Sermon by **Mike Kinman** from the virtual Christmas Eve Festive Eucharist at All Saints Church, Pasadena at 10:00 p.m. on Thursday, December 24, 2020. Readings: Isaiah 66:10-13, Psalm 103:1-17, Qur'an: Surah 3:45-48 and Luke 2:1-20.

**A Child Is Born. The Angels Sing.**

*So he paused. And the Grinch put his hand to his ear.
And he did hear a sound rising over the snow.
It started in low. Then it started to grow.
But the sound wasn't sad! Why, this sound sounded merry!
It couldn't be so! But it WAS merry! VERY!
He stared down at Whoville! The Grinch popped his eyes!
Then he shook! What he saw was a shocking surprise!
Every Who down in Whoville, the tall and the small,
Was singing! Without any presents at all!
He HADN'T stopped Christmas from coming! IT CAME!
Somehow or other, it came just the same!*

*+*

*Angels we have heard on high*

*Singing sweetly through the night*

*And the mountains in reply*

*Echoing their brave delight.*

A child is born.

The angels sing.

Now, mind you, that’s not what the text says. The Gospel text says:

*And immediately there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly array, praising God and* ***saying****,*

*“Glory to God in the highest heaven,*

*and on earth peace among peoples whom God favors!”*

But that is not how we remember it. When we see, when we hear the Christmas story in our minds, in our hearts, the angels are not saying … they are singing.

A child is born.

The angels sing.

And really, how could they not?

The news they had to bring:

*“Fear not. Look! For I proclaim to you good news of great joy for all the people: For there is born to you this day a Savior who is the Messiah, the Sovereign God, in the city of David. This will be a sign for you: you will find a baby swaddled and lying in a manger.”*

These are the days of miracle and wonder. This is the long distance call. God herself has bent down and kissed the earth. Has breathed their song into human flesh yet again. Has stepped down from her conductor’s podium to become a section leader, not directing us from afar, but singing from among us, from within us, inviting us to listen and tune our voices to hers.

This is a night of miracle and wonder.

A child is born.

The angels sing.

How. Could. They. Not?

There is a primal power to music.

A power that even the most eloquent of speeches or sermons cannot touch.

Helen of Troy’s face could launch a thousand ships.

Dr. King’s “I Have a Dream” speech has inspired us for half a century and more…. but it’s those songs from A Muppet Christmas Carol that I can’t stop humming to myself this week! That’s the power of music. Music captures us. Stays with us. Becomes us.

This is a night of miracle and wonder.

A child is born.

The angels sing.

How could they not?

There is primal power… in music. Something happens when we sing together. When we sing together even our brains start tapping their toes, squeezing out a hormone called oxytocin, which literally changes our body chemistry to bring us together, to make us more trusting of one another

…that takes the me and transforms us into we.

There is primal power in music. And we know it. And, as Tom Paxton sings, *“Since the first amphibians crawled out of the slime,”* we have recognized that power and used it for ends beautiful and terrible. Human history is a troubadour’s tale of song bursting forth again and again from people crying for liberation only to have it co-opted by those bent on keeping people in chains … only to emerge like a new chorus once more calling us all to freedom.

There is primal power in song. It is why the Roman legions always traveled with musicians. It’s why nations have anthems. Song is powerful … and we use that power in beautiful and terrible ways. It’s why the United States spends three times as much on military bands as it does on the National Endowment for the Arts. Music is power.

In fact, the word used to describe the group of angels, which we translate as “host” or “array” is itself a military term. These were armies of angels over Bethlehem that night with their own military bands. But these angels sang a different song. Music that hadn’t been co-opted by the powerful to oppress the powerless.

Music that reminded those shepherds, music that reminds us of the first song. The song that loved us into being. The song that binds us together. The song that connects us and loves us even beyond the grave.

We gather together this night each year as much as anything to listen, to sing and to remember. To remember that we are loved. To remember that we can love. To remember that God bends down and lightly kisses each of us … still.

We gather together this night to remember who we are and whose we are … as we hear the angels sing.

And yet …

And yet …

We are not gathered as we usually do.

We are not gathered as we long to gather.

This night of all nights, we perhaps long more than we ever have to be together … to sing together. To be pressed shoulder to shoulder – to hear the strings and reeds and handbells and timpani – to hear the angelic choirs and to blend our voices and trust even for a second that we are part of a love greater than any burden of grief or fear that rests on our hearts.

The sound is different this year. The songs echo off the walls of this near-empty church. Recorded voices reach our ears through speakers and AirPods. Exiled from one another, we are only human when we cry out like the Israelites in Babylon “how can we sing our songs in this strange land?” Exiled from one another, it is only human to wonder will Christmas come? Will there be joy for our longing hearts?

This Christmas … will we hear the angels sing?

After all, when Theodore Geisel wrote How the Grinch Stole Christmas, and he needed something to express the deep spirit of love that binds us all – human, Who and all creation – together. Something that he could *never imagine* being taken away even when everything else could. Something that was the very essence of Christmas. Dr. Seuss knew it had to be song.

And so, the Grinch thought he had stolen Christmas until he heard the sound and saw all the Whos down in Whoville on Christmas morning standing shoulder to shoulder, holding hands and singing.

The Grinch had taken every bit of Christmas away, but what the Grinch could not take away was the spirit of Christmas in song. And yet it sure feels like this pandemic is doing what the Grinch could not. Keeping us from holding hands and singing. And truthfully, painfully, ironically, not doing the very thing that has always rooted us in the love of God in Christ … holding hands and singing … is what that love looks like this strange, exilic Christmas night.

And yet still … there is a primal power to song. A power that is greater than the heaviness of our hearts and the space we find between us.

We gather this night not shoulder to shoulder but eye to screen, ear to speaker and are witnesses that even this Christmas … maybe especially this Christmas … is testimony to the deep truth that the music cannot die. That the music is inside us and a part of us. Within us and outside us.

That’s because all of us … all that ever has been, is and will be … we are not just creators of song, we are creations of song … longing to be reminded, longing to sing again not just because it is what we love but because the music is who we are. We cannot be separated from the music. It is the love that not only binds us together. It is the love from which we are made and remade … the love which we are and the love we are becoming.

We say “in the beginning was the Word” .. but really in the beginning was the sound.

The sound of creation being drummed,

being played,

being sung into being.

Ted Giola’s masterful work, Music: A Subversive History, sings that almost every indigenous culture in this land has a creation story where the creator sings all things into life.

*In Australia … “Aboriginal creation myths tell of the legendary totemic beings who had wandered over the continent in the Dreamtime, singing out the name of everything that crossed their path – birds, animals, plants, rocks, waterfalls – and so singing the world into existence.”*

Giola writes: “*Pythagoras turned this almost universal mythology into philosophy when, holding up a stone, he told his students: ‘This is frozen music.’”*

Unto us a child is born. And we strain our ears. In 2020, are the angels still singing?

How could they not?

For neither that night nor this night was the beginning.

This was not and this is not the first time this song had been sung.

This was not and this is not the first time this song has been threatened with silence.

A child is born.

We strain our ears.

Do the angels sing?

How can they not?

The song is everywhere. The song is everything.

The first note rang out 13.7 billion years ago, with a downbeat we call the Big Bang. An explosion of sound that still vibrates through all creation. The original unfinished symphony because the score is continuing to be written with

every moment, every breath,

every heartbeat, every moan,

every squeal of joy and wail of mourning

every atomic vibration and seismic shimmy and shake.

It is a love song, this song that vibrates through all creation.

This song that even now … especially now … angel lips long for us to join them in singing.

From lower than Barry White to higher than Whitney Houston.

It is the Hindu Nada Brahma … the reality that all creation is sound.

It is the chant of the Shema luring us to listen to and become the song that proclaims the unity of all creation.

It is the call to prayer from the minaret that reminds us five times a day that our real work is always love.

A child is born.

We strain our ears. Do the angels sing?

How can they not?

The song is everywhere. The song is everything.

Inescapable. Unassailable. Eternal.

Forever and ever. Alleluia. Alleluia.

*California sunlight
Sweet Calcutta rain
Honolulu starbright
The song remains the same*

Yes, even in 2020 … especially in 2020 … the angels sing.

And this night we do too.

For like a lover’s gaze, the song penetrates our hearts, refusing to let us go.

It comes to us and through us.

The song that is the love that is the heart of Christmas is a force that cannot be denied, that will not be stopped. Breaking down every barrier and drawing us all into one.

The world keeps spinning
'Round and 'round
And our heart's keeping time
To the speed of sound
We are lost 'til we hear the drums
Then we find our way
'Cause you can't stop the beat.

Yes, the angels sing and dance and drum and play.

And this night we do too.

In our homes and in our rooms.

In hospitals, prisons and care facilities.

Whoever we are and wherever we find ourselves this pandemic Christmas night.

The child is still born.

And we strain our ears as our life goes on in endless song
Above earth´s lamentations,
We hear the real, though far-off hymn
That hails a new creation.

Through all the tumult and the strife
We hear that music ringing,
It sounds an echo in our soul.
How can we keep from singing?

A child is born.

The angels sing … and so do we.

And the Grinch, with his grinch-feet ice-cold in the snow,
Stands puzzling and puzzling: "How could it be so?"

“It came in our loneliness. It came in our dread.”

“It came as too many are dying in bed.”

“It came without hugs. Without the timpani’s boom.”

“It came socially distant, home watching on Zoom.”

“The child is still born, the angels still bring.

“Good news of great joy, and so we still sing.

“We sing and the mighty are thrown from their seat.

“We sing and the hungry have plenty to eat.

“We sing in defiance. We sing loud and strong.

“We sing for in Christ all will always belong.

“We sing as the child first opens his eyes.

“Because singing is love and love never dies.”

*See him in a manger laid*

*Whom the angels praise above*

*Mary, Joseph lend your aid*

*While we raise our hearts in love.*

*(sing with me)*

*Gloria in excelsis Deo.*

*Gloria in excelsis Deo.*