing as if our lives depend on it, which surely they do.

AMEN.

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