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# “If Only You Will Not Fall Prey... ”

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## *Text:* **Genesis 1**

Artists are special people with special gifts.

Later in our morning worship we will unveil and dedicate a work which one of our former students, an artist, has painted during a long period of painful convalescence and has given to us as a sign of gratitude and appreciation.<sup>1</sup>

Artists have ways of plumbing the depths of human experience. They are often able to express insight and feeling that catches dimensions of our human existence which most of us are only dimly aware of. Artists know how to strike a responsive chord in us and to set in motion feelings whose existence we may have sensed, but which have until now not been allowed to come to the surface and to find expression in tangible ways. An artist may employ colors, sounds, words and harmonies which are able to evoke in us imagery of persuasive power. The artist, the poet, the musician, the composer can help us to see and to experience reality in new and different ways. Occasionally such a gifted person may even allow us to get a taste of things beyond human comprehension.

No doubt you have experienced such things from time to time yourself.

For me the most vivid recent encounter of this sort came a few days ago when I heard a masterful performance of Joseph Haydn's oratorio "Creation". The work was performed by the Menmonite Festival Choir at Winnipeg, accompanied by the Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra, all under the direction of the world-famous choral conductor Helmut Rilling of Stuttgart, Germany. The performance was broadcast on CBC's "Choral

Concert" and it was a musical experience unlike anything I had had for quite some time.

The oratorio is based on the creation story in the Book of Genesis. A good part of the impact of the work is no doubt to be credited to the librettist Salmon who had found masterful words of prose and poetry with which to draw attention to the many-splendored variety and beauty of God's creative act. Salmon's command of the German language enabled him to create sounds and images which evoke feelings of tenderness and peace as well as exuberance and joy, fervor and devotion in anyone who is familiar with that medium.

The librettist had initially prepared the text for George Frederick Handel, but Handel never got around to setting it to music, and now Handel was getting old. So Salmon offered the libretto to Joseph Haydn who approached the work with vigor and gusto. The resulting oratorio is probably the best and most mature work Haydn ever produced, and in the performance which was broadcast by the CBC Helmut Rilling knew how to bring out nuances and dimensions in the music and text in a way of which only a master is capable. Listening to this music was a spiritual experience. Haydn himself, after conducting the premier performance of the work, wrote that the experience had so overwhelmed him that he felt his whole body become hot and cold simultaneously and that he felt sure he would at any moment collapse of a stroke and die before the performance was ended.

Haydn was able to create sound-pictures which help one experience the wonder of creation in a marvelous new dimension. You can imagine that you yourself are right there in person as the muddiness of the original *Tohu waBohu* envelops the universe.

You are right there when God says "Let there be light!" The instrumental sounds Haydn creates to portray the light streaming into the darkness defy description. It is not a thunder-and-lightning kind of light, not an explosive kind of light, but a light which floods in and bathes the world in brilliance. Rilling made the instrumental and the human voices savor and relish the word "*strahlt*" ("gleams") with a caressing crescendo that went on until all thoughts of darkness were banished from memory. (Yes it does help to appreciate the oratorio if you

are fluent in German and can pick up the many nuances and connotations of the words and phrases.)

And then, one by one, God creates all the living beings that populate the earth in splendid profusion. And at each step of the way the words and the music linger to describe with sensuous abandon each creature with its special features and characteristics. The lion: strong and firm. The tiger: sleek and shiny, leaping into the air with graceful agility. The birds: flitting to and fro, excitedly chirping their love songs to one another. All the creatures are there in their bewildering variety. They are all there, even the wiggly squiggly worms that burrow their way in the garden soil.

What a wonderful world it is—especially at this time of spring in our northern hemisphere! The sun warms the earth and out of the soil, as though rising from their cold wintry grave, grasses and trees are resurrected, covering the earth with a canvas in various shades of green. The flowers break forth in blossoms, dousing the world in a splash of color, filling the air with delightful and intoxicating fragrance. What a wonderful world this is!

Then God creates humankind—male and female—with all their potential for love and devotion toward each other and toward their God—with their capacity to think and to plan, to understand, to feel, and to create. In God's image, and for God's own company, God created them.

In the Garden of Eden Adam and Eve, clinging to one another, sing to each other a duet: "*Mit Dir*" Adam sings to Eve; "*Mit Dir*" Eve responds to Adam: "With you"—"With you I want to enjoy all this marvellous splendor with which God has so richly blessed us/ with you I want to watch the moon and the stars/ with you I want to listen to the singing birds/ with you I want to drink in the fragrance of the flowers." (Rilling has the soloists savor the word "*Blumenduft*".) How good our God is, to shower us with all these many delights!

But then, just before the final chorus in which all creation joins to sing to the glory of God and to praise the handiwork of the loving creator, the narrator sings a short but ominous line. It is not a line from the creation story itself; it is a line which the librettist inserted and in which he catches what is surely there, hidden in the story somewhere, easily overlooked or forgotten: "If only," he sings, "If only you will not fall prey

to some madness which causes you to be greedy for more than you have, and to want to know more than you should." "*Mehr zu wollen als ihr habt, und mehr zu wissen als ihr sollt.*"

They can easily ruin it all. Their very potential can become a trap for them. Their ability to create and to enjoy, their potential for knowledge and understanding—this can become their undoing. Those very things which endue them as creatures made in the image of God can make them stumble and fall. The inordinate hunger for power and the insatiable thirst for knowledge can leave people forever chafing and dissatisfied, unfulfilled and ungrateful.

In this Seminary, this very place, we dedicate ourselves to the acquisition of knowledge and the pursuit of excellence; things which are surely pleasing to God. But when the pursuit itself becomes the thing pursued, when the creation is valued more highly than the Creator, God's rich gifts slip through our hands and we are left holding—nothing. Some things are not meant to be had, and some things are not meant to be known. The promise "all these things will I give you, if you bow down and worship me," that promise is not from God, and that promise *is not a promise*.

If only! If only you can find joy in each other and joy in the things which God has given you! If only.... Yes!

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Preached at Lutheran Theological Seminary, Saskatoon, on the occasion of the dedication of a painting by Benedicte Gormly, 6 May 1993.