

Ash Wednesday, 2016
February 10, 2016
By Thomas L. Truby
2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10

Taking the Ethereal With You

On Monday Laura and I went to the symphony in Portland and this time I managed to stay awake. The major piece we went to hear was The Planets by Gustav Holst. It's a huge and powerful piece of music. The stage was full of musicians and there was no room on stage for a women's chorus reserved for the ending. The music was dramatic and the themes presented the composer's reflection on life organized according to the planets orbiting the sun. Holst wanted to share his musical vision and maybe point toward something beautiful and full of truth beyond our grasp.

Like Paul in the text we just read, Holst wants to bring us all to a point of reconciliation and peace. Paul put it as "We beg you as Christ's representative, "Be reconciled to God!"

This humble service tonight wants us to let go of our fears; even our fear of death, and be reconciled to God. It wants to communicate that Jesus carries our sin away from us so that our mortality ceases to be a threat. Its only requirement is that we allow ourselves to believe a little deeper; or as the liturgy puts it: repent and believe in the gospel. Jesus has done all the heavy lifting already. It is a fate accompli. It is a bridge across the chasm that has already been built. Already we know about it and find ourselves on that bridge.

Holst starts his tour of the human situation with the planet Mars, the bringer of war. It's powerful and wrenching music that both excites and horrifies. The program notes read, "Mars, Bringer of War does not depict a specific battle; it serves instead as a metaphor for the emotional state we experience during wartime." Holst would have known these feelings as he, an Englishman, writes his symphony from 1914 to 1916, the period of the first part of the First World War. The program notes use the words, "relentless", "ominous", and "the brasses represent military might in this music of formidable, almost unstoppable power." It pounds against you and you get drawn into it.

Holst hated war and perhaps would agree with Paul who said "I beg you as Christ representatives, Be reconciled to God!" You see, reconciliation precludes war. Paul explains how this works. "God caused the one who didn't know sin to be sin for our sake so that through him we could become the righteousness of God." At least for me, at least for now, the best word for "sin;" the word that gives it teeth whose bit I feel, is the word "violence". If we plug that word in for sin, here is how it reads. "God allowed the one who didn't know violence

to be overwhelmed and killed by violence. God did this for our sake so that through Jesus we could become the non-violence of God.” This is extreme shorthand for how God showed us in Jesus that we are a species that has learned to kill and founds our culture on exclusion and expulsion. But he sent Jesus to show us another way, the way of forgiveness. In learning forgiveness we become “the righteousness of God.”

If all this violence, fear of violence and fear that a violent God will punish us with more violence gets taken away, well, what is there to be afraid of? Even the fear of death loses its sting. We can put ashes on our forehead and leave this sanctuary with a smile. It is in this context that Paul writes “We are begging you not to receive the grace of God in vain.” No, embrace it. Believe it. Live out of it. “Look”, Paul writes, “now is the right time! Look, now is the day of salvation!” We are living in the day of salvation! We receive the cross of ashes so that we can take God’s love in more deeply and walk away more convinced than ever that all is well.

Holst too reaches for a peace beyond violence and so moves to the next movement entitled Venus, Bringer of Peace. As our program notes say “the gentle calm of Venus, Bringer of Peace, serves as the perfect foil to “Mars” bellicosity.” For Holst the playfulness of Mercury, the Winged Messenger comes next, followed by Jupiter, the Bringer of Jollity. Each movement fills out and expands the human experience, taking us farther away from the violent and dehumanizing explosion with which we began.

Saturn, the Bringer of Old Age features stately chimes marking the passage of time and “marking the inexorable approach of Time.” Our notes said “How you interpret ‘Saturn’ depends in large part on how you feel about growing old.” I would add, to put ashes on our head is to face it squarely and in the overwhelming context of a love that holds us forever.

The next movement is entitled “Uranus, the Magician” and can be compared with The Sorcerer’s Apprentice. Maybe it speaks of the playfulness and a twinkle in the eye that a life well lived and settled in faith can bring us. I am discovering that twinkle already and I think it’s only going to get more pronounced as my years advance.

As our program notes stated, “The closing movement, ‘Neptune, the Mystic,’ moves beyond magic into the otherworldly realms. Holst emphasizes the ethereal nature of this music with glockenspiel, shimmering winds, gossamer strings, and the wordless chorus of female voices.”

Ah, the women’s wordless chorus brought tears to our eyes and brought hairs up on the back of our necks. It began quietly in the lobby of the concert hall and grew. And then they slowly opened the doors. The sounds were otherworldly and full of hope, grace and truth. When we heard their music we believed the driving force of the universe is not violence and war, but love, a deep eternal love that holds us and will not let us go. The sound rose to a

crescendo and then slowly faded away leaving the building in absolute silence. The concert was over.

Paul, reaching for ethereal words writes, “We displayed purity, knowledge, patience, and generosity. We served with the Holy Spirit, genuine love, telling the truth, and God’s power....We were seen as punished but not killed, as going through pain but always happy, as poor but making many rich, and as having nothing but owning everything. May we take the ethereal with us tonight as we leave this building with ashes on our foreheads. Amen.