

Sermon :: 25-Jan-2026
Epiphany 3, Year A (and Ruben's Farewell)

“ to answer readily the *call* of ... Christ, and
... *proclaim* to *all* people the Good News of His salvation ”

Now, I won't ask for a show-of-hands — don't you just *love* sermons that start that way?! — but how many of you have ever been sitting in church, listening to the readings, and suddenly thought, “Hey, they're reading from Handel's MESSIAH!”

The *first* time this happened to *me*—and it *still* happens, I'm not too proud to admit!—was in my early twenties. I'd sung “Worthy is the lamb that was slain,” the monumental final chorus from MESSIAH, many times back in high school. (It was the 1980s, and you could *do* that then!) Fast-forward several years, and one Sunday, I'm sitting in church, and I hear the lector reading:

“Worthy is the Lamb that was slain,
and has redeemed us to God by His blood
To receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength,
and honor, and glory, and blessing.” (Rev 5:12)

“Wait a minute—that's *Handel!*”¹ I thought. And only *then* did it begin to dawn on a rather sheepish me: The text of Handel's epic-and-beloved work was, of course, *all* drawn directly *from* the *Bible*.² But *there*, in a *book* ... no matter how many times we read or hear the words ... they tend to lay *flat*, on a *page*; to land dully upon the ear ... amidst the endless stream of sentences, paragraphs and pages we consume, every day ... almost all of them to be dumped from our short-term memory banks, while we sleep, to make room for *tomorrow's* equally indistinguishable load.

But ... when I *sang* “Worthy is the lamb” ... when I'd heard it *performed live* ... when I *rewound* my cassette tape, over and over again, on my 1988 Sears stereo, so I could bask in its *awe*, its *grandeur* ... well, *then*, the words of Revelation *rose up*: They *declared* ... they *proclaimed* ... they *soared*; they had *profile*, *depth* and *texture*; they didn't just *enter* my ear, but **pricked** it ... didn't just get *stored* in my thoughts, but **seized** them: creating a *feeling* ... a bodily (or sensory) *perception* ... a *spiritual connection* ... that no mere *reading*—even by the very *best* of them!—*ever* could. The **music** let me *see* the Lamb ... *sense* His Majesty ... be *awed* by His Glory. In the words of Isaiah's oracle we hear today ... the music “multipl[ied my] exultation” ... “increase[d my] joy” ... and set me “rejoicing.”

Such *is*, I believe, both the *power* and the *mystery* of *music* ... and *especially* of **sacred music**. For to St John's words had been added pitches and intervals ... tempos³ and rhythms ... dynamics and harmonies ... orchestration and voicing ... in an exceptional artistry that *interpreted* the words ... *imag(in)ed* the ideas ... gave *life—energy, passion, vitality*—to the divine truth ... in ways that not merely *amplified* ... but, indeed, **transcended** ... the written text ... and *connected* me to its very (S)pirit.

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¹ Or more precisely, Charles Jennens, Handel's librettist for MESSIAH.

² Technically, the King James Version of the Bible and Miles Coverdale's translation of the Psalter.

³ Or *tempi*.

Not merely to *amplify* the everyday-of-faith ... but to *transcend* it: to *connect* it **to** ... make it *expressive of* ... allow it to *beget* or *evoke* an *experience of* ... the Holy; the Awesome; the Passionate; the Gracious; the Infinite; the Ethereal ... of God the Beginning and God the End; of Christ Enthroned and Christ Alongside; **of Holy** Spirit in Mightiest Power and Tenderest Compassion. This is the life's work ... the spirit's journey ... the soul's quest ... that Ruben Valenzuela has been at, and on, for more than forty years now. At the key desk, and on the conductor's podium ... in the selection of repertoire, and the planning of rehearsals ... in the lithest movement of fingers and feet, and the elegant dance of arms and legs ... in the inhale of an upbeat, and the authority of a 'down' ... in knowing when a hymn has been sung too often, and when an anthem not often enough ... in the teaching of a basic interval and the perfection of a tricky fingering ... in a surging FORTISSIMO, and a ravishing PIANISSIMO ... in the cultivation of a parish's musical 'style,' and the confidence to depart from it, on occasion ... Ruben has been in—and *about*—the business of *transcendence*.

- He speaks not a *word* ... but *preaches volumes*
- He sings not a *note* ... but *prays the deepest prayer*
- He consecrates neither *bread* nor *wine* ... but brings us, his people, into the presence of *grace*

And Ruben's *particular* charism ... his *unique* and *most-excellent* gift ... is rendered all the more difficult—and thus, all the more *rewarding*; all the more *wondrous*; all the more *Christ-ly* ... because he does *none* of this alone. ¶He doesn't simply stand up and *do* something, by *himself* ... but teaches and shapes, cajoles and praises, corrects and supports *others*, until the spirit-within-**them** meets the spirit-within-**him** meets the spirit-within-**the-work** ... and, for a moment, an *inutterable beauty* ... *transcends* the *ordinary*: binding the '*knowing*' of worship and the '*unknowing*' of faith into a cohesive 'One,' within us ... that cries out YES! or AMEN! or I DO! in a way that startles us. ¶Ruben's work isn't to take a deep breath, open his mouth and start making sounds ... but to take the inert apparatus, channeled air and mechanical sounds of a vast, complicated, hard-to-master instrument ... and, sitting astride it, 'coax' it into dancing and soaring, praising and weeping, leading and accompanying in ways that conjoin the grandeur of God and the humility of human; in an experience not only of *ear*, but also of *spirit* ... that opens us to the Divine and **bids us feast** upon It.

To be a church musician is to do the work of priest and catechist ... of deacon and pastor ... of teacher and mentor ... of colleague and companion ... of visionary and trainer ... of artist and instructor ... all at *once* ... and in Ruben's case, seemingly effortlessly ... even as we know we haven't a *clue* as to all the effort this work *actually takes*.

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And now ... and *now*, comes the *hard* part: the time to say goodbye⁴ ... to **wish well** ... to bless and let go; let go and bless. For Ruben has discerned ... in prayer and reflection, stillness and discussion ... not only to depart *All Souls*;⁴ but also to depart making *church* music, at least for a *season*. A life's journey, now pointed in a slightly new direction. An expression of the Holy Spirit within, now sung in a slightly different register.

⁴ Literally, GOD BE WITH YE.

Our collect for this morning simply couldn't be more apt for this day: "Give us grace, O Lord, to answer readily the *call* of ... *Christ*, and to *proclaim* to *all* people the Good News of His salvation."

- Ruben's calling, for *now*, will no longer be to the surplice or the psalter ... to the anthem or the antiphon. But I have absolutely ***no doubt*** that in the ensembles he will conduct, the works he will perform and the exquisite art he will make ... lie *all* the depth and grace of a divine calling, as **have** his decades in the Church.
- The proclamation of Ruben's work will no longer be in the texts of Scripture and the writings of saints ... no longer in notes penned for liturgy, or rhythms set by feasts. But I have absolutely ***no doubt*** that in the operas and oratorios he will expertly select ... the cantatas and concertos he will masterfully prepare ... the suites and symphonies he will passionately conduct ... the beauty ... the love ... the mercy ... the peace ... the glory ... and, indeed, the very *transcendence* of *Christ* will be proclaimed to all who sit beneath the sweep of his baton, or come within the ambit of his art. The music may not be 'branded' Christian ... may not be 'heard' as liturgical ... but *anything*—indeed, *everything*—that wells up from the depths of Ruben's heart cannot *help* but be the *sharing* of his *faith* ... and the *offering* of his *soul*.

And so this day, Ruben ... this last and final day ... we pray that

The Lord bless you and keep you
The Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious unto you
The Lord lift his countenance upon you, and grant you peace

And we pray, too, that you carry a little bit of us *with* you, **wherever** you may go ... **whatever** you may do ... just as All Souls' will always preserve a little bit of *you* in *us*. For though you may be called *away* from us ... in Christ, you can never be called *far* from us ... or *we* from *you*.

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