

Sunday, December 20, 2015
Rev. Diane Monti-Catania

Sermon – “My Spirit Rejoices in God”

I am about to do a new thing...can you not perceive it?

Last Sunday something sacred happened in this Meetinghouse.

Those of you who were able to attend the Christmas concert bore witness to what happens when we reach out to the community, spend some of our money and join our hearts with kindred souls.

After the concert many people exclaimed to me that the experience was ‘magical.’

I would call it sacred.

God was present in the voices of our young guest soloists from Western CT State University;

The psalmist knew what he was talking about when he said that we praise God with the harp.

The Holy Spirit of God was alive and moving through this space.

The music, musicians and audience filled the building.

It felt like something new was happening.

But it is not new – it is simply renewed.

Perhaps it was something that hasn’t happened in a long time, but it wasn’t completely new.

New denotes something that didn’t exist before – renew means giving life to something that did exist before.

In it’s 200+ year history, this Meetinghouse has been alive with the spirit many times.

This past week, it was music that breathed life into our souls.

This does not just happen.

It takes intentional effort, as well as tremendous trust in God.

This semester I chose the topic of ‘music in worship’ for my research paper.

As we have spent the past year transitioning our music program, I wanted to get a good sense of the role of music in worship.

I was inspired by one scholar’s characterization of a church’s music program being “passed from one generation to the next as a gift, with the congregation taking responsibility for nourishing the musical practices – refurbishing and changing them to include the voices of the present faithful.”¹

I started my research by taking a look at the musical history of our church.

These are some of the facts I gleaned from our documents:

- In 1896 the church purchased the New Laudes Domini Hymnals, which served the church until 1915.
- In 1903, under the direction of Professor Richard P. Paine, there began in Salisbury the first of a long series of choral meetings. Over one hundred persons joined from this locality, the first year, and more in successive years. It had the immediate effect of improving the choral singing in all the churches of the town.
- 1912 restoration of the church included moving the organ from the side of the pulpit back to its original place at the back of the room.
- On Easter Sunday of 1915 another new Hymnal was used for the first time, the Church Hymnal, published by the Century Company.
- In 1924 it was considered necessary to purchase a new organ. A fund was raised and the organ was taken down and sent to a firm in Nyack, NY. The old organ then was rebuilt, using much of its old parts, and installed once more where we see it now.
- In 1949 a musician and organist, as well as mother and minister's wife, Mrs. Stone organized a junior choir (there were 80 children enrolled in Sunday School that year). Numbering as many as 28 in some years, the 'cherub choir' joined in Sunday worship and were rewarded in spring with an annual outing to the Ringling Brothers, Barnum and Bailey Circus in New York City.
- In 1959 Ed Harriott invited other men who loved to harmonize for hymn singing in his home. Mrs. Stone saw the nucleus of an adult choir, soon to be joined by women and to replace the traditional soloist at Sunday worship.
- A new Schantz organ was purchased from the manufacturers in Orville, Ohio in 1963, the gift of Ella Moore Belcher. Prerequisite to finer music, however, was a stouter choir loft and repairs to the walls and roof above.
- 1970 marked was the year Albert Sly was hired as organist and minister of music. Formerly head of the music department at The Hotchkiss School, Al Sly attracted fine new voices for his choir and brought out new strengths in the old. Sly wrote original compositions for performance by his choir, a Christmas cantata, prayer responses for Christmas and Easter...
- Musical and dramatic offerings provided fresh approaches to a spiritual message. At Epiphany one year, Rev. John Hay and Lee and Barbara Collins performed sketches from "Witness" by David Kossoff, and in 1976 Hay directed an ambitious production of William Gibson's "Butterfingers Angel," with a cast of adults and youngsters, supported by the choir. "Lightshine" a musical presentation on the beatitudes, involved both the senior choir and the newly formed bell choir in a 1977 production that even went on the road as far as Pine Plains

I share these historical notes with you,

one because I think they are fascinating,

two because I think it helps us to understand that the life of the church is an ever-changing, fluid environment and

three, to inspire you to imagine what we might do next.

Music is an integral part of our worship service.

We use music to enhance our experience of the divine.

Joseph Ashton suggests that music allows us to create moods in worship ranging from awe, exaltation and adoration, compassion and tenderness, resolve, courage, confidence and trust.²

It is fitting today that we hear Mary's beautiful song of praise upon realizing that the child she is carrying is indeed sacred.

My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed, for the mighty one has done great things for me and holy is his name.

A prayer and a song.

As we approach Christmas in just a few days, let this be our model.

Let each moment be one of prayer and song;

of praise and rejoicing;

Of gratitude and blessings.

If things get hectic, just say to yourself *my soul magnifies the Lord...he looks with favor upon me.*

At the end of this week I will embark on my sabbatical month. While I am away the music committee is going to ask you to review options for new hymnals. Our history tells us that we have changed hymnals several times as we, the eternal Body of Christ, adapt to God's ever-moving spirit in the world.

One writer pointed out that the musical choices made by a church shine light on the theology, spirituality, and value system of a church.³

While I am away I invite you to join me in prayerfully considering our theology, spirituality and value system.

What do we believe?

How do we encounter God?

What are the values that guide our lives?

My prayer for us is that this time apart will be fruitful, nourishing, and restorative.

My hope is that I will come back renewed and prepared to lead you into the next phase of our history.

Use Christmas and the New Year to reflect deeply on what your song might say when God chooses to do a new thing in you.

¹ Linda J. Clark. *Music in Churches: Nourishing Your Congregation's Musical Life*. The Alban Institute, 1994, page 79

² Ashton, Joseph N. *Music in Worship: The Use of Music in the Church Service*. Boston: The Pilgrim Press, 1943. Page **216**

³ April Stace Vega, *Musical Genre and Liturgical Spirituality* in "Worship" page 445