

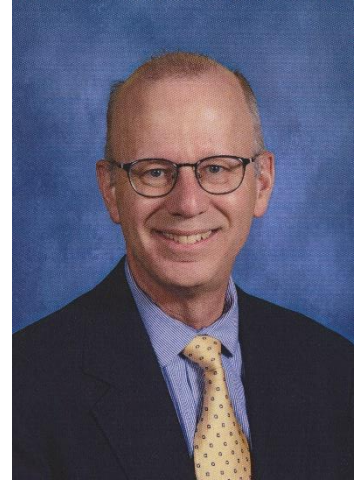
**Reflections from
the Upper Room:
for the Pastoral Musician**

Sunday, April 26, 2020

Reflections for the 3rd Sunday of Easter

By: *William M. Alford, Director of Music Ministry, Our Lady of Perpetual Help and Music Teacher, School of Saint Elizabeth, Bernardsville*

On this Third Sunday of Easter we hear in the Gospel the story of Jesus' appearance to two of the disciples on the road to Emmaus. As in other stories of Jesus' appearance, they do not recognize him. They share their story of what has happened to their friend and prophet with "the stranger," and he responds by recounting prophetic references to the way God's plan would be fulfilled. It is not until Jesus blesses the bread, breaks it, and offers it to them that they recognize that it is him. Then he vanishes.



I think about the two of them, in grief and shocked by what has happened. We are not told why they did not recognize Jesus. I think of this blindness to Christ's presence as something that we experience throughout our lives. We miss the opportunity for "divine moments" because we forget to consider that it is God who is walking beside us and calling us to be his own.

On their path to Emmaus, the disciples were in what Henri Nouwen calls a "time of waiting," or "passion—being the recipient of other people's initiatives." Jesus' presence on earth was a time of action in preaching and healing. As his disciples they were busy following and telling others. Jesus is condemned to death and his action—and theirs, for the moment, stops. They are suddenly thrown into a time of waiting.

Our condition of shelter in place has caused less activity, and a sense of loss of power over our own lives. We are also in a period of waiting. We are the recipient of other people's initiatives, whether it is our health, security of our job, or inability to act and live out our normal lives.

Our parishes are collectively in a similar place. We want to worship corporately, but we are not permitted to gather. We want to feed the hungry, but we cannot provide hospitality. We want to offer the sacraments at this particularly important time, but they have been postponed.

As a Candidate for Full Initiation in the Roman Catholic Church, this RCIA journey has been an unusual one. Since my beginning of service at Our Lady of Perpetual Help over two years ago, I have worked to help the parish celebrate the sacraments but have been in my own time of waiting to be able to receive the sacraments. The postponement of the Reception into Full Communion at this year's Easter Vigil further extends the time of waiting for all catechumens and candidates.

I ask myself, how can our waiting be celebrated as a time of growth? Nouwen says, "The secret of waiting is the faith that the seed has been planted, that something has begun. Active waiting means to be present fully to the moment." I have great joy in celebrating the sacraments in this parish. Looking forward to receiving them gives me hope.

What do we do in this time of waiting? As musicians we know it is important to focus on the process as much as the eventual outcome. Rather than this time being something that we wish was over, we can find gratitude in little things, look for God's presence all around us, find ways to be present for parishioners, and pray for the health of the world.

This interruption to life as we have known it is an invitation to draw closer to Christ, to be aware of "our hearts burning within us." As Luke tells us, they asked him to "stay with us." Like the disciples who walked with Jesus, let us actively search for a deeper relationship with Christ.

Wishing you Christ's peace,

William Alford

Henri Nouwen, "A Spirituality of Waiting: Being Alert to God's Presence in Our Lives," Weavings, The Upper Room, Nashville, TN, 1987.

Selected Reflection Music

On the Journey to Emmaus

By: Marty Haugen

<https://www.giamusic.com/store/resource/on-the-journey-to-emmaus-print-g4278>

In the Breaking of the Bread

By: Bob Hurd, Michael Downey, Craig Kingsbury

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xbe3bpi_9Pg

Contributor Introduction

William Alford has served for two years as Director of Music Ministry at Our Lady of Perpetual Help Church and Music Teacher at the School of St. Elizabeth in Bernardsville, NJ. Prior to this, he was at The Pennington School for twenty-eight years where he was Arts Department Chair and Director/Teacher of Music in grades 6-12. He created programs there in American Popular Music, Music Theory, AP Music Theory, Composition, Music History, and Rhythm of the Sacred—a survey course of the music of six major world religions. His choirs at Pennington toured domestically and abroad and had the distinction of performing *Missa Gaia* with the multi-Grammy Award winning Paul Winter Consort. He was honored at Pennington as the recipient of three different teacher awards.

Since college, Mr. Alford has continually held full and part-time positions as organist and choir director at various churches in Pennsylvania and New Jersey. He is also co-founder and past executive director of the Hopewell Valley Youth Chorale.

Mr. Alford earned a Bachelor of Music degree in Church Music from Westminster Choir College, and a Master of Arts degree in Music Education from Marywood University.

Alford is currently a Candidate for Full Initiation into the Church.

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