

Time Matters

**A Homily by C. Michael Hawn for Wesley Uniting Church,
Canberra, Australia**

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Job 38:4-7 Revelation 19:1-5

Job 38:4-7

4 “Where were you when I laid the earth’s foundation? Tell me, if you understand. **5** Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you know! Who stretched a measuring line across it? **6** On what were its footings set, or who laid its cornerstone— **7** while the morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy?”

Deuteronomy 31:14-22

The Lord said to Moses, ‘Your time to die is near; call Joshua and present yourselves in the tent of meeting, so that I may commission him.’ So Moses and Joshua went and presented themselves in the tent of meeting, and the Lord appeared at the tent in a pillar of cloud; the pillar of cloud stood at the entrance to the tent.

The Lord said to Moses, ‘Soon you will lie down with your ancestors. Then this people will begin to prostitute themselves to the foreign gods in their midst, the gods of the land into which they are going; they will forsake me, breaking my covenant that I have made with them. My anger will be kindled against them on that day. I will forsake them and hide my face from them; they will become easy prey, and many terrible troubles will come upon them. On that day they will say, “Have not these troubles come upon us because our God is not in our midst?” On that day I will surely hide my face on account of all the evil they have done by turning to other gods. Now therefore write this song, and teach it to the Israelites; put it in their mouths, in order that this song may be a witness for me against the Israelites. For when I have brought them into the land flowing with milk and honey, which I promised on oath to their ancestors, and they have eaten their fill and grown fat, they will turn to other gods and serve them, despising me and breaking my covenant. And when many terrible troubles come upon them, this song will confront them as a witness, because it will not be lost from the mouths of their descendants. For I know what they are inclined to do even now, before I have brought them into the land that I promised them on oath.’ That very day Moses wrote this song and taught it to the Israelites.

Revelation 19:1-7a

1 After this I heard what sounded like the roar of a great multitude in heaven shouting: “Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God, **2** for true and just are his judgments. He has condemned the great prostitute who corrupted the earth by her adulteries. He has avenged on her the blood of his servants.”

3 And again they shouted: “Hallelujah! The smoke from her goes up for ever and ever.”

4 The twenty-four elders and the four living creatures fell down and worshiped God, who was seated on the throne. And they cried: “Amen, Hallelujah!”

5 Then a voice came from the throne, saying: “Praise our God, all you his servants, you who fear him, both great and small!”

6 Then I heard what sounded like a great multitude, like the roar of rushing waters and like loud peals of thunder, shouting: “Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns. 7 Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory!

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 to 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 include Song of Zacharias, Song of Mary, Song of the Angels, Song of Simeon.

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 morning 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. 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 as Christians 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? We that work with music think primarily of 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. The biblical references rarely talk about actual sound, but about music used to build relationships, music as a symbol of the worship, or music as a metaphor for experiencing the holiness of the Eternal God.

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.

So rather than considering music in terms of its sound, perhaps it is more fruitful to think of another quality of music—music fills time. Music has the potential of enhancing the quality of time. Music enhances the quality of time in a similar way that worship 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 Job’s mention of music at the moment of creation and Moses’ canticle, on the one hand, and the hymn in Revelation, on the other.

Music in our worship provides many functions. Among those is to bring the witness of others into our time. When we sing “A Mighty Fortress is Our God” we bring some of the spirit and witness of the Lutheran Reformation into our worship. When we sing a South African Freedom Song in our worship, we bring the courage and witness of the black South African anti-apartheid experience into our space and time. When we sing the songs of immigrant communities such as the songs from Oceania, we allow the minority cultures in our presence to become part of our experience and fill our time. We allow the invisible among us to be seen. We give the voiceless among us a sound that can be heard. We allow the witness of other places and times to invade our space and time.

Last week we celebrated communion. As we were about to prepare to sing the “Holy, Holy, Holy Lord, God of power and might”, Garth said words to this effect: “And now with angels and archangels, with the hosts of heaven, and with the faithful of every time and place, we join in their song singing: “Holy, holy...” As 21st- century Christians who are responsible for a small segment of the time between the “song of creation” and the song around the throne, our generation, more than any others who have gone before us have the potential of understanding what it means to join in the “song of every time and place”—of every people and race.

For the 21st – century Christian, worship is not just about our moment in time, but about our heritage—the witness of the saints—and our future hope—that time when we will all nations will worship together. It is popular for some Christian communities to live totally in the present—concerned only about the present moment. These communities suffer from theological amnesia and often masquerade under the rubric of “RELEVANT.” Other congregations are stuck in the past and have little regard for the future hope that characterizes our faith. These congregations sometimes use the code language of “TRADITIONAL.” Both miss the target of the Christian understanding of time. Congregations without memory are rudderless. Congregations without a future run the risk of museum worship.

Vital and faithful 21st –century worship is rooted in our heritage and wants to bring the hope of the future into the present reality. Therefore relevance in worship is not tied to the fads or current trends. Vital and faithful 21st-century worship is a dynamic reality that understands where we have been and where we are going. The music that we sing today is one way to anchor our worship both in our heritage and offer a foretaste of the time when all nations will worship together.

So, let us sing our songs in the interim between the song of creation in Job, the canticle in Deuteronomy, and the hymn in Revelation. Through our music, let us reach toward the mystery between a living heritage and the hopeful 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. Through the songs of the world church, we glimpse what our future might look like. They pull us toward the future hope and bring that future into the present. Between the songs of the saints and the future hope, we practice our art with the humility that honors our heritage, claims the vitality of the present generation, and looks forward to expressions of praise yet to be composed.