

What was I thinking?

for Sunday, December 6, 2020



Still waiting

I can't remember the first Advent I had a choir sing this particular anthem, but I do remember doing it with the first church choir I directed, so it was in my Indiana days in the early 1990s. I'm sure I sang it as a choir member myself before that. The piece itself is unforgettable. It's considered a masterwork of twentieth-century American choral music. It's been sung by professional and amateur choirs around the world, and over one million copies of the music have been sold since it was published.

Every year, as choir members pull this anthem out to start rehearsing, I say, "it wouldn't be Advent if we didn't sing this," and every year I see heads nodding in agreement. I also make the same joke every year and choirs laugh and groan. At the top of the page, just above the title, it reads, "To John." So, I say Paul Manz wrote this piece for me. It was first published in 1954 and I wasn't born until '65. Still, there's always one choir member who believes me.

The real story behind the piece is quite moving. Paul Manz was a famous Lutheran organist and church musician. In 1953, Paul and his wife Ruth had a son, John, who was three years old at the time. John was in the hospital with double pneumonia and the doctors had essentially give up on him. He was not expected to live. Ruth Manz had adapted a text from Revelation 22. She asked Paul to set it to music. He worked on it during the time their son was in the hospital but didn't really think much of it. It's hard to imagine being in a state of mind to compose in a situation like that. Miraculously, John recovered and came home, and during that time, Paul Manz was inspired to put the finishing touches on the music and sent it to a publisher. John grew up to become a Lutheran pastor.

The piece is called *E'en So, Lord Jesus, Quickly Come*.

The image shows a page of a musical score for the hymn "E'en So, Lord Jesus, Quickly Come" by Paul Manz. The score is for SATB (Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass) and Keyboard (ad lib.). The tempo is marked "Adagio" with a metronome marking of 116. The lyrics are: "Peace be to you and grace from him Who freed us from our sins, Who loved us all." The score includes staves for Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass, and Keyboard. The lyrics are written below the vocal staves. The score is published by Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, MO, and is copyrighted by Morning Star Music Publishers.

I'm very sad that our Chancel Choir won't be singing it this year. This is one that most church choirs know so well they can do it from memory. I usually direct it that way with the choir singing unaccompanied. In fact, I just get out of the way and let them sing while I fight back tears.

Still, it wouldn't be Advent if we didn't sing this piece, so it will be a solo during Sunday's offertory. I'll do my best to make the rest of the parts into a subtle accompaniment.

This time of year, with Advent, Christmas, the New Year, and "the holidays" which may stretch back to include Thanksgiving, we usually gather, celebrate, tell stories, and as another year has passed, we reminisce and think of those who are not with us this year. That number grows every year, and the memory of those in the past never fades. Every year when I hear the Bidding Prayer in Lessons and Carols, whether in our church or on the annual Christmas Eve broadcast from Kings' College, I am moved to tears when we "remember all those who rejoice with us, but upon another shore

and in a greater light, that multitude which no one can number, whose hope was in the Word made flesh, and with whom, in this Lord Jesus, we forevermore are one.”

As we’ve talked about grief in our house over the last eight months, we’ve tried to help Aiden, but sometimes it seems he’s helping us. He talks about people and about pets we’ve lost. He says, “They’re still with us. They are in our hearts and in our imaginations. We still love them and they still love us.” And a little child shall lead them.

Tomorrow is a communion Sunday, and our liturgy usually includes some variant of this: “Therefore we praise you, joining our voices with the heavenly choirs and with all the faithful of every time and place, who forever sing to the glory of your name.” Ruth and Paul Manz included in their anthem the text that follows: “Sing holy, holy to our Lord, the Lord, Almighty God.”

The climactic moment of the anthem has these words, “Rejoice in heaven, all ye that dwell therein, rejoice on earth, ye saints below, for Christ is coming soon!”

We’re rejoicing together with those who are no longer physically present. Wherever heaven is and whatever it’s like, it seems there’s a lot of singing and rejoicing going on, and we are doing it together with them.

After that big moment in the anthem, when we’re left hanging with the news that Christ is coming soon, the anthem ends quietly but with powerful words that speak to us in our dark times: “E’en so, Lord Jesus, quickly come, and night shall be no more; they need no light nor lamp nor sun, for Christ will be their All!”

Our Lessons and Carols is coming, and I’ll write more about that bidding prayer and why thinking of those “on another shore” is meaningful.

Other music this Sunday

Hymns: We’re using one stanza of this hymn as a response during Advent, but we’ll also sing the whole hymn tomorrow. *Comfort, Comfort You My People* is set to a jaunty Genevan Psalter tune (that means it’s just right for us Presbyterians.) It’s a German paraphrase of the words of Isaiah, translated into English during a time when the British were interested in German religious poetry. *Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence* is a text from the Liturgy of St. James, 4th century, set to a French carol. Our communion liturgy is set to the tune of that hymn, PICARDY, in an arrangement by Kimberly

Bracken Long. *O Lord, How Shall I Meet You?* is another great Advent hymn we'll sing tomorrow.

Feeling a bit anxious to hear some Christmas music? Good. That's part of my plan. Observing the season of Advent is important. The discipline of waiting is a good one. Also, it's good to build some anticipation. In another week, we'll have Lessons and Carols and we'll start on the downhill side of Advent and be moving to Christmas.

Organ music: The prelude tomorrow is a mystical setting of *O Come, O Come Emmanuel*, one that I've never played before. The postlude is also a new piece I learned this year, a joyful carillon inspired setting (if you listen closely, you'll hear the pealing bells in the organ part) of a great Advent carol, *People, Look East*. I usually try to play organ pieces based on the hymns we are singing in the service, to help reinforce their message. We're actually singing *People, Look East* next week in Lessons and Carols, but I had other plans for a postlude for that service. So, think of this as a teaser at the end of a TV show, giving you just a preview of what's coming next week to make sure you'll tune in.

God be with you till we meet again.

John