

Music Blurbs for 3-1-2020 – Lent 1– A mighty fortress is our God

News and Notes

This week we have a music-packed beginning to Lent. Our bell choir will be playing “By Still Waters” and the choir will sing Dale Wood’s arrangement of “Jesus Walked This Lonesome Valley.” Hymns include “A mighty fortress” and “On eagle’s wings.” The organ music reflects different interpretations of “A mighty fortress” by baroque composer Dietrich Buxtehude and late nineteenth century composer Jan Zwart.

Sunday Bulletins

“A mighty fortress is our God” is usually viewed as a battle cry of the Reformation. The first printed appearance of the text is from Augsburg, 1529 and is titled “A Hymn of Comfort.” The idea of battle cry comes from the nineteenth century and was reinforced in such works as Mendelssohn’s “Reformation” Symphony and Meyerbeer’s opera “The Huguenots.” As stated in the companion to our hymnal, “this...interpretation is out of character with Luther’s understanding of his own hymn. He saw it as the grounds on which Christians can take hope in times of trial and conflict.”

Today’s prelude is by Dietrich Buxtehude (1637-1707). It is a chorale prelude on “A mighty fortress.” Chorale preludes were used to introduce and convey the mood of the hymn about to be sung. Here, the composer uses the technique called “ornamented chorale” in which the tune is decorated often beyond recognition. More importantly, ornamented chorale is used to denote deep feeling and contemplation and gives us an understanding of the text closer to Luther’s.

Jumping ahead a few centuries, the postlude is the introduction of Jan Zwart’s (1877-1937) Chorale Fantasy on “A Mighty Fortress.” The Dutch composer was part of a general movement among church musicians to return to a golden era of church music, which for Lutherans meant the eighteenth century. He uses the forms and techniques of his baroque north German forbears, but the understanding of the hymn has been transformed by the nineteenth century composers of intervening years.