

Trinity Cathedral Sermon
May 2, 2010 - Fifth Sunday of Easter
Rabbi Michael Z. Cahana

Dear Friends...

I give honor and respect to the Reverend Michael Hanley, the Bishop of the Diocese of Oregon, to my dear friend, the Very Reverend Dr. William Lupfer, to all of the worship leaders here today, and to this sacred congregation...its wonderful members here at Trinity Episcopal Cathedral. Standing here today, I understand how very much you are, indeed, an open and welcoming congregation. And I feel very welcomed, to be in this very beautiful space. We share a common legacy here. These two institutions, Trinity Cathedral and Congregation Beth Israel--two of the oldest houses of worship in Oregon and in this region. And to walk into this beautiful, magnificent, soaring space, lifts my spirits and makes me feel that I am indeed welcome and at home.

And as we come here today to honor and thank Canon Dr. John Strege--Director of Cathedral Music here--we speak of the common bond that we share in the beautiful music that he has created in this sacred space. As I hear this organ and the beautiful sounds that come from it...as I hear this quite magnificent choir that John directs for us, I am thinking of the words of the poet John Dryden (1631-1700). "Music for awhile, shall all your cares beguile. Wondering how your pains were eased, and disdaining to be pleased." Those words from the musical drama of Oedipus, were set to music by Henry Purcell (1659-1695). Henry Purcell was a magnificent young composer. His teacher, John Blow, was the organist at Westminster Abbey. And while there, he allowed the young man--only 20 years old Henry Purcell--to take on that organist post at Westminster. And we can imagine how John Strege must have felt when he first sat down to play in this cathedral, as a young man himself. And first allowed these sounds--this music--to enter into this sacred space. To be able to lift the spirits and allow that music can invade...allow our cares to be beguiled. Purcell was taking the text of Dryden, and skillfully weaving these themes...of sounds and of silence...of majesty and of calm. The song was in the musical drama, in a moment in which it was intended to calm the furies. We know that those furies that surround us all the time, often need to be calmed. We need what it is that music can bring to us...that sense of calm...of beauty...of inspiration, which allows us to perceive the realities of the world.

You and I are on a shared journey at this moment in time. The Jewish community and the Christian community are in a moment of beautiful experience, as we are traveling from this time of Passover that we have celebrated not long ago. A time that is so meaningful to both of our communities. Towards the commemoration of Pentecost, what we call in Hebrew, "Shavu'ot." In Jewish worship, there are three essential elements to the prayer. They take us on a journey from Creation to Redemption to Revelation. From the mere existence...what we all are blessed with...with life. The fact that we are created, and that we exist. The place where we all begin. But for human beings, existence is not enough. We need to be inspired. We need to be touched by what is holy. And so we move out of that moment, that experience of simple existence--of sim-

ple creation--and we try to travel a path upward...upward...every day of our lives. Trying to be inspired by something great and holy. We climb a spiritual mountain. We move from Creation, to Redemption, all the way to the peak of Revelation. And this is what Pentecost, and what Shavu'ot represent: that peak experience, the moment at Sinai in which God was revealed to all of the people. Who stood at the base of the mountain, and said, "We are touched by holiness. We can be so much more than a slave people." We were given freedom not just for our personal expression, but so that we can be touched by holiness, that we can move to this moment of Revelation.

I'm struck by a text from the New Testament. You can imagine I don't get to quote the New Testament often in my work (laughter). So thanks for the opportunity (laughter). From the Second Act: "When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly a sound came from Heaven like the rush of a mighty wind. And it filled the house where they were sitting, and there appeared to them tongues, as a fire, distributed and resting on each one of them. And they were filled with the Holy Spirit, and began to speak in other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance." Peter, who stands among these people who are so confused by this experience of having the mighty wind come into their midst at this time of Pentecost. Peter quotes the prophet Job, who says: "And it shall come to pass afterwards, that I will pour out my spirits upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy. Your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions."

We are dreamers of dreams. We are seers of visions, because we each of us know we are more than flesh and blood. And we allow that Holy Spirit to touch us, and to let words of holiness come forth from our lips. It is a shared spirit, this mighty wind. But there is a problem! There is a difficulty with this mighty wind, which they saw. Which they experienced, along with that power that was so much, that it overwhelmed them. Along with it came babble--the inability to put into words--what they had experienced. The sense of an overwhelmingness, when we are touched by the Holy Spirit. It is, in many ways, too much for human beings. We are mere vessels. And we are in danger of being shattered, when we come into contact with the most holy. How do we hold ourselves? How do we steel ourselves, against the babble. How can we pay attention, when the words come at us, one after another, layering and layering. It's so much--we don't have the ability to discern. How can we actually hear those words? How can we stand, when the mighty wind threatens to blow us down. "Music for awhile...all our cares beguile."

Music is a creator of calm. Music is a place of inspiration. Music lifts our soul, and also clears away what is too much for us. That mighty wind is calmed by the beautiful notes, by the beautiful sounds that lift us up. Music allows us to peer into the realm of God...to be able to touch the ineffable. We are calmed in our spirit from the agitation of the holy. And we allow those more-than-words, more than anything we can put into words. We allow that experience of that sound, when it is done well, when it is magnificent, when it is inspiring...to lift our spirits up, and be able to be...not buffeted by the mighty wind, but risen by the mighty wind. Carried away, into something that is so much beyond what we can put into words. There is sound and there is fury. And there is also silence.

Zohar--a book of Jewish mysticism--speaks of God as writing. And when God writes, it is unlike what human beings write. When God writes, God writes with black fire on white fire. With flames that are invisible, that are not perceivable. They are black and they are white, and they are mixed together. And in that moment...that's where the holiness rises. Musicians tell us that it is not about the notes. It is about the rests. It is about those moments of great and soaring incredible sound, tempered by the silence, which allows us to perceive the sound. That is what truly inspires us, and we move constantly between the notes and the rests...between the black fire and the white fire...between the sound and the fury, and the silence...which allows it all to make sense.

We are on a shared journey...your community and mine. Together, in this region of our town, together with that shared desire to touch what is holy. And we have for decades, had a shared partner who has allowed us to touch the ineffable. John Strege is celebrating and completing 37 years in this cathedral. He hadn't yet been born when he started here (laughter). Maybe just born, maybe. A young man who walked into this place, and was given a charge. To inspire, to allow that black fire and white fire to merge in your hearts. And for over 25 years, John has done the same thing at Congregation Beth Israel. In our temple as well. Has shared that passion for music with us. And I am pleased to note that he will be continuing to give us inspiration, we pray for years to come, in our cathedral.

This day is a very special one on the Jewish calendar, and I'm sure that this is the reason we decided to have this event today. (laughter) Bill Lupfer knew that today is Lag BaOmer on the Jewish calendar--the 33rd day of the Counting. As we move from Passover to Shavu'ot,...up to Pentecost, we mark each one of these days in Jewish tradition. We recognize that each one of these days has its own special purpose, that lifts us on this journey. And many of these days are filled with a certain kind of dread--a certain kind of concern, in Jewish tradition, because it is an awesome task to walk up this mountain. But there is one day that is a day of celebration--a day in which all of the concerns are set aside, and we simply allow the flames to raise us up. And that is this day--the 33rd day of the Counting--Lag BaOmer.

Now some of you may have seen the play, or read the book of The Chosen. And you know that there is a little game that we play in the Jewish world, that has to do with numerology. For those of you new to Gematria--to numerology--bear with me for just a moment, as we play this little game. 33 days...is in Jewish tradition designated by the two letters: Lamed and Gimel--which is why we call it Lag BaOmer...those 2 days. Those days add up to 33. When we take 37--the number of years that John has been playing here...and then we take away the 33, of the "Lag"--that would be Lamed Zion...that would be the 37. We take away the 33--that is Lamed Gimel. We come up with the number 4. 4 is represented in Hebrew by the letter Daled. When we add that back to Lag, we add the Daled, to the letters Gimel and Lamed...we come up with the word "degel." Degel in Hebrew means "a flag, or a banner." It is what you place above your troops, to say: "This is who we are. This is what we stand for." The Israelites stood by their various tribes, under their degel. That said, "We stand for something. We identify ourselves." by something magnificent. It is a proclamation. It is about imbu-

ing our experience with meaning. Our two congregations stand under the degel of the music that John Strege has brought to us. It is our shared banner. We have differences of various kinds. But we all are on a shared journey...seeking holiness. Seeking something ineffable. Knowing that the mighty wind is so difficult for us to experience, unless it is tempered by the beauty of music, that allows the rests to take place. And under that shared banner, we journey towards Pentecost. Towards the top of the mountain. Seeking out the sense of holiness, and of beauty.

In Song of Songs, we read "Viene el bate...(the transcriber is unable to find the Hebrew lyrics of this song). "He brought me into the banqueting house, and his degel--his banner--his banner over me...was love." We share that banner. We share that proclamation. We share that journey. We are grateful that we can have this beautiful music. And we pray that we will continue to be inspired, by the legacy that John Strege has continued to give. We continue to believe that when we are tempered, we can in fact, walk a pathway of holiness.

And to John, I give this reading from Psalms, as a prayer for his pathway forward, as he continues to inspire. From Psalm 20--a psalm to the chief musician--the Psalm of David.

20:1 May the Lord hear you in the day of trouble.
May the name of the God of Jacob defend you.
2 May he send you help from the sanctuary
and strengthen you out of Zion.
3 May he remember all your offerings
and accept with favor your burnt sacrifice. *Selah*

4 May he grant you your heart's desire
and fulfill all your plans.
5 May we rejoice in your salvation,
and in the name of our God set up our banners.
May the Lord fulfill all your petitions.

Let us say "Amen."