

Grace 2017 — A Challenging Time

By Dan Sapone



**I do not understand the mystery of grace
— only that it meets us where we are but
does not leave us where it found us.”**

— Ann Lamott

Extending a Tradition of Grace

On Saturday, December 9, 2017, Gretta and I continued our twenty-year tradition by attending an event called “A Cathedral Christmas.” It is an annual Christmas concert of the Men’s and Boy’s Chorus, orchestra, and pipe organ, at Grace Cathedral in San Francisco.

I have written about this annual event before on *ConVivio* (notably in [2009](#) and [2015](#)), and each time my goal was to shine a light on the powerful effect it always has on our experience of the holiday season. For us, the tradition starts with its magnificent music, having the ongoing effect on the lives of real people of all types that thoughtful art can have. In addition to the music itself, the venue — [Grace Cathedral](#) on California Street in San Francisco — contributes its powerful presence and enduring heritage to our encounter with the holiday season. And last but not least, this event intentionally involves itself in the tenor of the times in which we live — for Grace Cathedral has long served to participate in the life of its broad Bay Area community not only with its Christian Anglican traditions, not only with its music, but also by contributing to the everyday issues and struggles, both diverse and universal, that affect the lives of our society.

The Venue: Grace Cathedral

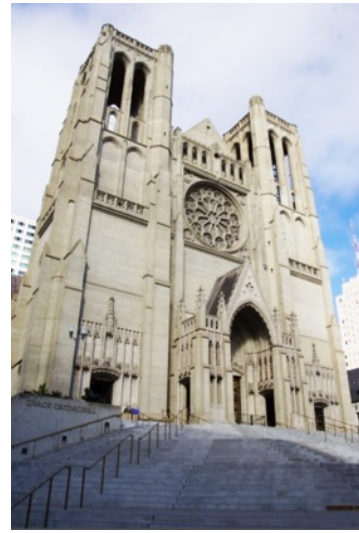
Grace Cathedral has long committed itself to be a house of prayer for all people and a place where all are welcome — prayerful or not. I observe that those two commitments set it apart from many other institutions that seem on the surface to be similar. Over the years I have noticed that the cathedral community provides many gifts, usually without a lot of fanfare, to people of all kinds whether they are part of their faith community or not. I learned, for example, of the hundreds of homeless who have been housed in the cathedral basement over the years. It also has lived up to a well-earned reputation for welcoming members of society who have not always felt welcome elsewhere in the Bay Area and the nation.



“Ghiberti’s Doors” copies of the 15th-century originals residing in Florence, reveal a welcoming heritage — the originals started the Italian Renaissance in bringing great art to everyday lives of real people.



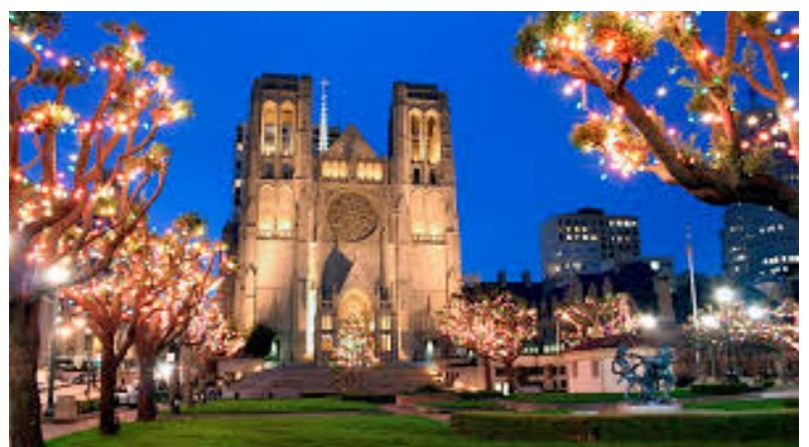
Grace Cathedral, inside ...



... and out



It can get colorful, inside ...



... and out

The Music

Usually, the Christmas concert focuses on two principal themes: 1) the joy associated with the birth of The Child — represented by well-known Christmas carols in the first and third segments of the performance — and 2) the peacefulness settling over the ‘Holy Land’ and the world, associated with the hope for peace that The Child would bring – represented by classic choral and orchestral music performed with sweetness and passion throughout the concert. The signature piece of the Grace Cathedral Music Ministry has always been a tune by Hugh MacKinnon called “*Sleeps Judea Fair.*” Gretta and I always look forward to this tune, in the final segment of the concert, as the highlight of the season. The lyrics and the slow, soft harmony of the voices recreate the joy and peace we expect from the season.



Settling into our usual seats at the acoustic center of the cathedral — one of America’s premier acoustical rooms — the expressions on the faces of the stained-glass figures of the saints all around the cathedral contributed to the warmth, peace, and harmony that we had come to expect. I opened the printed program and was pleased to find our favorite piece listed near the end of the program along with a few others I did not recognize.

The first segment of the concert contained the familiar choral pieces we had come to expect – like John Wade’s 18th-century carol “O Come, All Ye Faithful.” When the Men’s and Boys’ chorus left the altar for an intermission, the organ solo began. The organist’s right hand began by trying to play the familiar tune of “Christ Is Born Today,” while the left hand alternately ignored and ‘drowned out’ that melody with some deep, dissonant, and unfamiliar chords. I took this to represent the deep discord that “The Holy Land,” and much of the world, has been experiencing. We heard in the news that morning of the president’s announcement regarding the status of Jerusalem, which sparked some violent protests there and in Bethlehem itself.

Message received.

The peacefulness that The Child brought to this region centuries ago is not working out so well. I suppose this concert, to be true to its themes, needed to reflect that unrest and discord alongside the hope for peace and harmony that is the focus of so many of our prayers and greetings during this holiday season.

Then, after applause for the organ soloist, the singers returned for the final segment that traditionally conveys the message of peace and serenity culminating in their signature piece, “Sleeps Judea Fair.” It was as beautiful, soothing, and peaceful as always, offering a wish for “grace” — to Judea, to the world, and to us:

“Let the Christ Child, meekly smiling, infant wise all woe beguiling
Grant His grace to thee.”

Sleeps Judea Fair

By Hugh A. MacKinnon

Sleeps Judea fair,
Bides the Christ Child there.
Shepherds, haste ye! flocks forsaking,
Swift your way to Him be taking.
Babe of Israel's prayer.
Babe of Israel's prayer.

Christ from God is come,
Choosing earthly home.
Royal pomp and splendor, never,
But with love, which naught can sever.
He will heal the dumb.
Christ from God is come

Lowly bend the knee,
Thou from sin set free.
Let the Christ Child, meekly smiling,
Infant wise, all woe beguiling.
Grant His grace to thee.
Grant His grace to thee.

*[and then from a single small voice from the
choir loft in the back of the cathedral]*

Silent night, holy night

[and then the entire chorus again]

Grant His grace to thee.

Listen here:

“Sleeps Judea Fair.”



An Acknowledgement of the Times in Which We Live

After we were treated to that reward, the Episcopal Bishop of California, Rev. Marc Andrus, thanked us all for being there and gave us some words of wisdom for the season. His ministry, consistent with the ongoing mission of Grace Cathedral, is focused on the key issues of our time and place: peace and justice, immigration reform, climate change, civil rights for LGBT persons, and health care. On this night, he reminded us that these are hard times and drew a remarkable analogy for this season. He suggested that “our brothers and sisters of the animal kingdom” tend to slow down and prepare to go to sleep as the cold days and nights of winter approach. We humans, on the other hand, are called to do something different — it is a time for us to wake up, become more energetic, and do more of the things that need to be done, especially for others. He then suggested some specific ways we can do that in our own communities.

With that, the concert concluded with its final choral pieces. The lyrics of one of those, “A Stable Lamp is Lighted,” accompanied by the orchestra and organ, provided the stark reminder that our joy must be tempered with the reality of the hard times yet to come for the child born this day and, perhaps, for us all. Just before the finale, the voices intoned this piece of reality:

A Stable Lamp Is Lighted

By Richard Wilbur (1921 - 2017)

A stable lamp is lighted
Whose glow shall wake the sky;
The stars shall bend their voices,
And every stone shall cry.
And every stone shall cry,
And straw like gold shall shine;
A barn shall harbor heaven,
A stall become a shrine.

This child through David's city
Shall ride in triumph by;
The palm shall stew its branches,
And every stone shall cry.
And every stone shall cry,
Though heavy, dull, and dumb,
And lie within the roadway
To pave his kingdom come.

Yet he shall be forsaken
And yielded up to die;
The sky shall groan and darken,
And every stone shall cry,
And every stone shall cry
For stony hearts of men;
God's blood upon the spearhead,
God's love refused again.

But now, as at the ending,
The low is lifted high;
The stars shall bend their voices,
And every stone shall cry,
And every stone shall cry
In praises of the Child
By whose descent among us
The worlds are reconciled.

So then, we could celebrate: “Hark! The Herald Angels sing: Glory to the newborn king.”

The Message — More than hope for “Grace” during hard times

As we walked out of the cathedral on that beautiful December night, our world remains a place of suffering and danger, walking right alongside an enduring hope and optimism for which we Americans are famous. **The message:** we are right to be optimistic and hope for peace, harmony, and relief from suffering; but it is not enough to merely admire the problem and hope for the best. Rev. Andrus suggested that we must wake up and become active. We can start in our own families, neighborhoods, and towns, giving each other what we need, when we can, and contributing to organizations that do the work we can't do on our own — some examples: Planned Parenthood, Reach Out and Read, Boys and Girls Clubs, Sierra Club, Valley Humane Society, American Civil Liberties Union, KQED, The Kidney Foundation, Grace Cathedral, and so many others. All are hopeful, optimistic efforts. We can make a difference, starting right here.

