

## Do You Hear What I Hear?

Sterling UMC  
December 24, 2010  
Luke 2:1-20

He emerged from the Metro at the L'Enfant Plaza Station and positioned himself against a wall beside a trash basket. By most measures, he was nondescript: a youngish white man in jeans, a long-sleeved T-shirt and a Washington Nationals ball cap. From a small case, he removed a violin. Placing the open case at his feet, he shrewdly threw in a few dollars and some pocket change as seed money, swiveled it to face pedestrian traffic, and began to play.

It was 7:51 a.m. on Friday, January 12, the middle of the morning rush hour. In the next 43 minutes, as the violinist performed six classical pieces, 1,097 people passed by. No one knew it, but the fiddler standing against that bare wall outside the Metro in an indoor arcade at the top of the escalators was one of the finest classical musicians in the world.

The musician did not play popular tunes whose familiarity alone might have drawn interest. These were masterpieces that have endured for centuries on their brilliance alone, soaring music befitting the grandeur of cathedrals and concert halls. His instrument, one of the most valuable instruments ever made, handcrafted in 1713 by Antonio Stradivari during the Italian master's "golden period." The price tag was reported to be about \$3.5 million.

Who was the musician? His name is Joshua Bell. A onetime child prodigy, at 39 Joshua Bell has arrived as an internationally acclaimed virtuoso. Three days before he appeared at the Metro station, Bell had filled the house at Boston's stately Symphony Hall, where merely pretty good seats went for \$100. Two weeks later, at the Music Center at Strathmore, he would play to a standing-room-only audience so respectful of his artistry that they stifled their coughs until the silence between movements. But on that Friday in January, Joshua Bell was just another mendicant, competing for the attention of busy people on their way to work.

So, what do you think happened?

Bell played with acrobatic enthusiasm, his body leaning into the music and arching on tiptoes at the high notes. The sound was nearly symphonic, carrying to all parts of the homely arcade as the pedestrian traffic filed past.

Three minutes went by before *something* happened. Sixty-three people had already passed when, finally, there was a breakthrough of sorts. A middle-age man altered his gait for a split second, turning his head to notice that there seemed to be some guy playing music. Yes, the man kept walking, but it was something.

A half-minute later, Bell got his first donation. A woman threw in a buck and scooted off. It was not until six minutes into the performance that someone actually stood against a wall, and listened, but after less than 30 seconds the man looked at his watch and started to walk again.

Things never got much better. The one who paid the most attention was a 3 year old boy. His mother had him by the hand, she was hurried but the kid stopped to look at the violinist. Finally the mother pushed hard and the child continued to walk turning his head all the time. This action was repeated by several other children. All the parents, without exception, forced them to move on.

In the three-quarters of an hour that Joshua Bell played, seven people stopped what they were doing long enough to hang around and take in the performance, at least for a minute. Twenty-seven gave money, most of them on the run -- for a total of \$32 and change. That leaves the 1,070 people who hurried by, oblivious, many only three feet away, few even turning to look.

This is a true story. Joshua Bell playing incognito in the metro station was organized by the Washington Post as part of a social experiment about perception, taste and priorities of people. You can read all about it in the original Washington Post article entitled "*Pearls Before Breakfast*", for which the author, Gene Weingarten won the Pulitzer. The whole event was all caught on a hidden camera. Over 2 million people have watched it on utube, but that day, of the hundreds of people who rushed by only 7 people stopped and paid any attention. The video ends with the one woman who recognized Bell, walking up to him at the end of his performance and introducing herself and saying, "This could only happen in DC."

Well I don't know if I believe that. Because something very similar only on an infinitely grander scale happened on that first Christmas night.

Amid the hustle and bustle of Bethlehem's crowded streets the most beautiful music ever heard by human ears filled the air. That night long ago the cry of a child pierced the night. And with that, above the noise and the chaos a heavenly symphony rose in glory and splendor. In the Christ-child we hear the bells of Heaven ringing loudly. In Him we see God, the grand violinist, as it were, playing a sweet melody of hope, eternal life and redemption. This world is invited by God to attend this wonderful symphony of life, we are ushered into our seats by the Holy Spirit, there to be overwhelmed by the majesty and beauty of the song being played; Emmanuel – God with us!

And what do you think happened? Most people missed it.

Yes, the shepherds heard it. They heard the choir of angels announce the glorious message of Christ's birth. They heard it and responded.

The wise men saw it. They saw the star shining in the sky, guiding them to the place where the baby was laid. They saw it and responded.

Mary and Joseph knew it. She had been informed of the significance of her unborn child with the angel announcement that this was not just an ordinary child. Joseph too was told that, "His name was to be called Jesus, for He would save His people from their sins." They knew and responded.

But most people missed it. They went about their business oblivious to glorious event that was taking place around them. What about us tonight? For you see this is Christmas Eve and once again the Master is playing his masterpiece.

Do you hear it? Ringing through the sky? Once again He is playing his song of salvation.

Do you hear it? The heavenly harmonies of hope.

Do you hear it? The lush melody of love.

Do you hear it? The soothing notes of peace.

Do you hear it? The soaring sounds of joy.

Will you miss it? Will the noise and business of our modern lives drown out His song? Will we go about our business oblivious to the glory and splendor of His heavenly music? Or will you stop to listen? Will you pause long enough to take it all in and bask in the wonder and glory of the most beautiful song ever heard?

This evening we have gathered to do just that, to celebrate the glory of heaven ringing out loudly, proclaiming the wonder of God in the world; Christ Jesus who came into the world to offer redemption and lasting hope. We celebrate not the birth of merely a wise man, not only a great teacher, and certainly not simply a prophet of God; we celebrate God in the flesh, the promised Messiah; the Christ Child who came into the world to save sinners. In Him there is hope for the hopeless; there is healing for the broken! There is new life for those who feel dead inside. There is forgiveness for those who have turned away from the Lord.

God has sent His only Son into the world to set the captives free; to offer the hope of eternal salvation to you and to me. Of all of the sounds of the unwrapping of paper from the trinkets that we will collect this season, as you listen to them, hear a greater sound; the sound of the unwrapping, the unveiling of Christ to the world.

Take a moment to stop to listen for the sound of salvation, the ringing of the bells of grace, resounding in the wonder, the beauty, the majesty of Christ Jesus given.

For unto us a child is born, unto us a Son is given, and His name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace.

I would like to be able to say that I would have stopped to listen that day had I been traveling through that Metro station, but I don't know if I can say that. I probably would have just continued on my way like all of the rest of the people oblivious to the beauty, the wonder, and the glory of that music.

But I will not allow that to happen to me tonight! How about you?