

## **Homily – Music doth Magnify the Lord**

**Rob Keim**

**December 20, 2015 – St. Barnabas Episcopal Church**

Travis Tritt is a two-time Grammy Award winner who is best known for his country music. In their book called “Twang! The Ultimate Book of Country Music Quotations” Sheila Burgener and Raymond Obstfeld share a story about Travis Tritt. It seems that in his early career, Travis Tritt played in some pretty seedy places in which brawls were not uncommon. Here is what Travis Tritt said that he learned to do.

Tritt said, "Just when [things] started getting out of hand, when bikers were reaching for their pool cues and rednecks were heading for the gun rack, I'd start playing 'Silent Night.' It could be the middle of July; I didn't care." Tritt said as he played, grown men would stop everything and calm down. "Sometimes they'd even start crying, standing there watching me sweat and play Christmas carols."

As the saying goes, “Music can calm the savage beast.”

One of the things that makes the Gospel of Luke different than the other three Gospels is that we have songs, and more specifically we have the songs of Christmas in the Gospel of Luke. In order of presentation, we have the Song of Mary, which we heard Susan read as part of today’s Gospel lesson. We often call this song the Magnificat based on the opening words in their original Latin, “Magnificat anima mea Dominum,”—“My heart magnifies the Lord.”

The second Christmas song of Luke appears later in chapter one and is known as the Song of Zechariah, “Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel; he has come to his people and set them free. He has raised up for us a mighty savior, born of the house of his servant David....”

Then in Chapter two of Luke we have the song of the angels to the shepherds, announcing the birth of Jesus, “And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”

We will hear that one again on Christmas Eve.

And finally we have the Song of Simeon, which is also in the second chapter of Luke.

“Lord, you now have set your servant free to go in peace as you have promised; For these eyes of mine have seen the Savior, whom you have prepared for all the world to see: A Light to enlighten the nations, and the glory of your people Israel.”

This song is said by Simeon during the presentation of Jesus at the Temple by his parents. Simeon is a normal, good person who happens to recognize the uniqueness and beauty of the baby Jesus.

Now, scholars debate on whether the songs were original to the Mary, Zechariah, the angels, and Simeon, or if they were already popular songs of two thousand years ago. Either way they are each a beautiful way to express the joy of our God who became human. We do not know the tunes that went with these songs, but like today, the songs and music of two thousand years ago were incredibly important to people and could lead to very meaningful spiritual experiences. Music helps us get outside of ourselves and feel that there is something bigger, something more grand. Also, music helps us relate to God, others, and even to ourselves. I wonder if Luke saw the unifying power of songs. Maybe that is why he included them.

Of course music can also be a great divider. Music is very personal, and we all experience music through different lenses since each of us has a unique life we have lived. Our lived lives have helped shape our music tastes, and I know that my own music tastes have shifted over time. I have an iTunes play list in which I keep my top twenty-five songs, and I periodically update it. Billy Joel, Paul Simon and Cold Play all have songs on my playlist, and the last one I added was by the Hawaiian singer, Iz. The song is "Somewhere over the rainbow."

Have you started daydreaming about your own top twenty-five list?

We each have our own likes, and we have dislikes as well. There is some music I just don't care for. I like some country and rap music but other country and rap music just makes me change the channel on the radio. I also don't like Hymn number 370 from our 1982 Hymnal. Some of you may like "I bind unto myself" and St. Patrick's breastplate, but it makes me cringe.

At my last parish, the music director had gone through all 720 hymns in our hymnal and marked each one. It got an "X" if we were supposed to stay away from it, it got a circle if the parish knew it and could sing it, and it was left blank if it was sing-able but had not been done very often in worship.

Now, I have been at two parishes that were in the throes of worship wars. Worship wars are when people like different music in worship, and refuse to attend if the music is not to their taste. Music can get in the way of worship when it is poorly done, but it is even worse when the people of God resent one another because they didn't get the music they wanted. Can you see how power and control issues come into play?

Last week I was with other priests in the deanery, and one priest shared that two choir members refused to sing an anthem that had been selected. The two choir members not only refused to sing, but they had to tell everyone that they were refusing to sing.

God, please deliver us from even any hint of worship wars. Give our worship committee here at St. Barnabas astuteness to select music, and the people of our community wisdom to keep music from getting in the way of deeper spirituality. And, be with Janis, Sharon the choir and all of us as we sing.

By the way many of you have provided positive feedback about the silence we are practicing before and during our worship in this four-week season of Advent. We have signs up asking you to be silent before worship, and we have been using the Tibetan prayer bowl to mark minutes of silent meditation during our worship. Some of you have shared that you wish we could do this year-round, but I also know from my first five months here at St. Barnabas that pre-worship socializing and chatter is important for others. During the seasons of Christmas and Epiphany we will take the signs down about silence, but we will put them back up during the season of Lent.

In this way we can annoy some of the people all of the time, or put in a positive way, we can make some of you happy all of the time.

I think that you can see that worship music is the same. We can do everything in our power to make sure the music is well presented, and we can select music that makes some of you happy all of the time.

Now, over the last five months as I met with most of you in one on one or two-on-one meetings, I heard more feedback and suggestions about music than any other topic. Again, music is very personal, so it is normal for us all to have a diversity of feedback and thoughts about worship music. In my meetings with you, I also heard wisdom. The wisdom was a wisdom, which acknowledged that worship is not about us. It is about God. We bring who we are and our lived lives into worship, but we set them aside and focus on God.

By extension, worship music should take the attention off of us, and it should help us focus on God. Again, this is the wisdom that I heard in my meetings with you. We may have different likes and dislikes. We may think and feel different things about worship music, but we know that worship music is not about us. It is about God. It is not about power and control. It is about letting go so that we can focus on God, and in response our lived lives are changed.

Some of you will remember this is part of our vision here at St. Barnabas. We want to be a community that has life-changing worship. And, life-changing worship can be a tall order, for we didn't say that we wanted really-good worship.

We didn't say that we wanted make-me-cry worship.

We didn't say that we wanted beautiful worship.

And, we didn't say that we wanted perfectly-crafted worship.

None of these are bad, but we said that we want life-changing worship, and the only way to have life-changing worship is to shift the focus away from ourselves and towards God.

We focus on the universe-changing events that happened two thousand years ago and how they still change our lives today. We worship a God who became human in the womb of a young woman named Mary.

And that brings us back to the Christmas Songs of Luke, for the Song of Mary and the other songs are an example of worship. They focus on God and the beauty of what God has done for us.

"My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my Savior;"

My prayer for us in this season of Advent is that we let go of the fears of the world, and that we join our souls with Mary in proclaiming and magnifying the greatness of the Lord. May all of our spirits rejoice in God our Savior.

Even in our hurting and broken world may we let Mary's song become our own.