

# **“The Fifth Evangelist”**

## **Sermon on Sunday, July 28, 2019**

Based on the Life, Work and Devotion of J.S. Bach

It was around 1990 or 1991. I lived in an apartment building in Munich. Our flat in the center of the city was home to several guys and lots of dirty dishes in the kitchen sink. One of the students I lived with trained to become an electrical engineer, but he was also a gifted pianist playing frequently on his stand-up piano, sometimes eliciting the ire of the lady next door when it was past her bedtime. Harry (Harald) knew quite a bit about classical music. I had spent 23 years of my life paying no attention to classical music whatsoever. So I had no idea what I was listening to when one day my friend played this beautiful recording. I was taken by it and asked very innocently what it was. He looked at me like I was an alien from planet Mars and said, “You don’t know what this is? Where did you come from? These are the Brandenburg Concerto’s by Bach.” The music I heard that day for the first time was one of the fewer secular pieces written by the famous composer, and it is still to this day one of my favorites. It’s a master piece!

This Sunday I would like to stray a little bit from the lectionary discipline to focus on the lessons we can learn from the life of the extraordinary composer and church musician whom we commemorate today. J.S. Bach may not be known to most younger people today. His baroque musical style, his pompous wig, ancient instruments such as harpsicord and clavichord, all point to a bygone time. And in a summer that’s flush with modern musical biographies played in movie theaters in front of enthusiastic audiences, - from Rocket Man to Pavarotti, from Echo in the Canyon to Bohemian Rhapsody, to “Yesterday,” one might ask, “Why Bach?” Another old, dead German. You’ve got to be kidding me!

Why Bach? It’s not just the music that we honor today, but also the incredible passion for the work of God that this man exhibited at every turn of his life. Johann Sebastian could have made more money desperately needed to feed his large family by pursuing more secular projects, but 75% of his work was church music, often premiered in his home parish, St. Thomas in Leipzig in front of regular church people. His deep Lutheran faith prevented him to work for some people he didn’t agree with in a country that had become religiously divided. He was never a musician for hire; he always deeply believed in what he wrote; not just the musical notes, but also the words. And yes, that was for the most part the Word of God.

When he was 48 old, Johann Sebastian Bach acquired a copy of Luther's three-volume translation of the Bible. Living about 100 years after Luther, Bibles had become more readily available. He pored over it as if it were a long-lost treasure, underlining passages, correcting errors in the text and commentary, inserting missing words, and making notes in the margins. In other words, scripture was deeply meaningful to him. Near 1. Chronicles 25 (a listing of Davidic musicians) he wrote, "This chapter is the true foundation of all God-pleasing music." At 2. Chronicles 5:13 (which speaks of temple musicians praising God), he noted, "At a reverent performance of music, God is always at hand with his gracious presence." That interest in the foundation of the Christian faith, that passionate dialogue with the Bible, led him to write famous pieces such as the Passion of Christ according to St. Matthew and also his Oratorio of St. John’s Passion.

Some people have called him "the fifth evangelist" for his ability to set to music the drama of the gospel. Pretty amazing for a church organist and composer whose work was almost forgotten in the first eight decades following his death! During that time his work was sold away, while other parts were reportedly used to wrap garbage; in general people forgot about the lowly music director from Leipzig. His musical compositions were admired only by a few geniuses who could appreciate it, such as Mozart and Beethoven. It wasn't until 1829, nearly 80 years after his death, when Felix Mendelsohn carried Bach's Passion according to Matthew into a German concert hall, that more people started to recognize the genius behind the work. It had been nearly one hundred years since this master piece had been composed, but only now the flame of curiosity was ignited, resulting in a world-wide acknowledgment of his brilliance.

Today the sound bites couldn't be any more different. Take computer scientist Bernard Chazelle who teaches at Princeton University. He claims that Bach set out to "discover" the musical rules behind the universe, that's how highly regarded his work is today. And French essayist Emile Cioran, recognizing the power of Bach's music to evoke religious feelings, wrote "If God were indebted to anyone, it would be to Bach." I can tell you that Bach himself would have violently rejected such a characterization. He was famous for adding the words "Soli Deo Gloria" to some of his compositions – "To God alone be the glory." On other scripts he added the initials INJ (In nomine Jesus - in the name of Jesus). Still, it is pretty nice for a hard-working, creative, inventive and dedicated man to be recognized, even postmortem.

As I speak, his life is more than 300 years removed from our time, yet it contains a few timeless lessons, such as how to overcome adversity. There was a quite a bit of adversity in his life: the early death of his parents when he was only ten years old; the death of his first wife after 13 years of marriage; the death of nine of his twenty children. That's a lot of funerals to go through. In the most productive period of his life, when he was the musical director and choirmaster of Saint Thomas's church and school in Leipzig, he wasn't always happy and the people weren't always happy with him. He squabbled continually with the town council, often about money, and neither the council nor the people appreciated his musical gift. They said he was a stuffy old man who clung stubbornly to obsolete forms of music. (Fact is, he invented new forms of music.) Other people complained about his flowery playing style, which should provide perennial comfort to all church Music Directors. Consequently, they paid him a miserable salary, and when he died even contrived to defraud his widow of her meager inheritance. Oh, the people of the church!!!

How did Bach overcome all this adversity? I think he did so through his strong faith grounded in the gospel and frankly through his music and hard work. In this difficult setting in Leipzig Bach wrote his most enduring music, and he was productive. For a time, he wrote a cantata every single week. A cantata is a composition for one or more voices usually comprising solos, duets, and choruses and sung to an instrumental accompaniment. It's a small production. Bach's cantatas were based on the scripture readings for that particular Sunday. I read somewhere that today, a composer who writes one cantata a year is highly praised. Bach wrote one every week for several years and 202 of those have survived. How can we not honor and appreciate this man's life, even three centuries later? He was not a rocket man who entertained the masses. He was not a Pavarotti who dazzled with his voice. But he laid foundations from which generations of musicians have learned. And he taught us to believe in Christ, to believe in our own work, and to endure in the face of hardships. For that I thank you, we thank you, Johann Sebastian! Amen.