

*And he said, "Go out and stand on the mount before the Lord." And behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind tore the mountains and broke in pieces the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind. And after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. And after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire the sound of a low whisper. And when Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his cloak and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. And behold, there came a voice to him and said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" (1 Kings 19: 11-13)*

This is a curious passage of Scripture, and different commentators have very different reactions to it. What I find intriguing and convicting is that Elijah doesn't hide his face when I or most of us would. There is no response from Elijah when an "act of God" occurs. But when the low whisper comes to him, he hides his face at the entrance of the cave. Elijah's act of reverent and awe-filled worship comes in the stillness.

Our Scripture passage for this Sunday in John 11 brings us to another cave, the tomb of Lazarus. This too is a scene of stillness, as Lazarus has been in the tomb for four days. It is also a scene that unravels slowly in John's gospel. Jesus is in no hurry, intentionally. It is a scene that contrasts the lowest and highest points of the Christian pilgrimage—death and resurrection. The passage is full of weeping, but also full of wonder.

This Sunday's offertory is a musical meditation on this scene, and a piece of music that I believe captures this miraculous moment in an astonishingly moving and evocative manner. Scottish composer James MacMillan set verses 33, 35, 43, 44, and 39 of John 11 from the Vulgate translation of this scene, intended as a communion motet. Like much of MacMillan's music, this work entitled *Videns Dominus* (When the Lord saw) incorporates some of the vocal ornamental procedures of Gaelic psalm singing. This type of oscillating vocalism, found still today in exclusive psalm-singing Presbyterian churches of the Western Isles of Scotland, effectively portrays the weeping of Lazarus's sisters. MacMillan sets the text "Lazarus, come forth," three times, with each call growing louder, and with Lazarus's name repeated three times in each call. A good friend mentor and recently commented to me that MacMillan uses repetition and subtle reharmonization to create the sense of time being suspended. It could also possibly be thought of rhetorically, that Lazarus, as he awakens from his death slumber, hears the call to rise faintly at first, but the command "Come forth!" grows clearer and clearer, or that the call is echoing in the tomb. It is also interesting to note that when these words "Veni foras!" are set, there is no vocal ornamentation at all. The command is set in a manner that is simple, clear, and unwavering.

There is another important consideration, to which my friend alluded. With the concept of "suspension of time" that MacMillan writes into the structure of his music, there is an implied sense of *slowness*. The music requires that the worshiper be still and listen.

This points us to an important, but dying understanding of the nature of corporate worship. We live in a culture that is losing the ability to slow down, concentrate for extended periods of

time, and be still. For most of us, Sunday is one of the rare moments of the week when we can be still and listen. When we listen carefully to the preaching of the Word, we truly rest in the Word. Worship, too, can and should have a sense of slowness. As we see in John 11, Jesus is in no rush, because God's glory is frequently manifested in our waiting and stillness as he works his mysterious providences in our lives for his glory and for our good. Contrary to much of what we see in the contemporary evangelical church, our worship does not always have to be exuberant and energy packed. When the Apostle tells us to be transformed by the renewing of our minds, he is not telling us to work up fervent emotionalism. He is telling us to allow God to do his transforming work in our lives, but this requires us to be active in disciplines that require stillness—reading the Word, hearing the Word (in speech *and* in song) praying, and coming together around the Lord's table, as we will do this Sunday.

*“Be still and know that I am God: I will be exalted among the heathen, I will be exalted in the earth.” (Psalm 46:10)*