

# **“THE FIFTH GOSPEL (AND IT PRE-DATES MARK!)”**

**Colossians 3:12-17; Psalm 150**

**Market Square Presbyterian Church in the City of  
Harrisburg, Pennsylvania**

**The Reverend Thomas A. Sweet**

**Fifth Sunday of Easter/Music Sunday**

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Agitating about my sermon title to Nancy before she began her vacation this week, I told her I thought I should drop the part in parentheses. I was figuring it was a lose-lose proposition. Either, I whined to her, people won't know that Mark is the first of the four biblical gospels to be written and so it won't make sense or matter to them that the fifth gospel came into being before the first one. Or, the hardcore theological progressives will object: “The *fifth* gospel? There are a hundred gospels, like the Gospel of Mary, the Gospel of Thomas, the Proto-Gospel of James, the Gospel of Basilides, and many others that conspiracy theorists contend the church kept out of the canon of scripture because they were too explosive or contrary to the church's interest in carefully controlling its story.

Nancy listened patiently and then convinced me to keep my parenthetical remark in the title, assuring me the Market Square crowd knows Mark was the firstborn of the four gospels and that the title whetted her curiosity. It's just another of Nancy's many talents...knowing how to mollify her fretful boss!

The truth is, the fifth gospel has been around since at least the earliest days of the Old Testament where we read about the *Song of Moses* and the *Song of Miriam*. “The fifth gospel” is the *music* of our faith because music in its own way conveys the good news of God as surely as the written or spoken word.

The songs of Moses and Miriam in the book of Exodus sing of the liberation of the Israelites by the Lord from their long season of servitude at the hands of Egyptian slave-masters. In Hebrew worship, the songs were set to musical accompaniment and either a choir or the congregation itself would sing the gratitude of Moses and Miriam for what God had done:

*I will sing to the Lord,  
for the Lord is highly exalted.  
Both horse and driver  
has the Lord thrown into the sea.*

*The Lord is my strength and defense;  
the Lord has become my salvation...  
Who is like you, O Lord -  
majestic in holiness,  
awesome in glory,  
working wonders?*

*The Lord reigns forever and ever.<sup>1</sup>*

Similarly, the Book of Psalms is a songbook filled with prayers set to music. It is why, most weeks, just as synagogue and church have done for thousands of years, we sing our psalms, though not today with all of our other music. The psalm-songs express the hopes and fears and the pathos and drama of the life of faith. (As an aside, Eugene Peterson, the psalm expert, once told me the words we see in the margins of the psalms, like the word *Selah*, are curse words the musicians used when a string snapped on a harp or a valve stuck on a trumpet or a pipe acted up on an organ, but I'm pretty sure he was kidding!)

In the New Testament, "Mary's Song," known to us as "*The Magnificat*," is as poignant an anthem as ever we could hope to hear. Mary had been chosen to be the mother of the Christ child and she could not keep from singing her joy:

*My soul magnifies the Lord*

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<sup>1</sup> Exodus 15, selected verses

*and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,  
for God has looked with favor on  
the lowliness of this servant.  
Surely, from now on all generations  
will call me blessed;  
for the Mighty One has done  
great things for me and holy is God's name.<sup>2</sup>*

The words we use to profess our faith hold their own gravitas but they are doubly moving when set to music. The text of "Amazing Grace," for instance, is a true and profound rendition of what happens to us in Christ: *"Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me; I once was lost but now am found; was blind but now I see."* But how much more inspiring it is when the words are wrapped in music. *(Choir and organ sing and play the aforementioned verse.)*

Like the gospels we read and preach, music in the church glorifies God. The music sung in our congregation is not chosen to impress, dazzle, or amaze but to instruct, inspire, and praise. There are no musical performances within the worship of the church but only musical witnesses to the goodness, grace, and love of God. That is why applause after a song, though always well meant, sometimes seems out of place because it is never the choirs but God who is the focus of our worship.

Even as our choirs sing and ring their magnificent anthems, their primary role is to lead the whole congregation in its ministry of music and liturgy that belongs to all of us. Paul was not writing to the choir at the church in Colossae but to the congregation when he said: *"...with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God."*

Music can be technically flawless but if it is devoid of spirit, love, and trust in the hospitality of God for all of God's people, it fails. In the church, music is never for the sake of the music alone. When we talk about "good music" in the church, we are not referring to highbrow literature or to music that burnishes the

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<sup>2</sup> Luke 1:46-55

choir's or congregation's reputation. "Good music" in the church is music that elevates God and humbly acknowledges the ministry of God's grace in our lives. Our music is a gospel - the fifth gospel, if you will - bearing its testimony to the good news of our just and wondrous Lord!

A few evenings ago at a covenant group meeting of church members of which I am a part, Jim Hoffmann, until his recent retirement the director of choirs at Cedar Cliff High School, reminisced about his experience on September 11, 2001. The planes had crashed into the Twin Towers in New York City and, on hearing the news, he fell completely numb. But the administration at the school made the decision not to dismiss the students but told the teachers to "continue on with their day the best they could."

The next period Jim was to meet his general choir filled mostly with ninth graders, most of whom he didn't know very well since it was only the opening days of school. He wasn't sure how they would respond to a discussion about what had happened or how much they would comprehend how the world just had changed in a few brief moments. So, Jim told us, "I went on with the class and we sang the songs I had planned and just to hear the harmony of human voices making music comforted and healed."<sup>3</sup> So it is with the fifth gospel, with music, and it is one of the reasons our worship always includes music.

At the same gathering, George and Karen Blashford offered a poem for our reflection simply titled "Music," by Anne Porter. Donna Wenger introduced me to Porter a few months ago with a poem I subsequently used as a Prayer of Confession, appropriately credited in the bulletin, of course, and then the Blashfords shared a Porter poem with the covenant group and now I am sharing it with you. That's how things work in the church, thanks be to God.

I am not sure the Blashfords knew how appropriate the poem would be this week at Market Square. But, if ever a poem conveyed the sense of music as a fifth gospel, this one does. Anne Porter lived to be one month shy of a hundred years and the poem tells of her experience of music throughout her life:

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<sup>3</sup> As told by Jim Hoffmann at a Market Square Presbyterian Church covenant group meeting on 4/26/18 in George and Karen Blashford's home. Told here with permission.

## MUSIC<sup>4</sup>

When I was a child  
I once sat sobbing on the floor  
Beside my mother's piano  
As she played and sang

For there was in her singing  
A shy yet solemn glory  
My smallness could not hold

And when I was asked  
Why I was crying  
I had no words for it  
I only shook my head  
And went on crying

Why is it that music  
At its most beautiful  
Opens a wound in us  
An ache a desolation  
Deep as a homesickness  
For some far-off  
And half-forgotten country

I've never understood  
Why this is so

But there's an ancient legend  
From the other side of the world  
That gives away the secret  
Of this mysterious sorrow

For centuries on centuries  
We have been wandering  
But we were made for Paradise  
As deer for the forest

And when music comes to us  
With its heavenly beauty

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<sup>4</sup> "Music" by Anne Porter in her collection of poems called Living Things.

**It brings us desolation  
For when we hear it  
We half remember  
That lost native country**

**We dimly remember the fields  
Their fragrant windswept clover  
The birdsongs in the orchards  
The wild white violets in the moss  
By the transparent streams**

**And shining at the heart of it  
Is the longed-for beauty  
Of the One who waits for us  
Who will always wait for us  
In those radiant meadows**

**Yet also came to live with us  
And wanders where we wander.**

**Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and music, the fifth gospel, and the fifth pre-dates  
the first, for it started at the beginning and was and is always a gift to us from  
the One whose love will not let us go.**

**Amen!**