

OUR SACRED SPACE: DOMED CEILING, CHOIR LOFT, ORGAN

Psalm 19:1; Job 38:7; Revelation 5:11-12; James 5:13



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I will never be an Astronaut.

I will never go to the stars. I have been a voracious reader of science fiction all my life, and (full geek disclosure) a Trekkie for decades! But, I will never go to space. I will never navigate the stars and see the swirling galaxies, the horsehead nebula, or a massive star explode with the brightness of a million suns. Never.

But with music, I feel as if I have. That is the kind of power, for example, Marcello's piece we heard on the organ this morning for the Opening Voluntary. Music can move us into places beyond comprehension, taking us completely outside of ourselves and launch us into an out-of-body experience with the force of celestial mechanics.

I will never be able to see my soul.

I don't have the instinct of a poet, nor the fine-tuned artistry of a painter who can capture the deepest, most intimate essence of a person. But music, like an incredible shrinking machine, can take us into our skin, past the bone, and straight to the soul.

It has the power to forge a deeply intimate, very personal bond with ourselves, with others, and with God.

For me, the music here magnifies the magisterial presence of the mighty God and, at the same time, puts me across the table from the intimate presence of our friend, Jesus.

That is the power of music.

In fact, it was the very power of music that led the Reformation to treat it like a stick of dynamite – only use it under very controlled situations, for very specific purposes. For example, our friends in the Church of Christ only sing acapella, congregational hymns. For a long time, there was no other music in the worship. The Reformers did not trust music's

power to sway emotions, nor did they appreciate the sometimes overly-wrought works that led people to focus on the music itself, rather than the God it pointed to. By the way, that is why we do not applaud music in worship. The applause might lead us to think more about the performance than the Lord we are praising.

But, despite Presbyterians heavy reliance on the spoken Word, we have decided not to forgo music's unique power to connect us to God. We will explore several passages in Scripture and several places in our Sanctuary that reinforce the music.

The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.

(Psalm 19:1)

When the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy?

(Job 38:7)

God made us to worship and glorify the Holy name. And, as these scriptures indicate, it is a task not only for humans but all of creation. The beauty of the flowers in our worship underscores nature's role. They are not here simply for visual delight. They are meant to bring in a measure of God's handiwork, to connect us to the beauty of God's hand. In fact, as much as possible, this Sanctuary has been constructed with natural materials, especially all the lovely rich hardwood, precisely because it reminds us of the glory of nature, more than the handiwork of humans.

Key attributes of God that scripture constantly calls us to exalt is the majestic, mysterious, glorious, and eternal nature of the divine. This is the part of God that is utterly beyond us in scope and power. Part of worship is to be sure we are worshipping a God that is big enough; that we have not reduced down God to a finite, overly-familiar deity; we need the immanence and the

transcendence; the overwhelming; the power; the grandeur.

And, just like music can take our minds to the stars, it also has the power to take our hearts to heavens.

The organ embodies this power. It can rumble forth with the echoes of the Big Bang and it can cross melodies with the cleverness and complexity of the Divine. That is why, when Marcia rumbles those foot pedals, I get goose bumps... to me it is the mountains shaking from the voice of God.

At times, the organ speaks with a solo voice and when it does, it has the voice of that which is not entirely human. It speaks with the voice of creation itself. At these moments, it underscores that there is more to this world through God's handiwork than our own needs and concerns, indeed there are things in this world that have nothing to do with us.

But, more often than not, the organ is a part of the music – coupled with the choir – which leads us to our next scripture.

Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels around the throne and the living creatures and the elders; and the number of them was myriads of myriads, and thousands of thousands, saying with a loud voice, "Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing."

(Revelation 5:11-12)

You will notice that our choir is slightly lifted up, higher than the people, higher than the pulpit. This arrangement is not only acoustically practical it is meant to be suggestive – suggestive of the heavenly chorus. Furthermore, the highest point in this entire Sanctuary, the dome, is meant to evoke the heavens. It is above the choir, so that we can hear them as an echo, or foretaste, of the heavenly choir.

This is why the most frequent color of that dome is blue. Like the flowers, it is not there simply to add color but to remind us of the blue sky, firmaments of God's handiwork. The beautiful robes remind us

that we are all one before the Lord, that we are all together and that they are a unified whole in their purpose and calling.

The orderliness of the choir, the geometric arrangement, the robes, the curved arc all build toward a sense of purpose, to remind us that there is something majestic planned for us in the life to come.

And the cross hangs in front, so it is to Christ they sing. There is a benefit to having the choir up front and in the Chancel, but there is a critical danger – that they are putting on a show; that they are fulfilling some professional role in worship that the people cannot or should not do; that they draw attention to themselves rather than to God. So, some Reformed sanctuaries put the choir in the balcony or off to the side. But that logical choice feels contrived to me and, in practice, unconvincing to what it claims to accomplish. So, the cross before them underscores their role in worship – to sing to God on our behalf, not to sing to us.

Furthermore, having the choir in front additionally imbues key benefits. As many of you guessed, during my sabbatical research project, music was regularly cited as one of the most powerful places people experienced the presence of God. Quality was certainly a key factor. But stories emerged that pointed to a multiplicity of elements.

For adult-led music, exceptional quality was important. But there was more to it which leads us to our final scripture.

Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise...

James 5:13

Having the choir before us, seeing their faces and knowing their stories, magnifies the music.

One focus group I interviewed described a recent Sunday service.

The song was about the depth of human suffering and sorrow. It was a song about loss and the heartache we sometimes experience in this life. But

the song was also about the hope we have in God's grace and the healing power of Jesus' love. That song was transformative for them – it was the words and it was the quality of the music.

But there was one more thing that made it so much more meaningful. It was the person who sang the solo. You see, everybody in the congregation knew that, over the past year or so, this man had experienced devastating loss and heartache in his life. Loss that was so terrible and so difficult that it nearly crushed him under the weight of it. The congregation had been praying for him. And on that day when he sang, the way that he sang the words of heartache and loss, they knew that he meant them and understood them. And in the way that he sang of the hope and of the grace of God – they knew that he had finally been healed and he had gone to the other side of grace and joy once again. The entire congregation was transformed by that moment.

So in seeing the choir up in front, we are seeing people we love.

...People who devote countless hours in service
to God through song,
...who stay late on Wednesday night to perfect
their craft,
...who have walked long and lonely roads,
...who have experienced loss and hardship,
...some who can barely walk or breath
...but keep giving...

so that we all can experience the joy of the good news of the gospel.

We have an amazing blessing in our Organ and Choir Loft. But God has blessed us beyond measure, with these tireless, giving, loving singers who lead us in the joy of praise each and every week.