

“Ode to Joy”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
September 13, 2020

Exodus 15:1-11, 20-21

by Rev. Patrick D. Heery

How many of us have said, “I wish I could just slow down”? Well, there is one place that might have the answer: a town in Germany, where a church is currently engaged in an organ performance that will last 639 years. Oh you heard me right: 639 *years*. The piece, composed by the late John Cage, is titled “As Slow As Possible.” Just this past week, it had its first chord change in seven years.

In 2001, an organ was built in Halberstadt, where 639 years earlier the first large organ was built. This new organ has just six pipes, is encased entirely in glass, and, thanks to sandbags placed on the pedals, is constantly playing, sometimes a single note for years. According to its creators, “this project is a form of attempted deceleration, the discovery of slowness,” an invitation to live now, in a single note, a single breath.

It’s a bold idea—one that is probably more interesting in concept than in practice (I watched the live stream of the chord change last week; it lived up to its name; it was slow; probably the most boring thing I have ever watched). It is bold, though, because there is not a single living soul on earth who will see this project come to completion. Heck, there may not be an earth in the year 2640. Pick your apocalypse: climate change, nuclear war, pandemic, zombies. Which raises the question: Why, when the world often feels like it is falling apart, are these people devoting themselves to a song whose final note not even their great-great-grandchildren will hear?

It’s a question I can’t help but ask the Israelites today. Yes, they have great cause to celebrate. They have just escaped slavery in Egypt; the mighty Egyptian army has been swallowed by the sea. But their journey is far from over. They have a wilderness to cross, full of enemies bent on their destruction. They have no government, no laws, no unified community. They don’t even know how they’re going to eat, much less survive. This is before the Ten Commandments, before manna in the desert. They still have 40 years to walk; most of them will not live to see the promised land. I would understand if they used this moment to plan, to work, to gather food, to systematize their government, to arm themselves and set up sentries. There are so many practical things they could do. I would even understand if they just sat there, worrying. But what’s the very first thing they do? They sing. They dance. They shout for joy! Why?

It’s a question we might ask of ourselves. Why, with all the problems in the world and all the challenges facing Christianity, are we devoting so much money and time to restoring a pipe organ? We don’t know if future generations will like organ music. We don’t even know if current generations like organ music. In fact, when we are so tired, when we each are struggling with health problems or money problems or family problems or justice problems, why worship? Why bother to mask, and wash our hands a hundred times, and sit six feet apart, or watch over spotty imperfect technology, and give up a precious Sunday morning? There are many others

who chose not to worship this morning—sometimes with good, practical reason. So, why are we here?

I suppose that question is what makes the undertaking of a 639-year concert so audacious. The visionaries behind the project have a very clear answer. They see it as a kind of “musical apple tree,” a symbol of hope for the future. They say that this performance can go on indefinitely, “at least as long as the life of an organ lasts and as long as peace and creativity in the following generations exist.” They aren’t doing this because it’s practical, or because it’s easy; they’re doing it because it’s joyful. Because it expresses their joy to be alive, to make music, to think and love and create something beautiful. Because, when the world’s on fire, why not do something spectacular? To slow down and take delight in this gift that is God all around us. To resound with praise.

I imagine that’s what Moses and his sister Miriam and the people of Israel were experiencing, as they stood on that sandy bank of the sea, looking out on a path to freedom. They smell the salt of the sea, feel the warm sun on their skin, and close their eyes. No king to command them, no slaver to whip them, no oppressor to hurt their children. They wiggle their toes in the wet sand. They whip out their tambourines and swirl, in a seamless dance of color and sound. Sure, there is work to do, debates to settle, wilderness to traverse, but for now, let there be only this moment—this raw joy.

Ask yourself: Where did they get these drums? They fled in the night, only with what they could carry in their arms, and yet they bothered to take these instruments of music.

According to Rabbi Danielle Upbin, Jewish Midrash tells us “that when Israel emerged from the sea, the angels came to sing to God first. But God said, Let my children sing first because they are of flesh and blood. They must sing now before they die.” Indeed, there is an urgency in the Hebrew of Miriam’s song: *Shiru ladonai*, “Sing to God now.”

They sing a song that rejoices in a God who loves them and saves them. They sing for no other reason than the joy of singing to God. Observant Jews still sing this song every morning. Rabbi Simon Jacobson reports that this Song of the Sea is among the 10 most important songs in the history of Israel, each recording an act of God’s redemption. Nine are in Scripture; the tenth has yet to be written. “The tenth song,” the rabbi tells us, “will be the ‘New Song’ of the ultimate redemption: a redemption that is global and absolute; a redemption that will annihilate all suffering, ignorance, jealousy, and hate from the face of the earth; a redemption of such proportions that the yearning it evokes, and the joy it brings, require a new song—a completely new musical vocabulary—to capture the voice of Creation’s ultimate striving.” Indeed, the Book of Revelation prophesies that the angels, at the consummation of all existence, will sing the Song of Moses, as suffering passes away (15:3).

So again I ask: Why do we worship this morning? Why do we give ourselves to a faith most others have since abandoned? Why do we seek to save this pipe organ? I posit that it is for the same reason that a small German town is orchestrating the world’s longest concert, and the same reason that the Israelites sang on that sandy shore. Because God exists, and we exist, and no matter how hard life is, that is cause for joy.

This worship, this organ, is about proclaiming joy to a world so busy, so stressed, so selfish, so hateful, so hurting, that it has forgotten the grace of simply enjoying God and the life God gave us.

One of our Confessional statements as Presbyterians is a book of questions about faith called the Westminster Shorter Catechism. Its very first question asks, “What is the chief end of man?” Answer: “Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.” Of all the answers they could have given, they chose this to describe our ultimate purpose: to take joy in God.

I’m not just talking about a feeling or pleasure; I’m talking about a choice to step outside yourself and to take delight in a sacred song that began long before you and will continue long after you—the joy being that you get to be a part of it.

And here’s the funny thing. Once you set aside the worries that consume you, and enter this joy that transcends you, the better able you will be to face those things that worry you. The more we rejoice and worship, the more we pause to delight in God’s and our existence, the stronger we are to face the challenges of life. Or did you forget that it was the music of joy that brought down the walls of Jericho, and made David dance, and the angels sing in that Christmas sky?

So, sing a song. Leap in the air. Join a 639-year concert. Worship God. Restore a 100-year-old pipe organ. Laugh till your side hurts. Listen to Beethoven. Kiss somebody (maybe not right now). Swing a child in the air. Paint a picture. Stare at the stars. Climb a tree. Learn Greek. Love your neighbor. Plant an apple tree. Enjoy God. We have so little time on this earth. Why would you waste it doing anything else? **Amen.**