CHRISTMAS DAY, 2017
“HANDEL-ING” THE MESSIAH.....
WRONG PAGES AND ALL!

The mezzo-soprano stood poised, head slightly tilted, looking a bit like a porcelain Lladro statue -- with eyes focused in the distance, as if anticipating musical cues from some other-worldly muse. Her coral-colored dress looked slightly out of place with the cold night air outside and the holiday Christmas spirit inside. The chorus was stunning in black and white; the orchestra in traditional performance black; the girls of the high school ensemble wore long gowns with brilliant blue skirts and midnight blue velvet bodices. The other soloists accented the stage in black or red. But this was the mezzo’s seventh performance as a principal performer in Handel’s Messiah and, I suppose, a woman could run out of fancy evening gowns to wear before the same local crowd after several years.

Oh well, my friends and I were there to hear beautiful music, not to critique a quirky selection in holiday attire. I tried to close my outer eyes and open my inner ears to hear her lovely first notes of the next recitative: Then shall the eyes of the blind be opened! With the tap of his baton, the conductor drew the attention of the orchestra and chorus to himself. The harpsichordist poised his hands above his delicate keyboard and, at the downbeat of the maestro, struck the muted chord that was to give the soloist the cue for her aria. We waited! A look of puzzlement on the mezzo’s face, a single syllable came out and she stopped... dead... a dead stop, like the star that raced through the night sky over Bethlehem and came to a grinding halt over the stable where the child was born.

A glare in the direction of the harpsichord, a nod to the conductor, an awkward smile to the audience and the soloist returned to her postured position. No one needed to say: “Let’s try that one again!” A handful of nervous coughs and a return to the anticipatory silence indicated that the audience was again ready and eager. The harpsichordist struck the chord once more. Three notes issued forth from the soloist; she stopped again. This would not do. Only a conference call could solve this dilemma. Hundreds of confused spectators watched from the sidelines as the diva broke her composure and approached the conductor’s podium. The judge listened to both sides as the pantomimed debate ensued with the harpsichordist trying to get in his side of the story even though he was ten feet away -- trapped in the center of the orchestra, surrounded by bulky cellos and elongated woodwinds.
who were now as confused as the rest of us in the audience.

From what we could see, the decision was swift and final as they moved back to the field to resume play. The major delay was resolved by a relatively minor adjustment; the mezzo was on the wrong page. Her coral-colored dress seemed to suddenly turn a festive crimson red like her cheeks -- as she returned to her place, assumed her position, tilted her head, although a little less dramatically, and listened yet again for that delicate note from the harpsichord which would give her, this time, the right cue.

Over and over again we turn to the wrong page of the score. We seem to hear more false chords than true no wrong notes. We’ll just go on as though nothing happened.” And we did. The concert was great -- wrong pages and all, right up to the full-throated encore of the Hallelujah Chorus, when everyone got to be an Andrea Bocelli or a Frederica von Stade.

May you be blessed abundantly with the grace of this feast, for today -- as the gracious conductor declared -- “there are no wrong notes.” At least for today we catch a glimpse again of what life can be when we recognize and believe that “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” This “hallowed and gracious time,” as Shakespeare once described Christmas, is marked for us by some positive signs. The back of our Christmas bulletin lists dozens of generous outreach efforts by parishioners, adults, teens and children from our school and our Faith Formation program, bringing comfort and joy to those less fortunate. Our building project for a new Community Center is well underway and being generously supported by many of you. Some economists are sounding more positive than they did a year ago about our national economy. Even the 2017 “Person of the Year” cover of Time Magazine highlighting the “Silence Breakers” has forced everyone to pause and reflect on the dignity and respect we owe to one another, especially to the many women who have suffered for so long because of the abuse of power in all segments of society.

However, we know only too well that our society and our world, and we ourselves, have missed many divine cues. Over and over again we turn to the wrong page of the score. We seem to hear more false chords than true
ones. Greed and selfish concerns crowd out generosity. Fear of the stranger makes us inhospitable and the political rancor of a polarized nation weighs heavily upon us all. There are wrong notes and false starts. No one can deny it. We are as vulnerable as the babe in the manger to the darker forces that surround us and have even, at times, taken up lodging within us.

An authentic Christian celebration of the Christmas season must relate to life in the real world. If Christ the Lord is truly born for you and me and has taken his place within the human family to draw us to God, then this world is the stage on which our redemption must be played out. Our feasting doesn’t ignore the struggle between light and darkness, but affirms our faith. The great God has already reclaimed and transformed the dark night of random chaos. Our God, like the gracious conductor, has promised to work through the missed cues and the bad beginnings. Lovingly and tenderly, God gives us a new start each time we need to begin again. As Isaiah assures us: “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; upon those who dwelt in the land of gloom a light has shone!” The musical score that God follows can create a unique harmony of our discordant lives. And we can be well-tuned instruments of generosity and peace if we allow God’s grace to play out its melody through our lives.

For the brief weeks of Advent preparation, those of us who have gathered here have listened to the ancient promise restored for us in our day. John the Baptist and the prophet Isaiah have urged us to renew our dreams and hopes, to kindle again the flame of faith and to entrust our often frail lives into the hands of a loving God. Christmas insists that we place our hopes in the Light of the World who is Jesus Christ born for us this day.

Let the stories and the lights, the feasting and the music lift your hearts and raise your spirits. Let them carry you to a place where God can make you new again. And may we each take our place in the chorus, allowing the promises of God to come to birth through our words of hope and our deeds of love. Sing a new song to the Lord and sing it boldly. Remember, today there are no wrong notes. The coming of the Lord has made it so!

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