

Beethoven's Ode to Joy

1 Sam. 3:1-10 by Patty Friesen (June 2/24)

Kids sing a song with sign. Before sermon #551 Beautiful Things or #513?

200 years ago on May 7, 1824, Ludwig van Beethoven's Ode to Joy, the famous choral finale to his Ninth Symphony performed for the first time in Vienna. The story of that opening night is also one of the most moving in classical music history. For three decades Beethoven had worked on setting Ode to Joy. To him, Ode to Joy was the ultimate expression of love and unity; he felt he had to do it justice, composing some two hundred versions before settling on the one liked best.

But life hadn't been joyful for him. Despite his success in composing music, his father was an alcoholic and Ludwig had to support the family. His beloved brother Kasper died and he had a stormy relationship with his ward nephew Karl. He loved women who didn't love him back and wouldn't marry him, including the one for whom he wrote Moonlight Sonata. Finally Beethoven lost his hearing and confessed to his one living brother: "I must confess that I am living a miserable life. For almost two years I have ceased to attend any social functions, just because I find it impossible to say to people: I am deaf." To write an Ode to Joy in the midst of such emotional turmoil and hearing difficulties is called heroic in music history.

On that opening night of the Ninth Symphony in Vienna, Beethoven stood onstage beside the conductor, disoriented and disheveled, his back to the audience, gesturing erratically to the orchestra. He hoped to show them how to play the music the way he heard it in his mind. One of the musicians later described how he stood in front of the conductor's stand and threw himself back and forth like a madman. At one

moment he stretched to his full height, at the next he crouched down to the floor. He flailed about with his hands and feet as though he wanted to play all the instruments and sing all the chorus parts.

When the performance ended, the hall fell silent. But Beethoven didn't know this, couldn't hear it. He stood with his back to the crowd, beating time to music that played in his own head. It was a twenty-year-old soloist named Caroline Unger who gently turned him around so he could see the audience, who had risen to their feet, tears of awe streaming down their cheeks. They waved their handkerchiefs, raised their hats, used physical gestures rather than sound to pay homage to the man who had expressed their own yearning. The audience reacted the way it did because in Beethoven's rendition, the music was laced with sorrow, which anyone can hear echoing, to this day, in its soaring, triumphant notes. (Susan Cain, *Bittersweet*, p. 61-63). Beethoven invites us to joy in the midst of chaos; invites us to a new world of reconciliation.

In our Old Testament reading God's call comes to the prophet Samuel in the midst of chaos. This is not a narrative of Samuel's gentle religious awakening. It is not simply another experience on the road to religious maturity. Samuel is called by God in a time of spiritual desolation, religious corruption, political danger, and social upheaval. The word of the Lord is rare; the sons of Eli are corrupt; the Philistines are about to threaten Israel's survival; the pressures to move toward kingship will soon grow too overwhelming.

If the context for Samuel's experience is harsh, so too is the message he is told to bring. We sometimes celebrate so-called mountaintop religious experiences as ends

in themselves, without considering what the God we encounter in religious experience demands of us. Samuel is called to deliver a harsh message of judgment that is necessary if there is to be a hopeful new beginning for Israel in this trying time. There is no time to dwell on childlike faith experiences. The call is to a prophetic task. This text reminds us of the spiritual challenges and social transformations that God's call brings. We are urged not only to discern God's voice but to listen to what it asks of us as well. We are called to become the channel for God's prophetic word to our own time, not when everything is going well but precisely when it is all falling apart.

In our gospel reading of Jesus harvesting on the Sabbath for food for his disciples, the religious leaders have taken the letter of the law of not working to the Sabbath, and not considered the spirit of the law which was to give people rest and renewal, not legalism that would starve them on the Sabbath. Jesus is turning the religious world on its' head and bringing a new world into being where mercy is the law.

I'd like us to take our Voices Together and turn to #103. Young people may not know that for hymn tune and text writers - we look at the bottom of the page. Here we have the Reverend Henry Van Dyke who shook up the religious and social convictions of his time by preaching against slavery in the US in the late 1880's. In 1907, he took Beethoven's Ode to Joy and wrote Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee #103 In Voices Together, a beloved hymn for over 100 years. While joyful, the hymn does not deny difficulty for victors in the midst of strife. 'I'm not an optimist,' says Dr. van Dyke, 'there's too much evil in the world and in me. Nor am I a pessimist; there is too much good in the world and in God. So I am just a meliorism, believing that God wills to make the world better, and trying to do my bit to help and wishing that it were more.'"

Now turn to #513 When Hands Reach Out. This is another hymn tune adapted from Beethoven's Symphony #2 written in 1802 with text by Carolyn Winfrey Gillette in 2001. Carolyn Winfrey Gillette is a hymn writer and Presbyterian pastor. This hymn was commissioned for a national conference on disabilities hosted by the Presbyterian Church. Carolyn says, "I am grateful for the ministry of two other people I have known over the years. One of them has sight problems and another has hearing difficulties. They have taught me that hands can sing, and that love relies on gifts other than sight and sound."

A teacher once promised a deaf child, "One day, in the world to come, you'll be able to hear." And the child looked back and said, "No. In the world to come, God will use sign language." This hints at a promise that God will not restore disability but will restore prejudice and bring people who are hard of hearing into the centre of a restored and renewed community. Let's read in light of this kind of restored community.

Now turn in your hymnals to #809. In 2006, Mary Louise Bringle took Beethoven's Ode to Joy and wrote Sing a New World into Being which we will sing to close our service. Mary Louise (Mel) Bringle is Professor of Philosophy and Religious Studies. A teacher at heart and a theologian by training she began writing hymn texts in 1999. Her Sing a New World into Being is a prophetic call to sound a bold and hopeful theme for a church in verse 2 where each gender, class and race brings its rainbow gifts and colours to God's limitless embrace. Let us rise and sing this modern version of Beethoven's Ode to Joy for our closing hymn #809.