

## **Music That Scares Life Into Us**

### **Reverend Tom Robinson**

Every so often – with frustrating regularity – Trinity Sunday falls on the same Sunday in which we celebrate the music ministry that makes this church a special place to be. I say ‘frustrating’ because it’s a real trick to merge these two concepts. You could always pass by one or the other, but that would be an injustice. For one thing, Trinity Sunday is the only Sunday in which we celebrate a doctrine of the church – if you can imagine such a thing. I put it that way because in our time ‘celebrate’ and ‘doctrine’ don’t seem to belong in the same sentence. How can you celebrate anything as dry as a doctrine?

Maybe a part of this is because this is not just a bunch of words that someone put together a long time ago. The doctrine of the Trinity lies at the heart of what we believe as Christians. It is what makes us distinct – God in three persons, blessed Trinity, as we will sing in a little while. It is a reminder that God is one, but that oneness is beyond our understanding of oneness. God is a God in relationship and harmony with the aspects of who God is. The wonderful book *The Shack* is a great demonstration of that, as a grieving father is encountered by the Triune God who comes in the guise of an African American woman, a Middle Eastern carpenter and mercurial Southwest Asian woman, all in beautiful and joyful relationship.

We see and hear and taste the relationship of the Trinity every time we celebrate the sacrament of communion, as we will today, especially in that high point of Presbyterian worship, the prayer of thanksgiving. In that prayer, we remember God’s mighty acts of creation; we then remember that “Our Lord Jesus on the night in which he was betrayed, in eating with his disciples, took bread ... He then took the cup ... and said, ‘Do this in remembrance of me.’” The prayer moves on, and we ask the Holy Spirit to take these common elements of bread, juice and wine, and consecrate them, make them holy, so that we may experience the presence of Christ in our midst.

Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Creator, Savior and Helper. God in three persons, blessed trinity, right here with us.

So it is appropriate to set aside a Sunday to celebrate this concept of God. It is also placed where it is for a reason. Last week we celebrated Pentecost, the giving of the gifts of the Spirit for the church in her call to be a witness of the good news of this Triune God through Jesus Christ. Now we start the season of Pentecost with this Sunday, and throughout this season we will reflect on how we live out that witness; what does it mean to be a community of faith sent out into the world with good news?

One of the ways we live out that good news is through song. That takes us to the other aspect of this Sunday which would be an injustice to ignore, and that is the place of music in our worship and the celebration and thanksgiving of those who lead us in it. “The one who sings prays twice,” St. Augustine noted years ago, and that is every bit as important now as it was in

the sixth century. We in this church have been especially blessed in having two wonderful choirs to bless us with the ministry of music, and in having a dedicated and hard working music director who spends untold hours looking for just the right song to lift us all up in adoring and thankful worship. There has been a lot of talk lately about indigenous worship, the kind of worship that makes a particular community of faith distinctive and unique. Music is our indigenous worship; this is the gift we lift up to God that celebrates God's Presence and Love in our midst. I know there are so many of us who would like to express their thanks to the choirs every Sunday, and hopefully some of you do that. But we set aside at least one Sunday a year to make sure they know how deeply we appreciate their talents and the sharing of those talents.

But in the Old Testament text that we read this morning, the songs that were raised did not elicit in people a feeling of joy and thankfulness. Rather, the song caused deep anguish. It was a song that the seraphim, the strange and fierce guardians of the Divine throne, lifted up in praise to God. It was a song that caused the prophet Isaiah to tremble in fear, as he remembered his own sinfulness, and that of the people. The songs that the seraphim lifted up scared Isaiah to death. He remembered that no human being can see God face to face and live, and here he was getting an encounter with God that Moses would have envied.

Music can do that to you sometimes. It can cause you to feel the presence of God in a way that nothing else can, and that closeness can scare you to death. It can leave you fearful at such a close encounter with God, because we all know we are broken and sinful people.

But death is not God's will for the prophet. God wants the prophet to speak, and God knows the prophet's lips are unclean, even better than Isaiah does. So one of the seraphim flies to Isaiah and in an image sure to make you wince – if you are really paying attention – touches Isaiah's lips with a burning coal in an act of purification. Then God asks who will go for us, to bring God's word to God's people, to make it known to the faithful and the not so faithful that what God wants is not music that scares people to death; but music that brings people to life, the music that is sung and played in the course of one's life.

Isaiah responds in words that must have been music to God's ears, I will go! Send me! And yet it was because of God's steadfast and unfaltering love for God's people that Isaiah was set up for this encounter. God intends for people to hear the Word, for the Word to bring new life and new hope and new faith. The passage goes on to say how God knows that people will listen to what Isaiah is going to say but keep on messing up anyway. And yet God will send the word out through Isaiah, because that is a part of who God is; a loving Presence who wants people to turn back and live right, who wants us to take care of each other and the world God has created, who wants us to live in the teachings of Jesus, who are open to the strength and the amazing power that God's Spirit can give us. Who wouldn't want to sing of a God like that?

I guess there are some, because I know not everyone likes to sing. There are people who close their hymnbooks and don't let a note out of their mouths. Maybe some do that so

that the musical integrity of this place will be maintained. Maybe some do so because there is still too much grief in their lives to sing. Maybe there is some other reason. While I want to respect that, I am the son of a woman who loved to sing in church choirs, and for whom singing a song of praise to God was every bit as much a part of worship as any prayer or sermon. Maybe even more so. What she taught us was that God is too special, too wondrous, too amazing not to open our voices in thankful praise. To keep those notes to ourselves was akin to not sending someone a thank you note when they had given you the present that you have always wanted. Music is how we give thanks to God for all of our other gifts.

The one who sings prays twice. We sing and we pray to the Triune God who gives us life. We sing to the Triune God who saves us from the power of death. We sing to the Triune God who blesses us with special gifts that make life wondrous and amazing. We sing not because we have to, but because often the deepest words we want to express can only come through music. The words don't come any other way. The phrases just don't make it. But in music, people from the very beginning have been able to lift up their joy and wonder that God still has a word to give, and sometimes God gives that word through us.

So taste and see that the Lord is good; sing and share the Lord has a song for everyone to sing – a song that leads us to life, and life in all of its fullness. Amen.

Bible Text is Isaiah 6:1-8  
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