

**THIRD SUNDAY OF EASTER (C) – May 1, 2022**

**Church Music Sunday (*Observed*)**

**Acts 9:1-20; Psalm 30; Revelation 5:11-14; John 21:1-19**

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Alleluia! Christ is risen. **Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!**

<sup>11</sup>Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels surrounding the throne and the living creatures and the elders; they numbered myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, <sup>12</sup>singing with full voice,

“Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!”

<sup>13</sup>Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, singing,

“To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!”

<sup>14</sup>And the four living creatures said, “Amen!” And the elders fell down and worshiped. [Revelation 5:4-11]

What a delicious text for this Third Sunday of Easter when we are observing Church Music Sunday! In addition to this text from Revelation, I'd like to share with you another text – this one from a UniLu musician, Anne Howarth, who graced our services the past two weeks with her horn playing. When I asked her what church music means to her, this was her reply (and I use this with her permission):

Church and music have always been entwined for me. I've been to a few services in my life without music, and they are always a struggle. Singing together, in particular, ties me to the congregation and to all of

creation, as voices mingle and blend to form a whole greater than the sum of the parts. The vibrations resonate in my body, making me feel alive and held in community. I love listening to the organ, with its rich sounds and rich compositional traditions. Familiar tunes are comforting, and music that is new to me expresses divine possibility. To me, church has always felt like a safe space for music making – a place where all offerings are welcome, with encouragement and without judgement, even when I am quick to judge myself. It is a creative way to express hopes and fears, love and gratitude, devotion and doubts, getting us out of our heads and into our hearts. [Anne Howarth, e-mail message, Mon 4/25/2022 12:36 PM]

The heavenly choir of angels in the vision in Revelation is *huge* – “myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands”. In classical history, a “myriad” was a unit of 10,000; it can also simply mean an extremely great number or a number so large as to be uncountable. Try to imagine a choir of 10,000 singing the “Hallelujah” chorus. Now add another 10,000 singers and another 10,000 and another and another and ... What would it be like to conduct *that* choir??

Johann Sebastian Bach – composer, harpsichordist, string player, and organist – was also a choir director. In 1723, Bach was appointed Cantor of the St. Thomas School at the St. Thomas Church in Leipzig, Germany. Here his duties included instructing the students in singing and providing church music for the main churches in Leipzig. He had definite ideas of what constituted an appropriate choir. On August 23, 1730, Bach wrote his “Short but most necessary draft for a well-appointed church music; with certain modest reflections on the decline of the same”. In this essay, Bach sets forth his minimum requirements:

Every musical choir should contain at least 3 sopranos, 3 altos, 3 tenors, and as many basses, so that even if one happens to fall ill (as very often happens, particularly at this time of year, as the prescriptions written by the school physician for the apothecary must show) at least a double-chorus motet may be sung.

(N.B. Though it would be still better if the classes were such that one could have 4 singers on each part and thus could perform every chorus with 16 persons.) [All these] persons ... must understand *musicum*. [Hans T. David and Arthur Mendel, eds., *The Bach Reader: A Life of Johann Sebastian Bach in Letters and Documents*, Revised, with a Supplement, New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., © 1966, 1945, pp. 120 - 121.]

But that's not all! These singers were to be accompanied by a church orchestra with at least 18 persons!

Even if we don't have those musical resources today, we can, nevertheless, sing God's praises with the resources we have and the talents we have received – and sometimes we sing in very creative ways! (Yes, I remember those days when I was music director at Christ Lutheran Church in Belmont – and we sang a five-part piece by William Byrd with four people! – But we sang!)

That huge heavenly choir of angels in Revelation is “singing with full voice” – *fortississimo*! I have certainly had people tell me, “But I *can't* sing! I can't carry a tune in a paper bag.” Or, “My teacher told me just to mouth the words; consequently, I haven't sung since I was in kindergarten!” It's true that not everyone matches pitches or sings in tune. And it's true that some others may be matching pitches part of the time, but not always. (I am, however, a firm believer in the idea that unless something is physiologically impaired for a person, everyone can learn to sing.) Some of my greatest joys from my years teaching elementary music in Cambridge came when patient work with

small groups of students on pitch matching bore fruit – when they could finally hear themselves singing!

And speaking of elementary school music reminds me: How many of us still have recorders from third-grade music class? How many of us began instrumental music lessons in fourth grade? How many of us have sung in church choirs or in school or community choruses? Even if we haven't kept up with our instruments, even if we don't have umpty-ump hours in a day to practice, we can still bring what we have – ourselves.

And for our worship today, we are blessed not only to have music from the choir but also from instrumentalists – a pianist, a flutist, a trombonist, a tubist – and an organist. I very much appreciate that Bach was an organist and a composer of organ music, but not all of us have the skill he demonstrated. To compliments on his organ playing, Bach replied: “There is nothing remarkable about it. All one has to do is hit the right notes at the right time, and the instrument plays itself.” (Ah! But the trick of hitting the right notes at the right time – that can be elusive!)

Back to that choir in Revelation: These myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands of angels that are singing – do you imagine them singing in unison or in harmony? And what are they singing with full voice? Their song is:

*“Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered  
to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might  
and honor and glory and blessing!”* [Revelation 5:12]

Do the words of this song sound familiar? Perhaps you're thinking of “Worthy Is the Lamb That Was Slain”, the final chorus from Handel's *Messiah*. And what about this morning's Cantic of Praise? In the first verse we sang, “Worthy is Christ,

the Lamb who was slain, whose blood set us free to be people of God. Power, riches, wisdom, and strength, and honor, blessing, and glory are God's." [ELW, p. 187]

But then the choir in Revelation swells even more – much more! For now: “every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea and all that is in them” join in singing:

*“To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb  
be blessing and honor and glory and might  
forever and ever!”* [Revelation 5:13]

With climate change and the warming of the earth; with rising sea levels, air pollution, water pollution, microplastics in fish and in human blood, drought, floods, more and more storms of greater severity, vanishing rain forests, disappearing species, melting ice caps, thawing permafrost, longer pollen seasons – plus the destruction wrought by wars: We may wonder whether or not *the earth and its creatures* can still sing out God's name. And yet..., *and yet*, we have in this text from Revelation a *vision* of all creatures joining in singing divine praise.

As Anne Howarth notes: “Singing together, in particular, ties me to the congregation and to all of creation ....” During this Easter season as we sing our Cantic of Praise, we can be reminded of our connections with others – with the birds, the animals, the earthworms, the creatures of the sea – when we sing as we did in today's second verse: “Sing with all the people of God, and join in the hymn of *all* creation ...” [ELW, p. 187] And our Eucharistic liturgy for Easter reminds us of “the truly cosmic dimension of God's praise” and underscores “the witness of all creation” with the words: [Babara Rossing, “Commentary on Revelation 5:11-14,

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/third-sunday-of-easter-3/commentary-on-revelation-511-14-4>]

And so, with Mary Magdalene and Peter  
and all the witnesses of the resurrection,  
*with earth and sea and all their creatures,*  
and with angels and archangels, cherubim and seraphim,  
we praise your name and join their unending hymn ...

This theme of the creation offering praise also appears in the first stanza of our Hymn of the Day when we sing: “When in our music God is glorified, / and adoration leaves no room for pride, / it is as though the whole creation cried: / Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia!” [Fred Pratt Green, *ELW* 850/ 851] The author of this hymn text, Frederick Pratt Green: “... did not begin writing hymns, except for a few occasional pieces, until he was over sixty years of age.” [Marilyn Kay Stulken, *Hymnal Companion to the Lutheran Book of Worship*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981, p. 321] Pratt Green once said: “‘Coming to hymn-writing after experience as a poet, I have learned to distinguish between these two activities. One writes poetry to please oneself, one writes hymns as a servant of Christ and [Christ's] Church. Only one thing matters: that the hymn shall be right for use in worship.’” [MKS:321]

I pause here to consider the context of today's text from Revelation. In the opinion of most scholars, Revelation was written late in the first century of the Common Era. This was a time when “Roman authorities demanded that emperors be worshiped as gods.” [Nathan Aaseng, Intro to Revelation, *Lutheran Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version*, Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2009, p. 2026] When emperors appeared in public, the crowds were trained to call out, “Worthy! Worthy! Worthy is the emperor!” [Walter F. Taylor, Jr., Third Sunday of Easter: Commentary on Revelation 5:11-14, Working Preacher: <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/third-sunday-of-easter-3/commentary-on-revelation-511-14-2>] Not unlike empires today, the Roman empire, had an emphasis on “protecting power,

monopolizing violence, casting suspicion on the other, focusing on destroying enemies, and stockpiling resources for the few even if it mean[t] the rest must go hungry.” [C. Wess Daniels, Third Sunday of Easter: Commentary on Revelation 5:11-14, Working Preacher: <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/third-sunday-of-easter-3/commentary-on-revelation-511-14-5>]

The *author* of Revelation is named John. Because of John’s activities on behalf of the Gospel, he is banished to Patmos, an island in the Aegean Sea. It is here that he has his series of visions. And his visions raise the question: Who is worthy of allegiance, who is worthy of praise – the emperor or God?

As chapter five opens, John sees “one seated on the throne” holding a scroll sealed with seven seals. No one is found in heaven or on earth or under the earth to break its seals. Then one of the elders tells John that “the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered” and is thus able to open the scroll and the seven seals. But what John sees is not some mighty conquering warrior; no, John sees but a Lamb “standing as if it had been slaughtered”. [Revelation 5:6] The Lamb is the innocent victim of empire, the little one, the vulnerable one – but yet with the power to break the seal. When the Lamb takes the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fall before the Lamb, “each holding a harp and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints.” [Revelation 5:8] They then sing a new song – that *the Lamb who was slain* is the worthy one.

And the Lamb who was slain is none other than Jesus who was crucified and was raised. In the Gospel of Mark, on the night of Jesus’ last supper with the disciples, before they go out to the Mount of Olives, Jesus and the disciples *sing a hymn*. [Mark 14:26] This reference is picked up in the fourth stanza of our Hymn of the Day: “And did not Jesus sing a psalm that night / when utmost evil strove against the light?”

We may find it more difficult to sing when we are in pain or in despair – when *nothing* seems to be working and *everything* is going wrong. But what about singing *through* despair, pain, or discomfort *to* joy? Certain hymns may be especially helpful in this regard.

Did you know, for instance, that there is a section in both the *ELW* and the *ACS* called “Lament”? One of the hymns in the *ACS*, written by Adam M. L. Tice, begins:

*Sometimes our only song is weeping;  
our only sound is gasping breath.  
Sometimes it seems that God is sleeping  
while our brief lives are bound in death.  
Who hears the song our sorrows swallow  
and offers hope to calm our fears?  
When all our words seem frail and hollow,  
God heeds the prayers within our tears.*  
[Adam M. L. Tice, “Sometimes Our Only Song Is Weeping,”  
*All Creation Sings*, 1050]

Emotions expressed in the compositions of J. S. Bach range from deep despair to glorious jubilation. Bach himself experienced great pain and personal tragedy in his life. Orphaned by the age of 10, Bach was begrudgingly raised by an older brother, who resented having one more mouth to feed. Bach’s first wife died after 13 years of marriage. Of 20 children from two marriages, 10 died in infancy, a musically talented 15-year-old son went catatonic, and one son died at the age of 24. Bach had frequent struggles over wages and working conditions. Surgery to fix his failing eyesight left him completely blind; later he was paralyzed by a stroke. But he was not overwhelmed by his misfortunes. Instead, out of a deep and abiding faith in God as his comfort and strength, Bach turned his suffering into a way of



praising God by offering back to God the gift of music that God had first bestowed upon him. I have found, while working through a Bach prelude and fugue for organ, that Bach's trust in God has reached me through the music. This trust has helped sustain me in difficult periods of my life. Bach inscribed his music, "Soli Deo Gloria" - to God alone the glory.

We have been given the gift of music in our hearts and the means to express our praise of God. And when we sing out not only our exultation, but also our despair - the fact that we *can* sing - that we care enough to use the gift of our own voice (or the gift of making an instrument sing - or of clapping our hands, nodding our head, or tapping our feet to the music - or of just feeling the music's vibrations) - this is the expression of faith on our part - that our hope in God is a real hope - based on trust in God's promises and the particularity of God's love for each of us. Now, as we'll sing in the last stanza of the Hymn of the Day: "Let ev'ry instrument be tuned for praise; / let all rejoice who have a voice to raise/ and may God give us faith to sing always: / "Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia!" [ELW 850:5]

The response to the heavenly song in Revelation is, appropriately, "Amen!" And let us, too, say: "**Amen!**"