**Intro to the reading:** Well if you haven't put the pieces together yet, our theme for today is the gift of music in our life together. It's funny, we sort of backed into this focus for today. More than a month ago, Julie asked me to choose a first hymn for the service so she could teach it to our children's and youth choirs. I was feeling pretty uninspired by the lectionary readings for today, so we agreed on "When in our Music God is Glorified," simply as an "old chestnut" that we thought the kids should know. And then the stewardship committee chose music and arts as one of the gifts of our congregation to highlight in this year's campaign – and suddenly that random choice of hymn felt Spirit-inspired.

So then I went looking for Scripture about musical worship–don't think we pastors are above googling "Bible verses about music"–and in my searching I stumbled upon our Old Testament reading, from the book of Chronicles. Chronicles gives a history of the kingdom of Israel, with a special concern for the mechanics of worship life. You'll hear that concern in today's reading, about the dedication of the temple in Jerusalem. Listen for a word from the Lord.

**"A More Profound Alleluia!"**
**by Ellen Williams Hensle, 11/9/25**

Around the time I arrived in northwest Philadelphia last year, a group of interfaith clergy in our area were reorganizing themselves. This group of clergy friends had previously met together on a regular basis, and they decided it was more than time to get that monthly meeting back up and running. I was invited to join by Cheryl Perch, the pastor of Summit Presbyterian in Mt. Airy, and as soon as I walked into my first meeting I found the atmosphere warm and welcoming. Now our ragtag group of clergy – Presbyterians, Methodists, Episcopalians, Lutherans, UCC, Unitarians, and Mennonites, along with rabbis in the Conservative, Reformed and Reconstructionist traditions – all of us come together for a brown bag lunch once a month. We learn from one other's traditions, hear one another's stories, and share joys and concerns from our congregations and our neighborhoods. It's a beautiful thing.

And sometimes the things we have to share with one another are difficult. At our September meeting, we began by hearing from one of my Methodist colleagues about her recent sermon series on apocalypses in the Bible, from Daniel to Revelation. That brought up the problematic history of how Christians have interpreted these texts, often in ways that bring harm to our Jewish neighbors. We welcomed a new participant to the group, who in addition to being a Methodist minister runs a non-profit that supports the families of gun violence victims, founded after she lost her own brother to a gun shot almost 30 years ago. Though her organization brings healing and joy, she told us about just how little public support victims' families receive.

We heard from an Asian-American colleague about the ways his community is organizing in secret to protect themselves from immigration raids and support folks whose family members have been detained. We asked how we could help and he declined to share any details – safer for others to know as little as possible. And then one of my rabbi friends shared that her 80-something father living in Washington, DC had been questioned by ICE for no reason other than that he was working outside with his hands and looked vaguely non-white. It was a heavy hour.

And then my rabbi friend brought out her shofar. If you're not familiar, a shofar is a musical instrument like a bugle, traditionally made of a ram's horn. It's played for certain Jewish rituals and holidays, especially the autumn observances of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. So at the end of our meeting, my rabbi friend brought out her shofar. She brought the narrow end of the instrument to her lips and took a low, deep breath. Then she blew a long note – a note that resounded off the walls of the cavernous church hall in which we were sitting.

She blew as loud and as long as she could. And as the note sounded and echoed and lingered, the room grew perfectly still, and tears came to stand in my eyes. For something about that sound brought the pure presence of God into our midst. *Something about that sound brought the pure presence of God into our midst.* And I had a flash of realization: the world is hard and heavy and unjust, yes – and, we are together. Together with one another and together with God. God is with us. In that moment, I knew deep in my bones it was true. The resounding note of the shofar had made it real to me.

The blast of a musical instrument has that power – power to summon the presence of God into our midst, power to remind us that we are not alone. The blast of a musical instrument has that power – so it was when King Solomon assembled all the religious officials in his kingdom and a great crowd of God's people to dedicate the newly-built temple. Solomon had spent years on his temple-building project, bringing together materials and craftsmen from all over the kingdom of Israel and

beyond – they came together to finally erect a home for God in Jerusalem, a place for God to dwell in the midst of the people. God had promised Solomon's father David that his son would be the one to accomplish this great task, the task of moving God's home from a tent that sheltered the ark of the covenant and moved around wherever the transient people went, to a permanent structure, a temple in the capital city of Jerusalem. So Solomon set about building the temple. And when it was finally complete, he called his kingdom's religious officials, and he called his people, to come together for a great ceremony, a great celebration.

The verses just before the ones we read a moment ago describe how the crowd sacrificed sheep and oxen in thanksgiving to God as the priests carried the ark of the covenant, sheltered by its tent, toward the now-complete temple. The priests put the ark in its place, in the inner sanctuary of the temple, the Holy of Holies, and returned to stand just outside. Then the musicians assembled. Chronicles tells us that among the musicians were the Levitical singers, religious officials tasked with providing musical worship – the passage seems to indicate that every Levitical singer in the kingdom was there, meaning the choir would have numbered 288 people raising their voices and playing cymbals, lyres, harps and other instruments. And joining them were 120 trumpet-playing priests. Wow. That's quite the massed choir.

And then, in unison, they make a melody in praise and thanksgiving to the Lord. Our translation says that "it was the duty of the trumpeters and singers together to make themselves heard in unison" – but other translations render the phrase something like "the harmony between the trumpeters and singers was so *perfect* that only one melody was audible when they praised and gave thanks to Yahweh." These 400 musicians playing together don't just make a joyful noise – they give the performance of their lives. Their harmony is perfect. And this song of praise and thanksgiving, this song declaring the steadfast love of the Lord – it calls the presence of God into the temple. As the blast of the trumpets resounds, the glory of the Lord, made visible to the people in a thick, dark cloud – the glory of the Lord comes to rest in the temple. The sound of the musicians' praise brings the presence of God into the midst of the people.

That music brings God's presence to us, or that through music we are lifted up into God's presence, whether in a massed choir or in a hymn whispered under our breath when we feel unsteady — though we may not quite understand the mechanics of it, that music connects us to God is something we know intuitively. When I was interviewing for this job last summer, we talked a lot about the importance of music to the life of PCCH. Someone on the nominating committee said, "You know, sermons are great and all, but I've often felt closer to God when the choir sings than when I'm listening to the preacher. No offense." None taken — truly. Words are important, sure. I spend a lot of time choosing them carefully. And in the movement of Presbyterian worship the heart of the service is intended to be the proclamation of the gospel through Scripture read and sermon declaimed.

But even this preacher knows that we more regularly feel God's presence when we hear music, or when we make music together. The tingle down your spine. The swelling in your breast. The tear in the corner of your eye. The sense of connection to those around you as you all experience the same thing. The feeling of being surrounded by beauty. And what is God, if not pure beauty, expressed as love?

I've been thinking a lot lately about our need for beauty. I don't have to tell you that we live in a broken and chaotic world, a violent world, a fractured world, a world so in need of healing. There's something about experiencing beauty that really helps. It grounds us in goodness. It inspires us to hope. It gives us joy. It helps us to put the pieces back together. Beauty calls God's presence into our midst, yes – and the beauty we create with our own hands and breath and voices also reminds us of the power of human creativity, the resilience of the human spirit. If we are going to survive, we need all of these things: grounding, inspiration, hope, joy, healing, creativity, resilience, God's very presence in our midst. And so we need beauty like we need air: desperately, urgently. If we don't have it we will die.

This congregation has a strong history of creating beauty together: beauty in our spaces, beauty in the deep friendships found here, and of course beauty in our music. When we make something beautiful, we throw out a lifeline to each other. When we make something beautiful, we summon God's presence into our midst. Thanks be to God for the beauty found here; thanks be to God for all of you, who make it.