

What was I thinking?

for Sunday, November 29, 2020



What are we waiting for?

Well, we've come back around to the beginning of another year. I'm talking about our church liturgical calendar, not the ones on our phones. The liturgical year in the church begins with Advent, and this is the first Sunday in Advent. That means it's time for my annual speech on why we need to observe Advent and not just jump ahead to Christmas. Don't misunderstand me, I do love Christmas, especially the music. I know I dressed up as The Grinch a couple of years ago for the annual SAMS Christmas Tea, but that was only because I couldn't talk anyone else into doing it, and I won't be coming back in that role because when I left the Grinch costume on the floor in our closet at home the cat peed on it which shows that nobody likes the Grinch so I threw the costume out. I do love Christmas.

I also love Advent, that quiet time of reflection, introspection, and preparation. The hard part is the waiting, and I think that's the part people don't like. The problem is, we know how the story ends, at least the warm and fuzzy Christmas story in our heads, a beautiful scene of a baby comfortably wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger with Mary and Joseph looking awfully clean for people in their situation. The shepherds are there with the angels hovering above, and the magi are there too, even though that's not really what it says in the Bible. And of course, there's the snow. We've made up our own version of the story with a happy ending.

After the year we've had and continue to have, who could blame us for wanting a story with a happy ending? But we don't know how our story ends.

We need Advent. A couple of years ago at the Worship and Music Conference at Montreat, we focused on the liturgical year. I was reminded in more than one class that we need our liturgical calendar to keep us rooted in biblical narrative. The liturgical year is not just mindless repetition. We hear the same stories repeated but we are in a new place in our lives each year and we hear them in a new way. Oddly enough that year, while we heard the story of Mary and Joseph traveling, due to a census, being told to go back where they came from, and having to flee in fear with their new baby because Herod was after them. Immigrants being told where to go, not being able to find a place to stay, having a baby, fleeing from rulers, it all sounded like current events. I asked in one class if that was intentional. It was not, because the conference had been planned over the course of two years leading up to it. Nothing had been changed. The scriptures speak for themselves and we hear what we need to hear at the time. Whatever we're going through makes us hear the story in a different way.

And so, we come to Advent in 2020. One of the things I've always said about Advent is that while we can use it to prepare for the coming celebration of the birth of Christ, it's also good for us to think back to those who were waiting for the Messiah to come the first time. It wasn't just a matter of four Sundays. How long did the prophets talk about a coming Messiah? How long did the people have to wait? They didn't know when, where, how, or even if this Messiah was really coming. They were waiting and didn't know how the story would go.

Advent, if we truly observe it, helps us learn the discipline of waiting, and by discipline, I don't mean punishment, I mean following an example, becoming disciples. The prophets and the people of God had a seemingly endless wait. Sound familiar? Waiting for a vaccine, waiting to see who's right or wrong about a virus (or anything else), waiting for election results, waiting to see what new leaders will do. Lots of waiting. It's hard, but it's real life. We can sugar coat this season and pretend everything is perfect, but that won't teach us how to survive real life.

Don't get me wrong, there's nothing wrong with escaping reality for a little while. There will be times when I'll go home and sit by the fire with some eggnog and listen to Christmas music. We have to treat ourselves sometimes. Just don't skip over the waiting and preparing we need to do for Advent. We could all stand to learn some patience.

On the subject of trying to figure out who's right and wrong, you remember a Bach piece that I played for the postlude last Sunday. It's actually an arrangement of a piece written for organ and orchestra, which is actually a transcription of a piece written for solo violin. Bach wrote the solo violin piece in the key of E. He arranged it for

orchestra and organ and made it part of a cantata. More modern organists arranged it for organ solo.

There are a number of organ arrangements out there. In a Facebook group of organists, I asked of those who played this piece, what their preferred arrangement was. I got some surprising responses from around the world and sparked some friendly debate. Most of the organ arrangements are in the key of D, but a few are in the key of C. I had to use a translator to read a comment from an Italian organist who wrote that the piece was originally in the key of C, and that the modern French organists had changed it to D. Others quickly took issue with that, pointing out that Bach transposed it to D for his orchestral arrangement.

I did some research and found an autograph copy (meaning it's in Bach's own handwriting). Here's what it looks like:



First, if you look in the upper left corner, you see Bach wrote “JJ.” That stands for Jesu juva, or “Jesus, help!” Bach started many compositions with those letters. If you look at the bottom of the page, you see the organ part, and it's written in C. At the

top of the page, you see the trumpet parts, also written in C. But, if you look just above the organ part, you see the string parts, written in D. It seems the organ in Bach's situation, like the trumpets, was tuned a step higher, so to sound the same note as the strings, the organ had to play a step lower. Confused? Me too.

Below is a picture of a modern score of the same piece. This is obviously in the key of D, but if you look at the trumpet (Tromba) parts at the top and the organ part at the bottom, you see an editorial marking out to the left showing that those parts were originally written in the key of C.

Wir danken dir, Gott, wir danken dir
BWV 29

I. Sinfonia
Presto

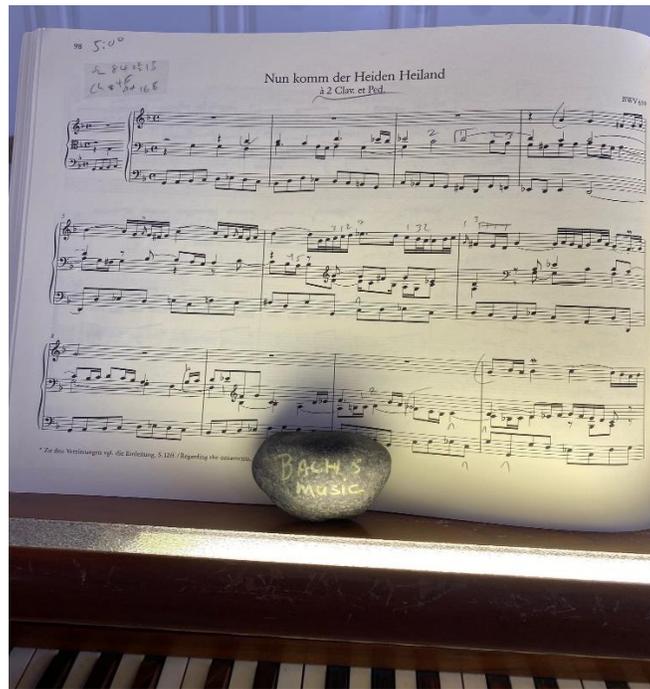
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So, who's right? Was the organ part originally written in C? Yes. Technically it was written in C, but it sounded like D. Was the piece in the key of D? Yes.

I thought it was nice to have a disagreement where both sides could be right! The last time I looked the organists were still arguing over which was the best arrangement for solo organ.

Going back to this Sunday, it's Advent I. For the prelude and postlude I'll be playing Bach organ settings of the hymn *Savior of the Nations, Come*. (I'll play them in the right key!) I learned these pieces as a student at Indiana over twenty years ago. They have become more meaningful to me every year since. The prelude is a very introspective piece, prayerful and meditative, capturing the quiet peace of Advent. The postlude is a bold, energetic setting showing a different side of the same hymn. Bach was a master at that. I'm playing the pieces out of one of the new editions of Bach's organ works. It's the third complete edition I've owned. It's basically the same music I've played for over twenty years, but there are subtle nuances, and new things that scholars have discovered, or that I have found myself. There's also personal meaning. I bought this

music at Montreat in 2019. That same year at the conference, one of our activities was to take a stone and write on it where we found God's peace. We wrote on the stones and then left them. Later, in a worship service, we were invited to come forward to take a stone, not our own. I found this one and it spoke to me because I find God's peace in Bach's music. In the midst of our turmoil right now, I have found peace again in Sunday's prelude music. After over twenty years, I'm still learning from it.



Other music this Sunday

Hymns: We'll be singing stanzas of *O Come, O Come, Emmanuel* throughout the season of Advent. We think of that as a hymn, but the stanzas were originally responses sung each day in the week leading up to Christmas. *Lift Up Your Heads, Ye Mighty Gates* is a joyous Advent hymn based on Psalm 24 that invites to prepare and to fling wide the portals of our hearts. *Prepare the Way* is a Swedish hymn and another joyful call to "Prepare the way." Like the other hymn, it also calls: "Fling wide your gates, O Zion." We will end with Charles Wesley's *Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus*. A hymn so good it appears in our hymnal twice!

Solo: John Tsao will sing an arrangement of *Savior of the Nations, Come* by a modern composer, Georgiann Toole who is on the faculty Shepherd University. She's also founder and director of the Antietam Women's Ensemble.

Organ music: In addition to the two Bach pieces, I'll play a more modern setting of *Comfort, Comfort Now My People* by Norwegian organist Egil Hovland. That hymn will also be used as a response after the Assurance of Pardon. It's another jaunty Advent tune. Who said Advent was dreary anyway?

God be with you till we meet again.

John