

Epworth Chapel on the Green  
December 29, 2013  
First Sunday after Christmas  
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Isaiah 61:10-62:3  
Psalm 147  
Galatians 3:23-4:7  
John 1:1-18

Eight years ago, on a bitterly cold January morning in Washington, D.C., a man went down into a Metro subway station. He found a suitable spot, removed a violin from a hard case, and began to play.

It was rush hour, and thousands of people poured through the station, most on their way to work. After about three minutes, a middle aged man was the first to notice there was a musician playing. He slowed his pace briefly, then hurried on to his destination. A few minutes later, the violinist received his first tip. A woman threw a dollar into his case without even slowing down as she passed by.

Several minutes later, a man leaned against the wall to listen, but after checking his watch, started to walk briskly away, as if he was late for work. The person who paid the most attention was a 3 year old boy. His mother tugged him along, but he continued to stop to look at the violinist and to listen to the music. This action was repeated by several other children. And parents -- without exception -- forced them quickly to move on.

The musician played for 45 minutes, and in that time only 6 people stopped to linger for a while. About 20 people gave him money but continued to walk at

their brisk pace. When he finished playing, the station became silent, but no one noticed the silence. No one applauded the music, and there was no real recognition of any kind.

The people in that train station didn't know it, but the violinist in their midst on that morning was Joshua Bell, one of the world's most accomplished musicians. He had played one of the most intricate pieces of music ever written for the violin. And he had done so on an instrument worth more than 3.5 million dollars.

Two days before playing in the subway, Joshua Bell played a concert at a sold out theater in Boston, where tickets had sold for \$150 each.

Joshua Bell's incognito performance in the Washington, D.C., subway was organized by the *Washington Post* as part of a social experiment. The experiment sought to gain information about peoples' perception. One of the underlying questions the experiment sought to answer was: In a commonplace environment, and in an inappropriate hour, do we perceive beauty? Do we stop to appreciate it? Do we recognize talent and genius in an unexpected context?

In short, if we do not have a moment to stop and listen to one of the world's best musicians playing some of the best music ever written, how many other things might we be missing?

The *Washington Post* confirmed, in part, the fact that our powers of perception can be quite dull, especially in those mundane or inopportune moments of life. We might find ourselves in the presence of great beauty or genius, but because we are not looking for it or expecting it, or because we are too distracted, we miss it. It comes to us, it is so near to us that we can reach out and touch it, but we miss it as we hurriedly make our way to wherever it is that we are going.

Two thousand years ago, God decided to appear "incognito" on the stage of human history. The location for this appearance was not a metro subway station, but a small stable in a little nondescript village called Bethlehem.

John tells us his version of this in today's Gospel lesson. He says: "So the Word became flesh and lived here on earth among us" (John 1:14). Eugene Peterson, in his translation *The Message*, says, "The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood."

A few people caught on to what was happening on that night in Bethlehem. There were some shepherds out in the fields who caught on, but they had some help from some angelic messengers. And Mary and Joseph knew what was happening, of course. But many folks -- then and now -- simply pass by on their way somewhere else, unaware that the music of heaven fills the air.

It reminds me of Phillips Brooks' famous Christmas carol, *O Little Town of Bethlehem*, where he writes:

*How silently, how silently the wondrous gift is given!  
So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of his heaven.  
No ear may hear his coming; but in this world of sin,  
Where meek souls will receive him still, the dear Christ enters in.*

John also speaks about this great irony in our Gospel lesson. He says: "But although the world was made through him, the world didn't recognize him when he came" (John 1:10).

And yet, I don't believe that the reason God showed up incognito in our midst was to be obscure, or to be coy with us, or to deliberately make it difficult for us to recognize his coming. For in the next verse, John says: "But to all who believed him and accepted him, he gave the right to become children of God, and they are reborn! This is not a physical birth resulting from human passion or plan - - this rebirth comes from God!"

It's not that God is playing with us, toying with us, or being obtuse in revealing Himself to us. *But recognizing his presence in our midst is not something we can do in our own human strength or wisdom.* It requires the gracious action of the Holy Spirit. It requires what John Wesley used to describe as the "activation" of our spiritual senses so that we might perceive and recognize the presence of God in our midst.

And for Wesley, one of the primary ways that our spiritual senses can be sharpened is through coming to the Lord's Table. For at the table simple things such as bread and wine become channels through which God tunes our ears and

opens our eyes and softens our hearts, awakening us to His presence and drawing us into the story.

And what a story it is.

As you come to the table this morning, come with joy that our Emmanuel has come. And come with thanksgiving, because even though God has arrived incognito, we have been blessed to behold the glory of it all. And what we have seen and heard, we now proclaim to each other, and to all who will listen.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.