

Trumpets

Ash Wednesday, March 6, 2019

Church of the Ascension

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Blow the trumpet in Zion; sound the alarm on my holy mountain! Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble, for the day of the LORD is coming, it is near ...

Blow the trumpet in Zion; sanctify a fast; call a solemn assembly; gather the people.

-Joel 2:1,15-16a

Jesus said, "Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven. So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." - Matthew 6:1-6,16-21

Blow the trumpet ... Those words from the prophet Joel are the first that we typically hear from Scripture on Ash Wednesday.

Blow the trumpet in Zion;

sound the alarm on my holy mountain!

Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble.

An alternative to this text from Joel is a passage from Isaiah that also includes the word trumpet:

Shout out, do not hold back!

Lift up your voice like a trumpet!

Announce to my people their rebellion ...

Joel says, *Blow the trumpet*, and Isaiah says *Lift up your voice like a trumpet!* But in today's gospel text, Jesus says *do not sound a trumpet*: " "... whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do ..."

All of these references to trumpets on Ash Wednesday, and I admit I never really paid them any attention before! And it's ironic that I've never paid attention to the

trumpets, because drawing attention is the main aim of trumpet-sounding in these and in dozens of other Bible passages.

We could probably better understand how these trumpets attracted attention if we could hear one, and I regret that I was unable to locate either a ram's horn, that is, a shofar, or an ancient silver trumpet. Nor was I able to find a sentry-musician who could sound one for us. But I'm sure there are plenty of them to be found here in Chicago. Some of you will know that the Jewish autumn feast known as Rosh Hashanah is also known as the Feast of Trumpets and is famous for the trumpet blast from a ram's horn. As a poor substitute, down in the church undercroft this afternoon I did find a section of copper pipe ... and I myself once played the trumpet. But that was in 6th and 7th grades, before I was demoted to the tuba. In any case, I wondered if with this pipe I could get close to the sound that is referenced in some of these passages ... May I try? [Yes, I did sound the 'trumpet.']

Sounding the trumpet in this fashion may seem like a cheap stunt or a farce, and maybe it is (a cheap stunt or a farce), and if so it may illustrate what so outraged Jesus and the prophets about false religion. When Jesus says *do not sound a trumpet* he is particularly taking aim at financial gifts that are given with a literal fanfare. And he goes on to take aim at a lot more. We all know the cheap religion that sometimes does more harm than good. We all know about the plausible show of religion when underneath the cassock is sexual abuse. Behind the fervently supported social policy is a double standard. Prayers as weapons. God-talk that is intellectually sophisticated but disconnected from hearts and relationships. And then there's all the unspeakable violence in the world done in the name of God.

The spiritual work for some of us on Ash Wednesday or during Lent may be to question if there are trumpets that we should stop sounding.

The admonition of Jesus that we hear in this gospel text today, from the Sermon on the Mount, is the only instance in the Bible that I'm aware of in which sounding a trumpet is negatively portrayed. Trumpets are otherwise sounded in a variety of broad categories. They are, for instance, typically sounded in order to literally bring people together and to spiritually unite a community of people. We get this sense in the text from Joel. The opening line is repeated later in the text: "*Blow the trumpet in Zion,*" and then "*sanctify a fast; call a solemn assembly; gather the people. Sanctify the congregation.*" The trumpet rallies people to come together and to recognize common concerns and to respond for the common good. I wonder, particularly in our increasingly polarized time, what trumpet call might cause us to see common concerns and find the will to find and grow common ground for common good – whether in our households or work places, our parish, our neighborhoods, our city, nation or world.

Trumpets in scripture also signify the start of a battle. Jericho comes to mind, of course, but there are many other instances, and Ash Wednesday could be seen as the initiation of a campaign to retake our more genuine, truthful, compassionate lives. Is there a battle that you or I or we need to wage?

In these and other contexts, trumpets also of course explicitly signify the presence of God. In the chronology of the Bible as we have it, the very first mention of trumpets comes in Chapter 19 of the Book of Exodus. The Israelites are gathered at the bottom of Mt. Sinai and they hear the *“blast of a trumpet so loud that all ... who were in the camp trembled.”* This trumpet blast is preparing Moses to go up the mountain, to speak with God and to come back down the mountain, in the very next chapter, with the Ten Commandments.

Trumpets are also found near the very end of the Bible. In the middle chapters of the Book of Revelation, seven angels sound seven trumpets. Each angel's trumpet blast reveals another aspect of God's judgment of humanity's failures. Until, *“ the seventh angel blew his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, saying, ‘The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign for ever and ever.’”* (Revelation 11:15)

All of this may lead us to wonder: What trumpet might be sounding for you or me or for us today? With all of the noise in our lives, how will we hear it? How will we distinguish the genuine trumpet call from all the other noises – the shrill, the alluring, the vapid? If we do hear the sound of a genuine trumpet call, one that sounds as if it's coming from the heart of God, what will it mean for us? How will we respond?

[the 'trumpet' sounds a 2nd time]