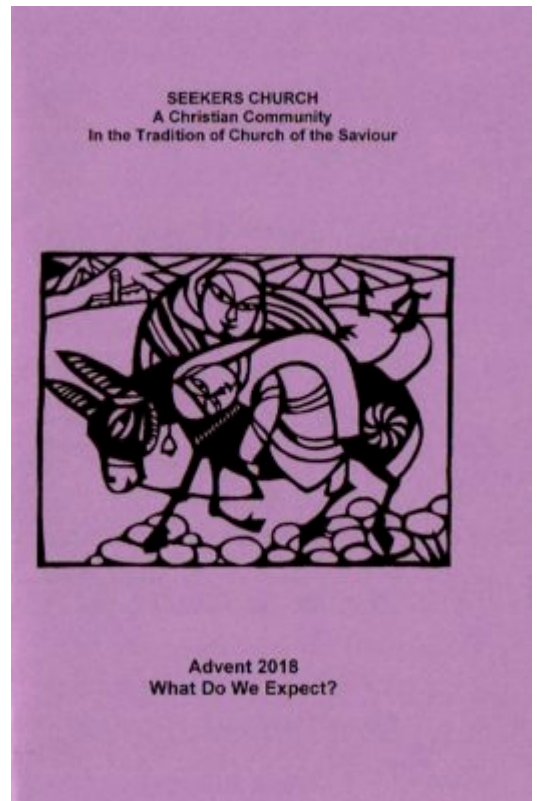


A Sermon by Glen Yakushiji

December 9, 2018



The Second Sunday of Advent

When I read the scripture texts for this week I saw that they were all about John the Baptist preparing for Jesus. it's an important part of the Christian story but I'm not going to talk about that. I'm reminded of the tenor in Handel's Messiah shouting in the wilderness; can you hear him in your mental ears? I'm not going to talk about him either.

As I continued to read, the word salvation seemed to rise into focus. The idea of salvation meant a lot to folks in the Baptist church where I grew up but somehow I didn't get it. When did I ever need saving, and from what? The idea of eternal fire seemed far away, and now even the idea of hell seems a bit extreme. Salvation sounds like a good idea; but what does it mean? I asked Deborah. She said it's related to the word salve; it's about "healing." Okay, I can use that.

I am also going to use themes from Philippians to guide me. Verse nine reads: And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, 10) so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ.

In this sermon I want to trace how Call has shown itself in my life. As you might guess, my call centered around music. I began playing the guitar as a young teen and became a song leader in my youth group at church. It was fun and I felt I was being helpful. I started playing the piano and then studied music in college. The music department focused on training performers, which is perfectly natural—performing is what a musician does. But I knew deep down that I did not want to be a performer like many of my friends and classmates.

After graduating from college I put down the guitar. I decided to concentrate on my work life. When Deborah and I arrived at Seekers in 1990 I had forgotten that I could play. It feels strange to look back and realize that I forgot something that was and is so much of my identity. For years in Seekers I was a non-musical member of the congregation. I have a hazy memory of talking with Pat and somehow ending the conversation by playing “Michael Row the Boat Ashore.” I think it might have been at an overnight at Wellspring. I remember seeing his surprised expression when I started to play. I suddenly remembered that I knew how to play the guitar. My call to music slowly began to wake up.

In 1995 on Christmas Day, Jesse and I played together at Alan and Mary Carol’s house so the gathered group could sing carols after dinner. Jesse Palidofsky is a folk musician who was a member of our church for many years. A couple of years ago he decided to become a member of Eighth Day, which is sister church that also came from the Church of the Savior.

The idea for the singalong was born that evening. In January of 1996 we began the monthly singalongs. Many of you have

joined me in a living room somewhere making music and enjoying each other's company. The singalongs were another expression of my call to shared music.

I remember a day at college, in piano performance class, when I was really nervous about the Chopin I was supposed to play. A fellow classmate, an old woman from my twenty-year old perspective, touched me on the arm and said "we're all friends here." That thought has been a part of my life since. It really is nice to sing with friends.

The songs we sing at the singalong are the old familiar ones; the easy songs out of our common histories: simple childhood songs, pop music, show tunes. The true joy is to be together and sing. We are not performing or showing off.

I think of singing, and instantly and unconsciously, I remember how to breathe, how to open my chest, release my shoulders, relax my neck, and open my throat. I stretch my mouth wide, shift my jaw, breathe in and out the plain old, regular air that is the main ingredient of singing.

See what we've done with it. We bring it in, make it interior, we infuse it, we surround it, initiate it, press it into the shape of our soul, and let it float away, something new and holy.

So the singalongs went on year after year and we sang hundreds of songs together. How many times did we sing: "Five Hundred Miles," "Those Were the Days," or "The City of New Orleans," and "King of the Road," or "If I Only had a Brain," and "All the Good People?" We sang silly songs, and beautiful ones; songs full of loneliness and pain. We surprised ourselves with how good we sounded, and through it all flowed the togetherness of fun.

The mission group Jubilate formed when we were at 2025, (Seekers used to worship at 2025 Massachusetts Ave near Dupont

Circle before moving here. Old time Seekers refer to the old building as "2025.") and in that group I discovered another outlet for call: service to the church. I began to see that I was being called to work with the music for worship. I didn't have the training that some other Seekers have but I recall the years that my dad chose hymns, led the choir, and congregational singing at Grandview Baptist.

The reason I chose "Mary Ellen Carter" as the second hymn today comes from a conversation we had in Jubilate. Someone suggested that we sing that song on Easter and I totally rejected the idea. Easter is the day we celebrate Jesus rising from the dead; we can't sing a song about a boat rising from the ocean. It's a good song so I wanted to use it and this was the perfect day for it.

I became more involved with the music in Seekers worship, joining in the work with Liz, Shary, Dave, and others. Jubilate disbanded after several increasingly dis-functional years but I continued to carry in myself the call of service music for worship. In the following years Liz and I worked together to bring music into our worship, and have a reliable and flexible partnership that is a legacy of our lives in the churches of our youth: mine Southern Baptist, hers Lutheran-Missouri Synod, I believe? It's a little interesting to track our trajectories from the Fundamentals to the Progressives.

Jesse and I spent many years making music together and organizing performances down at 2025. After we bought this building and were fixing it up I made sure we installed the technical infrastructure we needed for performances. In this room you can see the speakers and mic panels on the walls, the mounting points for hanging theater style lights; and know that the dimmer system, the cables and connections that make things possible are installed in the walls and ceiling. Preparing the way for the next steps of my call to music.

For a moment I am going to switch from my history to talk

about professional musicians. I think our modern culture has taught us to mistrust our own abilities. Too often some people compare themselves to professionals or naturally talented people, become discouraged and stop trying to create something of their own. I've heard many people say they can't sing, or carry a tune; I think most of those people are better at singing than they think, and simply need more confidence and practice.

Professional musicians are important, and I support their work. They are probably the ones who will make the greatest advancements simply because they spend more time with their music. I think the status and prestige of musicians and styles of music is an unnecessary prejudice, but folk music is on a lower tier of the music world. Some folk music is corny, hokey, dumb – and some of those songs are meant to be just that but I also think when a simple song is sung with integrity and appreciation for the beauties it might contain one could be astonished.

So I support the folk musician who works hard to create and present their best work, and I support anyone who sings by themselves, or sings in church, or at a singalong.

In 2010 Jesse and I, with a lot of help, started Carroll Cafe. This was the next step on the path of call for me. I wanted other people to see the depth and beauty I had experienced in the world of folk music. We wanted to create a place for audiences to hear music they would not find easily; and pay the musicians a fair price. I also wanted to use our wonderful building and the technology we put into it.

We have been offering 9 or 10 shows per year and had more success than we could have predicted. We opened our doors to the world and hundreds of strangers have visited our building and experienced our hospitality. We built the stage, and made improvements to the sound system. We can mount a very credible and professional music concert.

The musicians who have played on our stage are among the best in the folk music world. Realize that a famous name in the folk world will be practically unknown outside of it. These musicians are good people. For me, hearing them talk about their lives, and what they care about is just as important as the songs they sing.

Would you have heard of Guy Davis, Magpie, Sally Rogers, or Rob Flax if Carroll Cafe hadn't brought them to your attention? This is a test, if you were at one of those shows, did you get something good from hearing them play?

Carroll Cafe is an official ministry of Seekers Church. We wrote a mission statement; it reads in part:

We believe:

- *that music is a gift that brings a deeper understanding and experience of the Creator and ourselves in a way different from any other discipline;*
- *that music can promote cooperation, compassion, empathy, and friendship amongst all people.*
- *that roots music is a living tradition that grows out of the relationship between an artist and an audience.*

We are called:

- *to offer excellent music...for education, inspiration, enlightenment, and joy*
- *to help visitors learn more about, and experience the hospitality of, Seekers Church.*
- *to use music to create a world of equality, fellowship, and justice.*

This is what your Carroll Cafe is trying to do. Seekers can be proud of the good we've been able to do.

As Paul wrote to the Philippians:

...this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, 10) so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ.

Call is a personal and private process. I look inside my heart for joy. I look for some quality of love, for the work.

That inward questioning becomes the action that moves out of my heart into my hands, and out into the world. The journey inward becomes the journey outward, towards other people.

It is laid out in my history: the call to music was always part of me. My call motivated me to make music with other people and I am awed by the gorgeous music we are able to make when we are listening, and whispering to each other.

As for salvation, I feel that music can reach into the deepest channels of the soul and deposit a very effective medicine: joy, hope, or peace. Music can sometimes heal deep wounds. Music is one way to bring a very real salvation.

Amen