

# What was I thinking?

December 19, 2021



## Unexpected Christmas Gifts

It's always nice to get a gift. Yes, it's better to give than to receive, and I enjoy the feeling of finding just the right gift for someone special, especially Kate and Aiden. I love seeing them react to a gift they really like. That's probably why I have so much trouble Christmas shopping. I'm trying so hard to find the perfect gift. It doesn't have to be expensive to be valuable. In fact, the best gifts are often of little value to anyone other than the recipient, but to that person, the symbolic meaning of the gift is everything.

It was in 2007, while I was serving Covenant Presbyterian Church in Atlanta, that we had a choir Christmas party. I was living in the church manse. That's Presbyterian for parsonage for any who don't know – a house owned by the church and usually lived in by pastors, but since none of them wanted to at the time, it was all mine. It was a pretty big house, and since it was right next door to the church, it was a great place to have parties after church. This party was for all of the choirs, including children's choirs and their parents.

One of the choir parents, Jewell, came up to me and said, "we have a Christmas present for you from Barbara." I was pretty shocked. Jewell's mother, Barbara Disque,

was a wonderful woman in our church. She was very intelligent and very curious about many things. She loved learning about different cultures, and she traveled quite a bit. One Sunday, she was waiting to talk to me after the postlude about a hymn we had sung that day, *My Shepherd Will Supply My Need*. “What an unusual paraphrase of Psalm 23. Why did Isaac Watts write it that way? What do you think he was trying to say? What about the tune?” Barbara was always asking questions. We couldn’t tell whether she liked something or not, and maybe she wasn’t trying to judge, she was just curious. That was the last time I talked to her. That week, in the spring of 2007, she died suddenly at home. She had not been ill that I know of, in fact she was planning to make a trip to Turkey, so her death was a shock. I remember meeting with the family to plan her service and telling them the story about *My Shepherd Will Supply My Need* and our conversation. We sang that hymn in her service for obvious reasons.

So, if I may paraphrase Charles Dickens, Barbara was dead. That must be understood or nothing wonderful can come of the story I am going to relate. She died in the spring, and it was now December. Her daughter was telling me there was a Christmas present from Barbara. She said, “it’s really supposed to be from the girls,” meaning Jewell’s daughters, Barbara’s granddaughters, who were in the children’s choirs. “But we found it with a note saying it was your Christmas present.” I opened it, and sure enough, there was a note attached in Barbara’s handwriting saying it was my Christmas gift. It was an ornament, an angel. Then she said they had something that belonged to Barbara they thought I would like to have, since it had to do with music. It was a framed piece of stained glass with an angel playing a harp. It’s special, to me, to receive something that belonged to someone special who has passed away. It’s even more special when I know that person intended for me to have it, as was the case with the ornament. What was even more of a surprise to me was the symbolism of both gifts – angels.

We were in the midst of Advent/Christmas, and I had been thinking of angels, those messengers sent by God. Their first words are usually, “Do not be afraid,” which makes us think their appearance was probably quite a shock, then they delivered an important message of something good to come: “Your prayer has been heard.” “Your wife will bear a son.” “You have found favor with God.” “I bring you good news of great joy.” Always a message of hope, and usually to people who really needed to hear it, people in a dark time, a troubled time.

I was going through a difficult, dark time myself that year. It was not long after my father had died. I was in need of some good news. I was thinking of angels when I brought home a stray cat that showed up at Mom’s when I was there for Thanksgiving. She was a great companion for me in that big house alone. The choir

was singing *The Angel Gabriel* that year and I had that in mind when I named the cat. Since she was a girl, I thought of Gabrielle, the feminine version of Gabriel, but that was too fancy for me, so I just named her Gabby.

But back to Barbara's unexpected gift, and the gift from the family of a possession of Barbara's, it seemed God might have been sending me a message to not be afraid, that good things were ahead for me. They certainly were. Life led me to Kate and then Aiden, and it has brought me to this church and to all of you. I still have that ornament and that piece of stained glass, and when I see them, I think back to that time.



Something like that happened again recently, not just to me, but to a number of church musicians connected to the Sewanee Church Music Conference that many of us attend in Tennessee in the summers. There was a larger-than-life character named Mark Schweizer who attended most years. He's known for founding St. James Music Press. Mark was also an author wrote a series of books called Liturgical Mysteries which are hilarious. They have titles like *The Alto Wore Tweed* and *The Tenor Wore Tap Shoes*. Mark had a great sense of humor and kept everyone around him laughing most of the time. In 2019, he had just published what he said was his final book, *The Choir Director Wore Out*. We tried to encourage him to write more, but he thought it was time to wrap up that series. At the last Sewanee Conference we attended in person (2019) an evening was devoted to Mark and his work. He was interviewed and asked questions about his books, he talked about how the publishing company started at a breakfast table one morning during a conference, and he put on a skit that would rival *A Prairie Home Companion* any day.

That was July 2019. Just a month or so later, Mark was diagnosed with cancer and things didn't look good. He died in November that year.



Mark's widow and a friend and colleague from the Sewanee Conference took over St. James Music Press and have carried on Mark's great work publishing music. In October of this year, a surprising announcement was made – St. James was releasing a new piece of Christmas music written by Mark Schweizer. How could that be? Mark died two years ago. It seems Mark had some projects in the works that were found in his files, including this new piece, *Cold, the Winter*.

St. James  
MUSIC PRESS

# Cold, the Winter

Beverly Easterling SATE Choir and Organ Mark Schweizer

Andante - 81

Organ *mp*

All Voices *mf*

Cold, the win - ter, Bright, the star, Lead - ing shepherds from a  
far, Here the hopes of na - tions are: Glo - ry in ex - cel - sis,  
Glo - ry in ex - cel - sis, Glo - ry in ex - cel - sis.

This Sunday, our choir will sing Mark's new anthem. Once again, in a dark time, an unexpected gift has been given when we didn't think it was possible. That gift includes, again, the message of the angels. The text, by poet Beverly Easterling, includes this:

Sing, all angels! Send the sound  
ringing through the world around.  
By God's grace, salvation found:  
Glory in excelsis.

Good news of great joy. Glory to God in the highest and peace to God's people on earth.



Soli Deo Gloria (to God alone be the glory),

John