

“The Music of Christmas”

Luke 1:46-47, 67-68; 2:13-14

December 21, 2014; Revised for FPC Evening Service November 30, 2025

On this evening of the first Sunday in Advent I thought I would prepare us for thinking about what you and I are certainly going to be doing a great deal of over the next month. We love to do this, but we do it mostly without thought. It is a habit, a tradition. A wonderful habit and a fine tradition, but habits and traditions lose their power over time if we do not attend to them. And we do that by thinking about them, carefully, wisely, intentionally. The habit I am speaking of is the singing of and listening to Christmas music.

Tonight I want us to think more deeply about music and why it has the place it does in human life, and why it is so important to our Christmas celebrations. Music is so ubiquitous, so familiar, and so constant a feature of our daily experience that we hardly think about it all. We take it for granted, and we Christians, of all people, should not do that.

Text Comment

- v.46 What follows is universally known as Mary’s *Magnificat*, so titled because that verb is the first word of the poem in the Latin translation of the Bible. *Magnificat anima mea Dominum*, “My soul *magnifies* the Lord.” In Latin the verb was put first for emphasis.
- v.68 What follows is traditionally known as the *Benedictus*, again because that participle is the first word of the poem in the Latin translation of the Bible. *Benedictus Dominus Deus Israel*, “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel...”
- 2:14 This poem is universally known as the *Gloria in Excelsis Deo*, “Glory to God in the Highest,” again after its first words in the Latin Bible, though “Excelsis” is actually a synonym for the word that is found in the Vulgate where the first phrase is “Gloria in *altissimis* Deo...” Jerome, the translator of the Vulgate, the Latin Bible of European Christendom for more than a thousand years, preferred *altissimis*; Hilary, apparently the author of a 4th century hymn based on this text, preferred *excelsis*. Both words in the same gender, case, and number mean the same thing, “in the highest places,” that is, in heaven. The idea is that we on earth should praise God as he is praised in heaven.

All three of these poems have OT roots; indeed, the opening line of the Benedictus is a verbatim citation of Psalm 41:14. The Magnificat and the Benedictus are both “mosaics of Old Testament texts.” [Caird, 55] That is, phrase after phrase, sentence after sentence either repeating something found in the OT or closely approximating it.

More than we probably realize, our celebration – indeed the world’s celebration – of Christmas is profoundly musical, much more so than any other celebration of the year, personal or public. We expect to sing “Happy Birthday to You,” on your birthday, but pray tell what music signals the approach of the Fourth of July, or Labor Day, or even Thanksgiving? We all know Christmas carols or Christmas hymns for what they are, we recognize them as soon as we hear them. Everybody does. The stores get us into the Christmas mood by playing them; carolers sing them

from house to house; many Americans and many Christians play Christmas music in our homes through the month of December, and, of course, we expect our Advent services at church to be full of Christmas music. Have you noticed this? There is really nothing else like this anywhere in the world, even in the church. We sing Easter hymns on Easter Sunday, but we don't play them for a month beforehand, we don't hear them in stores, and no one comes to our front door to sing them.

There are, no doubt, several reasons for this, but surely one of them is that the Christmas narrative in the Bible is itself littered with songs. *Christmas began as history set to music!* We actually have still another song in Luke chapter 2, Simeon's *Nunc Dimittis*. We find four songs or hymns to celebrate and to acknowledge the birth of Jesus Christ in the Bible's own account of that birth. Surely *that* has something to do with the fact that Christmas is *so distinctly and unusually a musical holiday*.

To be sure, all the music we sing at Christmas is not distinctly Christian. "Jingle Bells," "Silver Bells," or "Chestnuts Roasting on an Open Fire" are full of cheery sentiment but have nothing to do with the incarnation of God the Son. But a surprisingly large portion of our Christmas music, even in secularized 21st century America, is overtly Christian. I heard not long ago on the car radio that in one poll of American opinion the most popular Christmas song was "Silent Night." At what other time of the year do you hear hymns to Jesus Christ sung or played in stores or the streets?

Now the sharp sighted among you may have already noticed a problem. I'm talking about music and particularly about Christmas *songs*, but the verb "sing" does not appear in regard to any of these texts: not the *Magnificat*, not the *Benedictus*, and not the *Gloria in Excelsis*. We read in Luke 1:46 that Mary "said," not that she sang; and so with Zechariah in v. 67: he prophesied *saying*, not *singing*. Again, the *Gloria* in 2:14 is introduced with the phrase, "the heavenly host praising God and *saying*..." Where, we may ask, is there any *music* to be found?

True enough, the text reads "say," not "sing," but that is of little consequence. If you read the commentaries on these texts, as I did this past week, you will find that scholars of all persuasions artlessly refer to all three of these poems as "songs," and frequently speak of their being "sung." And there are reasons why they do this.

1. First, these psalm-like texts, of course, originated as poems in praise of God, both the Father and the Son. We do not have to believe that Mary and Zechariah *sang* their poems as they wrote them. We don't need to believe they were musicians and composers. The words may well have been chanted from the beginning, but we don't know that. But every hymn begins as a text, a poem. The music is typically added later. But these poems – like the poems found in the Bible's Book of Psalms – invited musical settings and almost immediately they were provided. When Ignatius of Antioch in the early second century remarked that in Christian worship "Jesus Christ *is sung*," no doubt he was referring to these texts among others. [Eph. 4:1] Many of David's "hymns" were written first as texts, but as he was a musician himself, no doubt they were likewise intended to be sung and were sung very soon, if not at the outset.

2. Second, in Revelation 5, we have a series of similar hymns that were being sung to Christ in heaven. Once it is said that they *sang* the hymn, twice that they *said* it. Later in the same book on two different occasions (14:3; 15:3) we are told that such hymns were *sung*. What seems clear is that in such a context, when referring to a group uttering a hymn of praise, the terms “sing” and “say” are virtually interchangeable. What that suggests is that when we read that Mary *said* the *Magnificat* or that the angels *said* their *Gloria*, we are free to think that they may very well have *sung it*. In such a context “saying” and “singing” are synonyms. Or put it this way, to say that Mary *said*, or that Zechariah prophesied *saying*, in the literary convention of the time was never intended to indicate that the words were merely spoken instead of sung.

As one scholar sums up the situation, “Today...singing is clearly distinguished from mere speech. These distinctions did not obtain in the cultural milieu of the early Church. Hebrew and Greek have no separate word for music. The frontier between singing and speaking was far less precise. As soon as speech turned to poetry, or when public and ceremonial speaking was involved, rhythmic and melodic features were incorporated that today would be classified as musical.... Music and singing could be present even though none of the vocabulary associated with it might be met with.” [J. Gelineau, “Music and Singing in the Liturgy,” *The Study of Liturgy*, C. Jones, et al (eds), 497-498]

3. Third, the Jews always sang their hymns of praise to God. The verb “to sing” occurs many times in the Psalter, the Psalms themselves, as the titles indicate, were hymns set to music, and sung often if not always with instrumental accompaniment. It would have been contrary to their expectation and custom that texts such as the four we find in Luke 1 and 2 would not be sung, psalm-like as those texts are. Whether or not they were sung at the outset, the expectation would certainly have been that they would be sung as soon as a musical setting could be provided. But why not sung at the outset? Can’t you hear Mary or Zechariah humming the words as they wrote them down? Perhaps to tunes they already knew.
4. Finally, we have other examples of poems that were said to be *sung* not simply *said* to commemorate great moments in the history of salvation and some that were *said* to be said rather than *sung*. For example, in Exodus 15 we read that after the triumph at the Red Sea the people of Israel *sang this song to the Lord*. What follows is the so-called “Song of Moses.” What is more, later in that same chapter we read that Miriam *sang* that same song to the women of Israel. These poems too were written almost immediately after the events themselves. The same may be said of Hannah’s Song or David’s Lament for Saul and Jonathan. Say or sing, in such cases meant *sing!*

The fact is Christian worship has always been sung, however much the musical style or form has varied from age to age and place to place. *Ours is a singing faith!* [J.-J. von Allmen, *Worship: Its Theology and Practice*, 90-92] Christian worship was born singing and it has never ceased to sing. Christians themselves have always sung in church – indeed the loss of congregational singing in medieval Christianity was not only a terrible mistake but a striking anomaly – and accordingly, as we would expect, there is a grand tradition of hymnody produced for the church’s worship, indeed some of the most beautiful music in the world. Further, as in biblical times, musical worship has been enhanced by the singing of choirs, and so there is as well an immense library of Christian choral praise, again some of the most beautiful music in the world.

When Benaroya Hall is filled four times during the Christmas season for the performance of *Messiah* by the Seattle Symphony Orchestra and Chorus, it certainly isn't because all of those attending are believers in the Lord Jesus Christ; they are there for the grandeur and the beauty of the music. Indeed, it is not too much to say that the Christian church has been *a* if not *the* major influence in the development of music and especially sung music in the world, and particularly in the western world where the church's influence has been the most powerful for the longest time.

Don't take this rather obvious fact for granted. Most religions, and certainly no other philosophy of life, has this deep, wide, and rich musical tradition. You have nothing like the impressive tradition of Christian musical worship in Islam or Buddhism or Hinduism. Muslims, for example, have spiritual songs, or at least some of them do, but they do not sing their praise to God at worship in the mosque. Singing is at the periphery of their worship, not central to it. Their faith is not a singing faith as is the Christian faith. Perhaps that is because they have no salvation history to sing! Indeed, Osama bin Ladin, expressing his Wahhabi sensibilities, once said that "music is the flute of the devil" and the Taliban's penal code banned "any equipment that produces the joy of music." [Lawrence Wright, *The Looming Tower*, 188-189] There is something uniquely musical about the Christian faith. And try, if you can, to imagine great music being written and then sung for ages in celebration of Charles Darwin or Karl Marx or Sigmund Freud.

For these reasons it is well for us to ask, especially at Christmas time, the most musical time of the year for Christians and non-Christians alike, "why music?" Why this concentration of song? Why *was* our faith sung through the ages and why is it sung today? Why was the appearance of the Son of God greeted with song?

I. Well, we should begin with the obvious fact that music is a gift of God, a gift he gave to us for our welfare and happiness.

It is a highly interesting fact that the Bible even refers to God singing! In Zephaniah we read:

"The Lord your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save; ...he will exult over you with loud singing."

Do you suppose God is a tenor or a bass? We would have known, in any case, that music comes from God: not only the capability of producing it, but the appreciation of it, the power of it over the human heart, and the manifold uses to which music can be put in human life.

As with human language, music – whether we are speaking of instrumental music or the music created by the human voice – is a distinctive and utterly inexplicable human capacity. That is, there is, contrary to the claims one sometimes hears, nothing like it, *nothing*, in the animal kingdom. Music in human life and only in human life is, like speech, a medium capable of innovation and development. It is an open-ended capacity with, literally, infinite possibilities. Just as the primates are no closer to human beings with regard to language than songbirds are (or what we humans call "song" birds – they are hardly "singing" in the same sense in which we use the term – so the primates are no closer to humans in regard to music than song birds or any other animal to whom we attribute musical capacities. We may speak of the "music" of the

cicadas on a summer night, but we understand that to speak in that way is metaphorical, sentiment not science.

The fundamental characteristics of human language and what distinguishes it entirely from anything found in the animal kingdom are that 1) it is *unbounded*, that is capable of being employed to articulate a limitless range of new expressions. The human capacity for language is a capacity to produce and understand literally unlimited numbers of new words and sentences we have never encountered before. You have already heard sentences this evening you never heard before and you understood what they meant. You, yourself, will speak sentences today that you have never spoken before, and other people will understand what you mean. 2) Human language is also *hierarchical and recursive* – those are the terms that the linguists use – which means that “...the words of a sentence are not haphazardly strung out one after another, but are organized into phrases, which themselves can be constituents of larger units – sentences and paragraphs – and so on...” [S. Anderson, *Doctor Doolittle’s Delusion*, 8] And all of this is an innate capacity; that is, in Noam Chomsky’s phrase, this capacity is “hard-wired” into human beings. This is why children do not have to be taught to speak. In whatever language, wherever in the world, they absorb language and the power of speech as a natural art and begin speaking instinctively.

Well, it is very easy to see that the same features are typical of human musical expression, either by voice or by instrument or by both together. Our musical capacity is open-ended; it can be turned to all manner of expressions that had never been thought of before. It is hierarchical and recursive, organized in ways that form, as it were, musical phrases and then whole motifs, and ever larger pieces of composition. And all of this is hard-wired into human beings: the ability to sing, to appreciate music, and to respond to it. And this is why you don’t have to teach children to hum, to tap their feet, or to sing a song they have heard. It comes naturally to them. *Evolution does not – never has in fact – and cannot explain music!*

Music is a phenomenal gift; it is one of the great powers, the mysterious powers of human life. *Only God could have given it to us.* It is not an insignificant detail of our text that *the angels* sang a song. Music came from heaven and when God came from heaven to earth, no wonder that music came with him! No wonder then that music and song figure so prominently as an instrument of our relationship with him, in our worship of him, and in our enjoyment of our life before him. The extraordinary divine gifts that they are, both language and music were inevitably used to announce the salvation of the world!

II. Second, music serves to glorify words and to add power and effect to them.

The sort of music we are speaking of this evening is words that are sung, text and tune together, whether or not other instruments are used to accompany the human voice. The hymns in the Christmas narrative are as important and influential as they are because of their *message*. The words themselves demanded beautiful music to do justice to the impossibly grand themes of these poems.

By adding music to the words, the meaning of the words is awakened in our hearts and the power of it felt in our souls. As the church father, Basil put it in a fourth century sermon:

“The Holy Spirit sees how much difficulty mankind has in loving virtue, and we prefer the lure of pleasure to the straight and narrow path. What does he do? He adds the grace of music to the truth of doctrine. Charmed by what we hear, we pluck the fruit of the words without realizing it.” [*Hom. In Ps 1*; cited in Gelineau, 496]

I think most of us have had that experience and know that we have had it. The same truth uttered in words, powerful as that truth may be in itself, doesn't touch us, doesn't move us as it does when it is sung to beautiful music. It is something I notice and appreciate almost every Lord's Day, impressed as I always am by the force of gospel truth when it is sung. *We sing a great hymn and know it is true; feel the certainty of it in our hearts!* And, of course, as we know, good music not only drives the text home, it fixes it in the hearts and minds of God's people, old and young. *What we love to sing we remember best!*

No wonder then that the greatest event in the history of mankind – the incarnation of God the Son – an event so stupendous and wonderful in its significance that Dorothy Sayers could describe it as the only thing that ever happened, should have been announced and adorned by song!

III. Third, music adds beauty to worship and beauty makes it not only more pleasing to God, who loves beauty, gave us beauty and the power to appreciate it, but makes it more compelling to us.

Think about how beauty captivates you: whether it is the beauty of a person's face, or of some scenic vista, or of a gorgeous musical theme played or sung? Well, the most beautiful thing we regularly experience is a well-ordered Christian worship service, or, at least it ought to be. It should be beautiful for the sanctuary in which it is offered; it should be beautiful for the form of words employed; and it should be beautiful for the music that is played and sung.

When we are commanded to “worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness” or when we are told that “strength and beauty are in his sanctuary,” (Ps. 96:6, 9) surely “beauty” is used in a somewhat metaphorical sense. On the other hand, the reason the metaphor works is because the sanctuary *was* a beautiful building and the service offered there was beautiful in various ways. And one of the chief parts of its beauty was the music played and sung as part of divine worship.

It is this power to lift us up with its beauty that has made music through the ages such an essential ingredient in both human life and Christian worship. We are not speaking merely metaphorically when we say that beauty *lifts our spirits*. It awakens an attitude in us, whether that attitude is one of awe, or love, or joy, or peace, or even sweet sorrow; it opens our hearts to both the human and the divine, to the earthly and to the transcendent. Our hearts must be opened to both when we come into the presence of God and music is uniquely powerful to open them. Some of our most powerful anticipations of the life of heaven have come listening to music, if only we realized what was happening as we were carried away by the sound.

Music is a medium especially suited to exercise this power over the human heart. I know you have had such experiences, listening to the second movement of Beethoven's 8th piano sonata, “Pathetique,” or to Smetana's *Die Moldau*, or to J.S. Bach's *Brandenburg Concerti*, or to a

virtuoso soprano singing Mozart's "Alleluia" from *Exsultate Jubilate*, or two great female voices singing the *Evening Prayer* from Hansel and Gretel, or perhaps, in your case, to some other operatic aria, or an art song, or folk song, or popular song. But, whatever the particular kind of music or the particular piece, it was beautiful and you were captivated by it. You hummed it for days after. You couldn't help it any more than you could help falling in love, when first you did!

Well the fact is, *and it is a fact*, some of the most beautiful music in the world was composed for the church to hear or to sing, and has been preserved in the Lord's Day worship of the church: from Mozart's *Ave Verum* to the arias and chorales of Handel's *Messiah*; from the choral masterpieces of J.S. Bach and Felix Mendelssohn to an entire library of exquisite hymns; from African American spirituals to a large number of Christian folk songs.

Music has a unique power to move us, to change the way we feel. Even to change the way we think. Music affects the whole man, his intellect as well as his affections, his mind *and* his heart. And it does so supremely because it is beautiful, as God is and as God made the world and man to be. When you are moved by the beauty of something you are encountering the hand of God! The incarnation, the Christmas story, is perhaps the most beautiful scene in the entire history of redemption. No wonder it should be announced by and celebrated with beautiful music!

IV. Finally, music enables all of us to worship God, to confess our faith, and to experience the force of truth together.

This is a truly remarkable feature of sung music, at least the best music written to be sung by Christians together in worship. It has an intrinsically communal dimension. This is the mysterious thing about the musical setting of a hymn. In singing many voices are blended into one. Instead of a babble of sound, a single voice or a harmony of voices is raised to God. As John Chrysostom, the early church's great preacher, famously put it:

"The psalm which occurred just now in the office [he means the hymn they just sang] blended all voices together, and caused one single fully harmonious chant to rise; young and old, rich and poor, women and men, slaves and free, all sang one single melody.... All the inequalities of social life are here banished. Together we make up a single choir in perfect equality of rights and of expression whereby earth imitates heaven. Such is the noble character of the Church." [cited in Gileneau, 495]

You see, the fact that the *Magnificat* and the *Benedictus* and the *Gloria* are hymns enables us all together and at the same time both to enter into Mary's and Zechariah's and the shepherd's experience *and* to sing their praise together with them and with the Christian ages that have passed since that time. And it makes possible our singing that praise as a single voice. And nowadays, when the church sings not only in unison, but in four-part harmony – soprano, alto, tenor, and bass – there is an even more beautiful unity. If you were located in the sanctuary where I was for many years during the worship service, you would not hear the many voices; you would hear *the voice*, the single voice of the people of God united in the praise of God, a voice that is one, but a harmony of four. And the music is still beautiful, even more beautiful for the many voices that have become one.

This is the worst feature of this new fashion of having some singers in the front of the church singing the congregation's hymns to them through microphones. We hear *their* voices, not *the* voice, the single voice of the congregation, united in the praise of God.

Music is everywhere: on our car radios, on our playlists and CDs, at home, in the stores, at the offices of dentists and doctors. Music is one of the greatest evidences that we have been made in the image of God. There is no other explanation for this wonderful, amazing, and transcendent phenomenon of human life. How impoverished the world would be without music and without the music of Christmas. Life is so much happier, so much more beautiful, so much more enriching, and its sorrows so much easier to bear because of music in the world and music in our hearts.

We will be singing our way through Christmas as we do every year, *and this is right*. The music of the Christmas narrative bears powerful witness to the wonder and joy of this history. If Mary and Zechariah and the angels had not sung, the very stones would have sung out in praise of God who had sent his son for the world's salvation. The music of the Christmas narrative, still sung so widely today all over the world, by believers and unbelievers alike, bears, however unwittingly in many cases, powerful witness to this *history*, that God indeed did enter the world as an infant boy to do for them what they would not and could not do for themselves. No fantasy could sustain music as the Christmas history has sustained it for so long.

So think about this during the Advent Season. Why does the world sing at Christmas? Because God the Father loves his Son and wants the world to remember why it should love him too! And because he wants his people to rejoice in the impossibly great gift he has given them.