

Ash Wednesday, Shrove Tuesday, Year C

4pm Jazz Vespers Service at St. Andrew's-Wesley United Church

With the Homegoing Brass Band (Marc Lindy)

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17 (NRSVue)

2 Blow the trumpet in Zion;
 sound the alarm on my holy mountain!
Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble,
 for the day of the Lord is coming, it is near—
² a day of darkness and gloom,
 a day of clouds and thick darkness!
Like blackness spread upon the mountains,
 a great and powerful army comes;
their like has never been from of old,
 nor will be again after them
 in ages to come.

¹² Yet even now, says the LORD,
 return to me with all your heart,
with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning;
¹³ rend your hearts and not your clothing.
Return to the LORD your God,
 for he is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love,
 and relenting from punishment.
¹⁴ Who knows whether he will not turn and relent
 and leave a blessing behind him,
a grain offering and a drink offering
 for the LORD your God?

¹⁵ Blow the trumpet in Zion;
 consecrate a fast;
call a solemn assembly;
¹⁶ gather the people.
Consecrate the congregation;
 assemble the aged;
gather the children,
 even infants at the breast.
Let the bridegroom leave his room
 and the bride her canopy.
¹⁷ Between the vestibule and the altar,
 let the priests, the ministers of the LORD, weep.

Let them say, "Spare your people, O LORD,
and do not make your heritage a mockery,
a byword among the nations.
Why should it be said among the peoples,
'Where is their God?' "

Song: *Lift Every Voice And Sing*

Reflection I, Move I: Brass instruments, History

When I was in high school, I remember that I became enamoured of the sousaphone – a cousin instrument to the helicon that Marc is playing today that is also in the tuba family. At the time, I had already been a gigging musician for several years, playing woodwinds in just about any band that would have me, any band that could tolerate my hotheadedness and love for music. My main instrument has always been the clarinet. It's my voice. It's the instrument that allows me to voice my humanity before the community. And, perhaps most relevant to this story, a small instrument that comes apart into five pieces and goes into a case no bigger than the size of my lap. It was a shock to my mother then, when I hauled a fibreglass sousaphone (enshelled in a massive plastic and metal snailcase, no less) over two-and-a-half kilometres home on foot from my high school band room to my parents living room. My mother was not as thrilled as I was about the prospect of playing the tuba, and needless to say, I was instructed to bring it back to school the next day. Verily so, I returned the tuba to its low shelf in the instrument storage closet, but the feeling of hauling a large instrument, putting it on, and playing low funky bass lines lived on inside me.

This last Summer, well over a decade later, I made a trip all the way out to Creston with a few close friends of mine to pick up the most beautiful 1956 Conn 20J Tuba, an instrument designed for dance bands. We hauled that old tuba all the way back to Vancouver, with my two friends sitting in the front of the truck, and my smiling face sitting with the tuba on my lap the whole ride home. Since then, I've been shedding the tuba whenever I can, trying to get my act together as a funky East Vancouver tubist – a variety of musician that is more common than one would think. And man, let me tell you: brass instruments are no joke. You play the clarinet every day for a few months, at gigs, at home, at the places in-between, and eventually you can take a few days off here. Like letting the fields grow fallow so that they can be planted anew, a short few days break as a woodwind player is a good thing – a certain magical learning just happens behind the scenes. But no, it is not so with brass instruments. Playing them is like being tasked with holding up the heavens like the titan Atlas of Greek mythology. It's grueling, somehow uphill both ways at once, taxing on the mind, and even more taxing on the body. The conceptual of the trumpet is simple; one makes a small buzzing sound with the lips vibrating against a small, shallow cup. Trumpets of all varieties have been found the world over, from Eurasia to the Americas, Oceania to Africa. Alongside drums and flutes and simple string instruments, trumpets are some of our oldest forms of expressing our human nature; we press and squeeze ourselves against creation, and

a wail of joy and grief wells forth. While we know that trumpets have been endemic to the human condition for thousands of years, our oldest surviving examples of them come to us from the burial chamber of King Tutankhamen, approximately 3,000 years ago in ancient Egypt. Here we have some photos of King Tut's Twin Trumpets [See slides].



Reflection I, Move II: Joel 2:1-2, 12-17

It's interesting that so many of our human experiences of life, and especially death and dying, are marked by the presence of trumpets, and other such brass instruments. From the tombs of the pharaohs to the battlefields of Europe, the churches and synagogues of Christianity and Judaism to the courts of ancient China, such instruments were valued across cultures because of the ways in which they embodied our human struggle against nature – a struggle that ends in a clarion call to hope. In ancient Israel, for example, the prophet Joel used the trumpet (the shofar, made of a ram's horn) as a symbol to call the people back to God during a time of occupation under the Persian Empire, in the hopes of enjoining the people to one another as to their God, so that they all might move towards greater freedom;

2 Blow the trumpet in Zion;
 sound the alarm on my holy mountain! [Cue Marc]
 Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble,
 for the day of the Lord is coming, it is near—
²a day of darkness and gloom,
 a day of clouds and thick darkness!
 Like blackness spread upon the mountains,
 a great and powerful army comes;
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Let the bridegroom leave his room
and the bride her canopy.
¹⁷ Between the vestibule and the altar,
let the priests, the ministers of the LORD, weep.
Let them say, "Spare your people, O LORD,
and do not make your heritage a mockery,
a byword among the nations.
Why should it be said among the peoples,
"Where is their God?" "

In this passage there is a heady mixture of celebration and fear, faith and struggle, as humanity attempts to strive toward embodying the heart of the divine, the heart of God, as it were. In many ways, this music could almost be read as a universal lyric to the suffering and celebration inherent to the brass band tradition. In such flowery prose, the prophet Joel reaffirms that the trumpet call to unity, victory, and repentance belong to God, who reigns in and through, over and under all the people, not the king in Persia, nor any tyrant in anytime or place – Rome, America, or otherwise. So the people sound the trumpets, but really, they are already participating in the revolutionary music of God – music that sees empires fall, hearts brought together, and self-giving love that topples all enmity. In a few short moments, I'm going to pass the floor back over to Marc and the Homegoing Brass Band, but I want to invite you to sit with the emotionalism and symbolism of listening to this music; allow it to move you, allow it to speak to the struggles and triumphs of what it means to be human and what it means to wrestle with God. The band is offering us a sampling of the once-global brass band tradition as expressed by Western music; a music that revels in the highs and lows of life, and that fits so aptly into this time of receding

winter, dawning spring, a time in the northern hemisphere that sees the comingling of life and death brought into greater acuteness.

(Introduce *Drei Equali* in three parts (no clapping), funeral music for Beethoven, followed by funeral music for Queen Mary.)

Interlude: *Drei Equali; Funeral Music for Queen Mary*

Reflection II, Move III: Spring, Mardi Gras/Ash Wednesday

Not two nights ago, I was walking around UBC campus after having attended Ravi Coltrane's Concert of Translinear Light with my partner. As we passed through the hedges walking toward Pacific Spirit forest, she spotted patches of crocuses blooming on the green. "Do you know what this means?" she said. "It means we've made it!" And isn't that just so? Spring comes unbidden in the face of winter, in many ways like how our humanity comes unbidden in the face of adversity, like the trumpet that sounds against the odds, that sounds because of God. Those crocuses, however, have a long way to go; we're not out of the woods of winter just yet. But, like the trumpet, the crocuses speak to hope – hope that springs forth, come what may.

It's interesting to me that many of our world religious traditions seek to mark this transition of time in some way or another through feasting and fasting, celebration and solemnity. In the Muslim tradition we're currently observing Ramadan. In various south coast Indigenous communities, there are traditions that align with the spring equinox. In my spiritual home of Christianity, we will be observing Mardi Gras (also called Shrove Tuesday) and Ash Wednesday this week, a time of celebration and repentance that marks the beginning of Lent – the annual forty-day journey to holy week, which culminates in the death and resurrection of Jesus along with the people of God. In many traditionally Roman Catholic areas, huge celebrations begin this week – from the carnivals of Brazil and Quebec to the Mardi Gras parties of New Orleans in Southern Louisiana, all expressions of an urge to embody and express the shift in seasons, the change that is coming. That's why I wore my striped Mardi Gras shirt – purple and green after all are the liturgical colours of Lent. It's funny then, that just a few days ago, that I had forgotten that Shrove Tuesday and Ash Wednesday was coming up this week. What with the intensity of my studies and all as I graduate with a Masters of Divinity from Vancouver School of Theology this semester, I had simply forgot that it was upcoming until a few days ago. But I could feel a movement in the air. I could hear certain birds start to sing, even from the busy intersection of Knight and Kingsway near my place in East Vancouver. I could feel a shift. I could feel a calling, not unlike a trumpet, that spoke to my humanity. I could feel that "the day of the Lord is coming, it is near" as says the Prophet Joel. I could begin to see signs of new life, of the Spirit of Christ, moving around me, beginning to waken us from our grey-steeled lethargy. Before my mind snapped into what was going on, my body was already responding to the various calls to life going on around me.

Reflection II, Move IV:

Such music as we witness today, grounded in our shared humanness, invites us to lean into the mixture of grief and joy that we each experience in our walk of life. Increasingly, as I gain life experience, I find that my greatest spiritual commitment so to walk the middle path, as they say in Buddhism – walking a path that doesn't sit in unending despair any more than it does lust after unending euphoria. Music that is embedded in tradition, emotion, culture, spirituality, and religion, like the brass band tradition, helps me to inhabit this narrow road.¹ Jesus once said that, "Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. ¹⁴ But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it." As a Christian, music like this helps me to embrace the posture of Jesus – a person who deeply embodied what it means to know the full height and depth of the human condition, a person whose joy comingled with grief, life and death and resurrection all tied up with one another. With music like this, I can relate to those around me, not in spite of my religion, but because my faith invites me to respond to the call and connect with other people as they respond to the call in turn. In music like this, I hear the Spirit of Christ singing. Others may hear sacred Coast Salish song, echoes of synagogue cantors, the voices of friends and family past and present, all of which speak to a deep, mysterious, undergirding divine reality. So may we all embrace our living and our dying at this hour of change, boldly responding to the call to live into the freedom of God and doing our part to accompany those around us, for as Ram Dass once said, "we're all walking each other home," and until we're all home, no one is home. May it be so. Amen.

Song: *Precious Lord, Take My Hand*

100 Acts of Love, tomorrow marks a 100 days before the 100th anniversary of the UCC; 100 acts of love. Mark it by love.

¹ See Mathew 7:13-14.