



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

In the beginning_ - The First Sunday After Christmas- 12_26_2021

Pastor Manisha: Grace and peace to you from God, our Father, and the Lord, our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Before we begin. Joe, can I invite you to come forward? I'm sorry. Do you all know Joe Balistreri, our musician in residence and our assistant [inaudible 00:00:25]? I'm sorry. As I was walking, were you playing a little ditty from the Sound of Music?

Joe: Maybe.

Pastor Manisha: Oh, okay. That's what I thought. I thought I recognized it. Like when Julie Andrews is meeting with all the kids and she's trying to teach him how to sing, right?

Joe: Oh yeah. Teach them how to sing what?

Pastor Manisha: Well, let's see.

Joe: Do you remember the song?

Pastor Manisha: I think it goes: "Let's start from the very beginning. It's a very good place to start."

Joe: Do re mi.

Pastor Manisha: Do re mi! That's right. Was that what you were playing?

Joe: Yeah, exactly.

Pastor Manisha: Why?

Joe: So when I was listening to the gospel and listening to that bit about, "In the beginning was the word," I was thinking about music and about how music making begins and it starts with do re mi. Just like when we learn to read, we start with ABC. When we start to count, we learn with 1, 2, 3. So I was thinking about beginnings a little bit. Want me to tell you about that?

Pastor Manisha: I'd like you to tell me a little bit more about beginnings, yeah.

Joe: All right. Well, why don't we all talk about that for a minute here? So do re mi is fundamental. When one learns to sing, when someone first

learns how to sing in a choir, like here with the choristers with Christopher Wells, they learn what's called solfege, do re mi. Do re mi fa so la ti do – the fundamental notes that we call a scale. I'm going to get a little technical for a minute here. I promise it won't be too long and there will be no test. So what does that even mean? Where does that come from? Where are those syllables that are connected to these notes and what does that have to do with beginnings? And what does it mean?

So that type of division of music that we call the scale was really kind of a hodgepodge invention over the centuries that was put together in the Western world, in the 12th century, by a monk named Guido of Arezzo. He was a wonderful, wonderful music theorist. He ended up going to help the Pope and work in Rome. And the musicians in Rome were a little jealous of him and he got moved back up to Northern Italy. But he discovered in an ancient hymn about a beginning, about a birth, the birth of John the Baptist, that there were these syllables that started in each little strophe of the verse. Do re mi fa so la – and from there, the scale was developed. The foundation of all of Western music today started with a song about birth, a song about the beginning.

But that wasn't really the beginning. It's much more ancient than that, this concept of music connected to meaning and music connected to beginnings. Let me take you even further back to the beginning – high school geometry. Remember Pythagoras, the Pythagorean theorem? The way I drive on the freeway, I sometimes wish I could take a hypotenuse instead of 94 and 696, right? The straight line to get there as quick as you can. Well, there's a myth about Pythagoras, a wonderful story that talks about the meaning of the universe and the idea of objective truth, and there being harmony and consonance to the world, and there being divinity.

So Pythagoras is walking through a field one day. He's walking out in the countryside and he hears beautiful resonant music, this perfect tone. You know, when you hear a choir sing and everything's perfectly in tune, how wonderful that is? Well, Pythagoras walked into a cave and in the cave, there were hammers made of gold, vibrating – that were vibrating in the air. And he looked at the hammers and they were in perfect harmony with one another. And he noticed one of the hammers was twice the size of the other. And another hammer was half of the size of the small one. And he realized, oh, these are golden ratios. These are these perfect ratios, these truths, these fundamental truths about how things fit together in the universe that are proof that there is something, some greater power ordering everything and making things sound good together.

So from that the Greeks developed a whole system of music. They developed what's called modes, which are ways of putting the notes together similar to our modern scales. Well, Christianity is all about the

world being in order from the beginning, right? We talk about the creation story, that out of nothing, where God just was, order came, right? Out of, sometimes you hear, the chaos and God breathed over the waters and breathed order. Well, God sang order into the world.

There was a Christian philosopher in the sixth century, in the Roman Empire, I think the Holy Roman empire by then – getting there, right? But his name was Boethius. And Boethius baptized this Greek idea about music having proof of divinity into the Christian world. And by the time you get to the 12th century, we get do re mi, and we get the scale, which now around the world is the foundation of music making.

So we talked about do re mi and The Sound of Music and Maria teaching the kids. But I was actually thinking of a different hymn when I played do re mi. Same idea, but a different concept. All right? It's called Christae, Redemptor Omnium. And I come from a Catholic background and this is the vespers hymn for Christmas. So evening prayer, since the sixth century, since Boethius' time. And it talks about the beginning. And sometimes we think about, you know, Jesus was born as the beginning of Jesus, but the hymn, the first verse says this:

Jesus, the Father's only son
Whose death for all redemption won
Before the worlds, of God Most High
Begotten all ineffably

Before the worlds, of God Most High, begotten all ineffably. I had to look up the word ineffably when I first read this hymn, and it means of an unspeakable power or an unspeakable mystery, or it's overwhelming, we just can't describe it. And that's the idea that Jesus was begotten from God, the Father, at the very beginning of time, before creation.

So, what does that really mean? What's that all about? Well, as I was reflecting on it, God isn't just a static being, God is in relationship with God's self. From the very beginning, it wasn't just God, one being, it was God and Son and Holy Spirit together, which means God is relationship. God is also a resonance. I know that sounds pretty wild to say God is relationship. Pope Francis actually said that in his Christmas homily, just a couple of days ago. So if God is relationship, our relationship is a residence. If you think about music, we have harmony. And to have harmony, you have to have two people singing together. There has to be a relationship.

So it means a lot that God is a relationship. So God resonates and God is perfect resonance. God is in tune and God is tuning the universe as God works out God's purpose. So what does this mean for us? I was reflecting on this a little bit. We are made in God's image and likeness, right? We are part of His very good creation. So we are created in the

resonance of God. There is a note to our being, there is a pitch to our existence. What else could that mean? In our lives when things are rough, maybe we're not in tune with God, right? God is not forcing us to sing a certain song. But God's song is infused in every stone, in every tree, in every beautiful blue sky, in every bit of sunbeam, God is singing God's pitch.

And I'm a little bit of a control freak. And for years and years, I was the music director at the Cathedral in Detroit and choirs and lots of liturgical details and getting the bulletins all correct. And usually the best work happened when I let go and I just let the resonance in the world, God working out His purpose through my brothers and sisters, through all the beautiful Christian people that I was connected to. That's where the rubber hit the road. And if I relaxed, things went pretty much as well, if not better, than if I was trying to make things happen.

But even more importantly, God is in us, right? Emmanuel, God among us, God with us, but God is born in our hearts. Jesus is born in our hearts. That relationship that Jesus has with the Father is ours too. We are children of the Father and we can call Him Abba, Daddy, Father. So we should have that same intimacy with one another. We all have that in dwelling.

So as a choir director, I often think about tuning. We want to be in perfect harmony, but I'm going to just do a demo for you. The difference between consonance and dissonance. I just want to give you a sense of why I believe this is actually proof of objective truth. So I'm going to play this note. That's a pipe four feet tall, and that's a pipe two feet tall. You play them together, almost sounds like one note. How about that? Do you hear how it beats? Ba-ba-ba, dissonance, but then consonance, it's in perfect order.

When you sing the do re mi fa so la ti do, you get another note. It's do, do (8vb). Same name. We would say same note, but they're different notes, really. Kind of like Jesus and the Father are one, right? But they're distinct; that relationship exists. So same with a choir. A choir will sing one note, but there are multiple pitches happening at once. Sometimes a choir sounds out of tune, right? I see a couple of singers from the choir in the pews and up here, when it's time to tune, you can think about tuning, but if you make the decision, I'm right. I'm going to wait for them to tune to me, the choir will never tune. There's always in that relationship, a releasing of your notes so you can find the common note, the greater note, the divine note.

And for singers over time, that happens automatically. You have to let go and you have to let yourself resonate with the music that's all around you. So too for us as Christians and as citizens of the world, right?

Sometimes when we have strong political ideas or when we have, I don't know, arguments in our families or other challenges –

Pastor Manisha: Not resonating with one another.

Joe: We're not resonating with one another. And we try to bring the other person in tune with our note, right? But God has the note. So sometimes we just have to let go and that's hard. And that takes humility. It takes the same humility though that Jesus had when he was born in a stable, in a barn as essentially a refugee. So I'm going to read you one last thing, I just, I can get a little carried away here when I'm having fun.

Pastor Manisha: Isn't this fun?

Joe: So that same hymn, that ancient vespers hymn from the sixth century has a line that talks about who Jesus is.

The Father's light
Splendor of the Father
The eternal hope for all below

Whatever note He's singing, I want to be on that note.

The Father's light and splendor thou
Their endless hope to thee that bow
Accept the prayers and praise today
That through the world, your servants pay
Amen

Merry Christmas, friends.

Pastor Manisha: Amen! Thank you, Joe! What a gift! I love the way that you talk about the resonance of God, the perfect tune, the perfect music existing before time. I think there's something that's really powerful for us when we think of music actually being this beautiful representation of the word of God – of God. And just allowing us to think about the resonance that can happen in music. I mean, the idea of that being the beginning is so profound to me.

I was thinking a lot about beginnings myself. I think that's why I picked up on that Sound of Music, let's start at the very beginning. I was just thinking I'm one of those people when I walk into a theater and the film has already begun, I walk out because I feel like if I haven't watched the beginning, I'm going to miss everything. There's going to be something really crucial that I have not understood because you have to start from the beginning. And you start from the beginning and it changes everything that comes after.

I was once at this preacher's conference and it was an unusual preacher's conference. It was a conference filled with preachers who were evangelical and non-denominational, and I was one of the few who was from the main line. So it was a different way of looking at things. And these preachers, as I was kind of listening to them, they preached a different way and a different style. Their favorite way to speak about what the people of God had to do was they would tell you that unless you change your way and repent and return to Christ our Savior as your Lord, you will go to Hell. They singed your eyebrows when they spoke.

And the speaker that got up to speak to them was so radical because he knew them so well, he too was an evangelical preacher, a nondenominational preacher. And he said to them, he said, too often we preachers like to start the story from Genesis 3. And we like to tell people that they've been tempted and they fell and they're disobedient to God and they haven't done what was right. And we start the story there. Have we forgotten that the story begins in Genesis 1? Where the God who was filled with light and love and joy and peace, that God made everything, and that God said, oh, that's good. Very, very good. It matters where you start. Start at the beginning. It's a very, very good place to start.

I was thinking about this because I think so often you and I like to start in the middle, even in our lives. We want to start, when things go haywire. We want to start when we screwed it all up. We want to start when the problems have appeared in our lives. And instead God said, no, no, no. Start where it says where I made you to be good. I made you to be very good. And then tell your story.

During Christmas, I think we sometimes like to start with the verse of Jesus Christ. We think that the incarnation is where we begin the story. But today we are reminded both through our music and through the resonance of our own life with God, and by God Himself, that we start our stories in the beginning when there was the Word. That's when you and I, who weren't even a twinkle in our ancestors' eyes, that is when you and I were decided and imagined by God.

I want you to think about what it was like when God was before creation, just use your mind's eye and imagine God, as Joe so beautifully put it, God in relationship – a God who is fully whole and complete and perfect and filled with joy and filled with music and laughing and dancing. You know what comes to my mind is a great big kitchen full of a dozen cooking mamas, and they're all laughing and they're telling stories and they're drinking wine and they're dancing around and making their delicious dishes. That is the God who made you.

So you start there and you realize something pretty profound – that this God, this joyful, cacophonous, singing, dancing, filled with words and

music God, this is the God that made you and imagined you into existence. And it is this God, therefore, that says you start your story from the beginning and you therefore – listen for this. You were meant to exist before the beginning of time. And that makes you just like the Word that became flesh, that makes you timeless and eternal. That's the scandal of the incarnation. Before the beginning of time, you were meant to be.

Merry Christmas, you timeless and eternal ones.

Amen.