

Hanover International Worship

November 15, 2020

The Schübler Chorales by Johann Sebastian Bach

Organ: Dietmar Zeretzke

Sermon by Pastor Viola Chrzanowski,

presented by Rev. Dr. Gretchen Schoon Tanis

Organ: BWV 648 My Soul Magnifies the Lord

Welcome

In the name of God the father, the son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The first question that came to mind when I heard of a service focussing on the Schübler chorales was "Who on earth is Mr. (or Mrs.?) Schübler?"

The answer is easy.

Johann Georg Schübler published the original edition of these organ compositions by Johann Sebastian

Bach that were first printed in 1748/49 in the town of Zella.

Schübler was not just any engraver or publisher though. He was considered a master of his craft, and Bach obviously put great trust in him.

Besides that, Schübler was a musician himself. He took organ lessons from none other than the great master, Bach himself.

With these chorales, Bach has created six preludes for the organ, several of which he had previously used in his cantatas.

We are fortunate to be able to hear all six of these chorales today, played by Dietmar Zeretzke on the organ.

Some of the hymns that go with these chorales have been translated into English. Some of these hymns have become popular with a totally different text than Bach had in mind for these chorales, like the popular tune "Praise to the Lord, the Almighty". And some have not been translated into English at all but rather received totally new lyrics. Some have remained

popular over the centuries, others have fallen out of use, their lyrics sounding old-fashioned and outdated to us, with lots of sin and devil and hell in them.

We will not be faced with the situation of having to sing lyrics that we may feel uncomfortable about however because by the new set of rules for November, we are currently not allowed to sing at all in church. If at all possible, we ask you to keep your face masks on during the service. You are required to wear it whenever moving around.

So let's just read along today, verse by verse, without singing, and give some thought to old and new lyrics.

The organ prelude was the first of the chorales we get to hear today: It was the prelude to an old canticle, the Magnificat, the Song of Mary. Let us now praise God, using the words of this song as a prayer:

Psalm/Prayer: Luke 1: 46-55

Organ: BWV 645 Wake, Awake, For Night is Flying

Reading: Matthew 25: 1-13

Hymn: Wake, Awake, For Night is Flying

Sermon Part 1: The Bridegroom Comes

He's coming!

What a sweet cry in the ears of those who have been waiting for a long time. Waiting with great suspense and longing at first, always keeping an eye out on the path he is expected to come.

But he doesn't come. At some point, the excitement and anticipation gives way to fatigue. Waiting is exhausting, and at some point, even the ones who are most excited start yawning and falling asleep. They have almost given up hope. Is he going to come at all?

Have you ever waited for someone with such great suspense and longing? At the train station... and the train didn't come? Or at home... everything is all set, the coffee is starting to get cold, and the long-anticipated guest doesn't show up?

I had this happen at a wedding once. I was standing

at the church door with the bridegroom and the custodian, the bells were ringing, all guests were there, the organist was awaiting her signal, and no bride anywhere to be seen.

Five minutes of waiting were not difficult to make it through without getting uneasy.

After ten minutes the custodian started getting nervous because he had been told not to ring the bells any longer than ten minutes (too much tension on the spire).

After fifteen minutes I had used up my repertoire of calming words and helpless attempts at humor to cover up the increasing tension.

After twenty minutes, the bridegroom was getting seriously worried. She couldn't have changed her mind, could she?

Now that at least was something I could put him at ease about, and at that moment, I was certainly glad that this wedding was taking place in Germany and not for instance in the United States where the church

wedding is also the legal wedding. For those of you who are from other parts of the world, in Germany it is totally useless for the bride to run away from the altar theatrically with her veil flying, because at that time, she already is legally married, and saying "no" at the altar isn't going to change that in the least.

Back to our waiting bridegroom: His bride did show up eventually, more than 20 minutes late. Her beautician had taken a bit longer.

And back to the waiting young ladies in our story. They are waiting for the bridegroom. They have been waiting for a long time. It is getting dark, and they are getting tired. Of course they all have their lamps with them – but they didn't expect to be waiting for so long, and some of them didn't bring enough extra oil.

Let me translate that for the younger generation: This is like if you have your cell phone with you but forgot your battery charger. And now finally that star comes you have been waiting for for hours on end, you want to take pictures, and – well, nothing happens. The

battery is at zero, and your cell phone doesn't do a thing.

So the question this story asks is: Are you ready when you hear the cry "He's coming!" - ?

Or have you fallen asleep, no longer actually expecting him to come at all?

We need to translate this story for ourselves too. This is about Jesus' return. Do we seriously expect him? Do we expect him to come again, do we expect the world to come to an end some day, do we expect some sort of salvation for all or some sort of judgment day – depending - , or a resurrection for all?

For the early Christians, this was a completely natural idea. Of course, that's what Jesus promised, right? He is going to return, he is going to come like the bridegroom to the bride, and they themselves, the congregation, were the bride in this picture. Of course he is going to come! And of course all this is going to take place in our lifetimes, right?

But now 2000 years have gone by... we are tired, our lamps are extinguished, our batteries are low... Do we still expect the cry "He's coming!" - ?

Organ: BWV 650 Come Thou, Jesus, From Heaven

Reading: Matthew 25:31-46

Hymn: God, may your justice

Sermon Part 2: Judgment Day

He's coming!

For the young women waiting for the bridegroom to come, this is a sweet cry, a cry of relief. Finally! We have been waiting for so long!

He's coming!

This cry can have totally different undertones. It can sound threatening, it can be a foreboding of punishment.

Remember that one time in school, when some kid had painted this picture on the blackboard that the teacher better not see?

Some other kid always had to keep an eye out on the hallway for the teacher. And suddenly there was the cry: "He's coming!"

Or some of you may have a memory of having been naughty as a kid, and your mom saying "Just wait until dad is home!"

Someone saying "He's coming!" then meant fear. It meant upcoming punishment.

So, what is that day going to be like when Jesus is going to be coming? Is it going to be a judgment day, a huge day of punishment? The bad people being punished, the good ones being rewarded?

This is a question that not only the early Christians gave a lot of thought to. Throughout the centuries, people wondered about this. You can feel it when you look at old hymns and find the words "justice" and "heaven" and "hell" all over the place. In medieval times, fear of punishment was totally predominant in people's minds.

This has somehow tipped into the opposite extreme in more recent times. The idea of there even being any sort of punishment has become extremely unpopular, the word "hell" has practically fallen out of use in a serious theological context. Some denominations preach what is called universal reconciliation: Eventually, everybody is going to be saved.

That sounds good, and it goes together well with our picture of God as a 100% loving and merciful God.

Let's not cheat ourselves though: This leaves a lot of open questions too. What about the Hitlers and Mussolinis, what about the murderers of whichever ideology, may it be called ISIS or Naziism or Stalinism? What about the assassins of New York, of Paris, of Nice, of Vienna? Are they all going to go unpunished? Will they triumph over their victims in all eternity? Will there be no justice for their victims?

Some years ago, we were traveling the United States. One Sunday, we went to church in a small town where we happened to be that day, and after worship,

we were invited for coffee and a chat. After some smalltalk, some the members of that congregation apparently wanted to put our faith to the test. One lady asked us point-blank: "Do you believe in hell?" Apparently, for her, that was the benchmark of true faith.

What we did not know at that time but later learned was that the idea of universal reconciliation is a downright pet peeve of many conservative congregations in the United States. Certainly this lady at least was not satisfied with our reply "We believe in Jesus Christ".

So, is there eventually going to be some sort of a reward for the good guys and punishment for the bad guys?

Do we have to tremble when we hear the words "He's coming!" like we would when a big punishing dad is coming home? Or is he, in his infinite mercy, eventually going to save everyone after all?

I will be quite frank with you: I do not have an answer

to this question. And there is a very simple reason for that: I am not God.

I want to leave it to God to find the answer to this question. He will know how to solve the problem of being just, loving and merciful all at the same time.

And because I trust him to be able to do that, I am convinced that we do NOT need to tremble in fear before the cry "He's coming!"

Organ: BWV 646 Whither shall I flee?

Reading: Matthew 21:1-11

Hymn: O Bride of Christ, Rejoice

Sermon Part 3: He's coming!

He's coming!

They have been waiting for so long.

God had promised to send the redeemer, the anointed one.

Can that be him now, the one who is coming into town, riding on a donkey?

He's coming!

The people in Jerusalem are shouting as they hear that Jesus is coming into town. They put palm leaves and pieces of clothing down on the dusty path like you would roll out the red carpet before a king.

And they shout "Hosanna" – "Help us, Lord", a cry that over time transformed from a cry for help into a cry of joy. Hosanna to the coming Lord!

Isn't this a strange kind of connection, a story that we associate with the season of Advent – "Jesus is coming!" - , or maybe with Lent, as the beginning of the passion of Christ?

Yet, there is this connection between the end of the

church year and its beginning (Advent), between the first and the second coming of Jesus.

In German churches, on the second Sunday of Advent, all texts focus on the double entendre of the "second advent", the second coming of Jesus.

You can hear this connection throughout our hymns: *Zion hears the watchmen singing, and all her heart with joy is springing. ... Her dear friend comes down, all glorious, the strong in grace, in truth victorious. Her star is ris'n, her light is come! Now come, O Blessed One, Lord Jesus, God's own Son. Sing hosanna!* - we might as well sing these words during Advent.

The poets and composers have always been aware of these connections.

"O bride of Christ, rejoice" – here we have the motif of the bride and the groom again, and then the hymn moves on to the people of Jerusalem who are spreading pieces of clothing and palm leaves before him.

An even earlier poet, Francesco Rovigo who lived in

the 16th century, used this very same tune for his version of the Song of Mary which we spoke together at the beginning of our service.

The very earliest lyrics to go with this tune are secular ones: Full of unrequited love, the poet complains about the suffering Venus and Cupid have caused him. From his own disappointment and his own unfulfilled hopes he draws the conclusion: "I advise you all to stay away from love. There is nothing to be gained except woe and sorrow."

Disappointed hopes, turning away from love – this is the conclusion of the very earliest version of this hymn. What a sad conclusion.

Just imagine the young women in our first story had simply extinguished their lamps and gone home. Imagine they had given up waiting for the bridegroom altogether.

That's not how it's supposed to be!

The Christian poets, in their lyrics, contrast this

hopelessness with the great hope of the bride and the groom, the longing of the early Christians for Jesus to return, the joy of the people in Jerusalem at Jesus' coming.

May this hope, this longing, and this joy fill our hearts as we expect Jesus to come again.

He is coming!

Amen.

Organ: BWV 647 If Thou But Trust in God

Creed

Hymn: If Thou But Trust in God to Guide Thee

Announcements

Hymn: Lord, Cause Thy Face On Us to Shine

Prayer of intercession

The Lord's Prayer

Hymn: The Lord bless us and keep us

Blessing

Organ: BWV 649 Abide With Us, Lord Jesus Christ