

Homily
2nd Sunday of Advent - C

Rev. Peter G. Jankowski
December 04-05, 2021

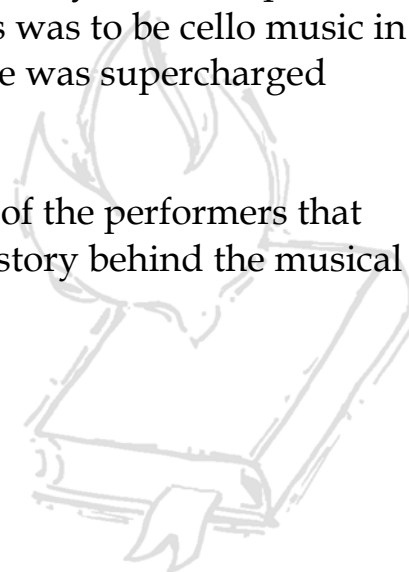
Bar 5: 1-9
Ps 126: 1-2, 2-3, 4-5, 6
Phil 1: 4-6, 8-11
Lk 3: 1-6

The story I am about to share with you is entitled, **The Cellist of Sarajevo** and was written by Paul Sullivan for a periodical called *Hope Magazine*. This is the story...

As a pianist, I was invited to perform with cellist Eugene Friesen at the International Cello Festival in Manchester, England. Every two years a group of the world's greatest cellists and others devoted to that unassuming instrument - bow makers, collectors, historians - gather for a week of workshops, master classes, seminars, recitals and parties. Each evening the 600 or so participants assemble for a concert.

The opening-night performance at the Royal Northern College of Music consisted of works for unaccompanied cello. There on the stage in the magnificent concert hall was a solitary chair. No piano, no music stand, no conductor's podium. This was to be cello music in its purest, most intense form. The atmosphere was supercharged with anticipation and concentration.

The world-famous cellist Yo-Yo Ma was one of the performers that April night in 1994, and there was a moving story behind the musical composition he would play:



On May 27, 1992, in Sarajevo, one of the few bakeries that still had a supply of flour was making and distributing bread to the starving, war-shattered people. At 4 P.M. a long line stretched into the street. Suddenly, a mortar shell fell directly into the middle of the line, killing 22 people and splattering flesh, blood, bone and rubble.

Not far away lived a 35-year-old musician named Vedran Smailovic.

Before the war he had been a cellist with the Sarajevo Opera, a distinguished career to which he patiently longed to return. But when he saw the carnage from the massacre outside his window, he was pushed past his capacity to absorb and endure any more. Anguished, he resolved to do the thing he did best make music – public music, daring music, music on a battlefield.

For each of the next 22 days, at 4 P.M., Smailovic put on his full, formal concert attire, took up his cello and walked out of his apartment into the midst of the battle raging around him. Placing a plastic chair beside the crater that the shell had made, he played in memory of the dead Albinoni's *Adagio in G minor*, one of the most mournful and haunting pieces in the classical repertoire. He played to the abandoned streets, smashed trucks and burning buildings, and to the terrified people who hid in the cellars while the bombs dropped and bullets flew. With masonry exploding around him, he made his unimaginably courageous stand for human dignity, for those lost to war, for civilization, for compassion and for peace. Though the shellings went on, he was never hurt.

After newspapers picked up the story of this extraordinary man, an English composer, David Wilde, was so moved that he, too, decided to make music. He wrote a composition for unaccompanied cello, "The Cellist of Sarajevo," into which he poured his own feelings of outrage, love and brotherhood with Vedran Smailovic.

It was “The Cellist of Sarajevo” that Yo-Yo Ma was to play that evening.

Ma came out on stage, bowed to the audience and sat down quietly on the chair. The music began, stealing out into the hushed hall and creating a shadowy, empty universe, ominous and haunting. Slowly it grew into an agonized, screaming, slashing furor, gripping us all before subsiding at last into a hollow death rattle and, finally, back to silence.

When he had finished, Ma remained bent over his cello, his bow resting on the strings. No one in the hall moved or made a sound for a long time. It was as though we had just witnessed that horrifying massacre ourselves.

Finally, Ma looked out across the audience and stretched out his hand, beckoning someone to come to the stage. An indescribable electric shock swept over us as we realized who it was: Vedran Smailovic, the cellist of Sarajevo!

Smailovic rose from his seat and walked down the aisle as Ma left the stage to meet him. They flung their arms around each other in an exuberant embrace. Everyone in the hall erupted in a chaotic, emotional frenzy-clapping, shouting and cheering.

And in the center of it all stood these two men, hugging and crying unashamedly. Yo-Yo Ma, a suave, elegant prince of classical music, flawless in appearance and performance; and Vedran Smailovic, dressed in a stained and tattered leather motorcycle suit. His wild long hair and huge mustache framed a face that looked old beyond his years, soaked with tears and creased with pain.

As I reflected on the scripture readings and themes for this week's Second Sunday of the Advent Season, I came across this story I once read about the Cellist of Sarajevo and the means by which Vedran Smailovic communicated the sadness and agony of the war set upon the citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina. I was thinking about this story because Mr. Smailovic, even in the throws of war, attempted to illuminate a glimmer of hope in a war torn country through a simple piece of classical music. In his own way, Smailovic attempted to shed light during a great moment of darkness in southeastern region of Europe.

In light of today's readings, I envisioned Smailovic as some type of messenger of peace at a time when the citizens of Sarajevo looked for hope. Smailovic was not hope itself, but a messenger that communicated that hope was not impossible, that the vision of the future promised something greater than the people could grasp at the moment. For 22 days, Smailovic preached the gift of hope in a war-torn nation through his gift of music. It is Vedran Smailovic who became a messenger of

hope in the for the 20th Century citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina for what was yet to come.

In today's scripture readings, we encounter the same message of hope during the people's time of darkness. The first reading today comes from the prophet Baruch, a text that we encounter during our three year liturgical cycle only twice – once every three years on the Second Sunday of Advent and every year at our Easter Vigil. The text from Baruch most likely was written during the faithful people's exile from Jerusalem during a time of agony in the area of Babylon, an agony similar to that experienced by those in the story I shared today. Baruch's message from today's first reading holds a similar theme to today's story: that God will lead the people from their misery into the Promised Land.

As I reflected on the readings for today's Mass, I was thinking about St. John the Baptist, who is the one of the main subjects of our Second Sunday of Advent each year. St. John is considered the last great prophet, the one who specifically points to Jesus as the Savior who will redeem God's chosen people. Only in Luke's gospel will we read about

the birth of John the Baptist and the impact this birth made on his parents Elizabeth and Zechariah. His birth inspired a canticle by his father that is prayed at every Catholic morning prayer throughout the world by the holy priests and religious who pray it.

It is St. John the Baptist who echoes the sentiments of today's first reading from Baruch, who points to a sign of hope during a great darkness in the world of faith, a sign of hope that would shine the light of the sun into the throws of the night. It is St. John the Baptist who became a messenger of hope in the 1st Century for what was yet to come.

I was also thinking about a model of this Christian virtue, a man named St. Nicholas of Myra, who, because of his generosity to the poor and neglected, became a model of charity throughout the world. It was through the stories passed on by St. Methodius to the Dutch Catholics of the 9th Century that the legacy of this Dutch *Sinterklaas* evolved into the Santa Claus tradition of today, a tradition that we renew each sixth of December and on the Feast of our Lord's Incarnation on December 25th.

Today, St. Nicholas is considered the patron saint of gift givers. And on December 6th, the feast day of this saint, tradition speculates that this

Sinterklaas fellow leaves gifts in the shoes of the good Dutch boys and girls as a reward for their goodness over the year gone past. It is St. Nicholas who became a messenger of hope for the 4th Century people of Asia Minor, for the Dutch people of successive generations and for all of us sitting in these pews today.

As I reflected on the readings for today's Mass, I came upon the image of the Blessed Mother in my prayers. Last week, we celebrated the feast of the Immaculate Conception, which, paralleled with her Assumption body and soul into heaven, constitute the two major infallible statements that our Holy Fathers have pronounced in the last 160 years (the Immaculate Conception in 1854; the Assumption in 1950). This Tuesday, our Church celebrates the Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe, the Patroness of the Americas, the mother of us all, and the Mother of God who holds the distinction of serving as the first tabernacle of the New Testament.

Finally, there are all of you. I can preach about following the Ten Commandments and the precepts of the Church. I can teach you the ways of God. Today, you have chosen to *live* the life of Christ by coming

to church and giving thanks to God for his presence in our lives. Behind me in this sanctuary, you have made this holy place quite messy by donating the layers of bags that are stacked before us as a symbol of how much you care to serve the needy of this city of Joliet. As Christ came to serve us, the helpless and wandering, in order that we might find our way again to this light of hope, you have followed that example in helping the kids and families of the east side of Joliet. This afternoon, a bunch of our eighth grade students will be gathering these toys and cloths and directing them to *El Centro Vilaseca* on Chicago Street in Joliet, where the Sisters of St. Joseph (*Las Hermanas Josefinas*) dedicate their service to the low income families at their daycare center. Once a month, I have the honor and privilege of serving these sisters at Mass and breakfast and they serve as my reflection of the way I need to live my priesthood.

These sisters provide the light in the darkness of my Advent, as do the prophets of the Old Testament, our Blessed Mother, St. John the Baptist, St. Nicholas, St. Methodius... and you. May you continue to

allow that light to shine brightly and may we all share that light with the people that we meet. This is our prayer.