Sunday, March 21, 1976
HAPPY BIRTHDAY, J. S. BACH!
Psalm 95:1-5, 96:1-6, 100:1-5

It is one of the strange features of history that there appears among us from time to time, persons whose unique talents, genius, and contributions, continue to enlighten and inspire us for generations. Such individuals have the ability to pull together many of the strands that have gone before them, give them new meaning and direction.

In the history of religious thought, persons such as St. Paul, St. Augustine, and Martin Luther are examples. In music and particularly church music, Johann Sebastian Bach was such a person. The most heterogeneous elements were welded together by him into a new entity, a new unity.

Perhaps you have already noticed this morning that all of the music used in this worship service is related to Johann Sebastian Bach, including the hymns. In our hymnbook, there are 21 hymns in all which Bach had some part in creating. Bach was one of those unique persons whose influence on church music and all music is monumental. Just as Martin Luther changed the course of church history, so also Bach changed the course of church music.

This morning we are going to look at the life of J. S. Bach, not only because it is his birthday, March 21; but also, because through the life and work of persons like him, we can learn something of the way in which God works through persons.

The first fact to note about Johann Sebastian Bach is that his whole life from birth to death was deeply involved in the church, as was that of his entire family.

Johann Sebastian Bach was the youngest child of Johann Ambrosius Bach and Elizabeth Lammerhirt. He was born in Eisenach, Germany on March 21, 1685. Two days later he was baptized in St. George's Church in the same town. This was the same church in which Martin Luther on May 3, 1521, had thundered his sermon of defiance following a hearing where he had been ordered to recant.

The entire Bach family had been a family of musicians for several generations. From his great-grandfather onward the family had produced a multitude of professional musicians who had served and were still serving as organists in churches, town pipers and members of the court band in that part of Germany.

We don't know a great deal about the early childhood of J. S. Bach, but it is safe to assume tha.t he was taught to play the violin and other stringed instruments by his father who was an outstanding violinist. During his early childhood, his second cousin was the organist at the village church in which he had been baptized.

Young Sebastian entered school when he was eight years old, but a year later his mother died. His father married again, but not long after that died himself. So, at age 10, young Bach went to live with his oldest brother, Johann Christoph who was organist in St. Michael's Church at Ohrdruf. Here his musical studies continued. He lived with his brother's family for five years and during that time earned money as a singer.

Coming from a musical family, his intense interest in music grew as he grew. Furthermore, he had the opportunity to store away a great deal of practical knowledge about pipe organs by observing the construction of a new pipe organ at his brother's church. That interest in organ construction continued throughout his life. During this period of his life, his older brother was his main teacher, and he was a guide of high quality since he had himself been trained by the great organist and composer Johann Pachelbel.

At the age of eighteen, Bach was appointed organist at the new church in Arnstadt. His duties were to play every Sunday from 8 to 10 a.m., every Monday at an intercessory service, and every Thursday from 7 to 9 a.m. Although not in his contract, he was also expected to train a small choir made up of pupils from the Latin school. This choir was used to lead the Sunday worship service.

Since he was the organist at the newest church in town, it was inevitably allotted the least desirable material while the better singers were employed in the other two churches in town. Not only were members of Bach's choir mediocre musicians, they were an unruly group.

To achieve good results with such an uncooperative group, a mature person of high authority was needed; a musician like Sebastian, who was younger than some of the singers, had a difficult position indeed. These complications were further aggravated by the young genius's lack of patience, and his temper when provoked could assume violent proportions.

After two years of problems with the choir, things came to a head in a street brawl between the organist and a particularly offensive rowdy by the name of Geyersbach. He was three years older than Bach and happened to meet Johann on a dark night and attacked him with a stick, calling him a dirty dog because the organist had earlier made fun of him as a nanny-goat bassoonist. Johann drew his sword, a fight began, and blood would have been shed had not the spectators intervened.

The incident made young Bach even more disgusted with the choir and gradually he stopped working with the choir. Various unpleasant cross-examinations by the Consistory of the church fo11owed. Again and again his superiors urged him to accept the imperfect conditions which they readily admitted and work with the choir, but he stubbornly persisted in his point that the contract did not provide for this work and that it should be entrusted to a choirmaster.

Soon after the street brawl, Sebastian, eager to forge this personal problem, asked for a four week leave to visit the famous organist Dietrich Buxtehude, in Lubeck, and suggested that his cousin Johann Ernst Bach should act as his substitute organist. Bach wanted to attend the famous Abendmusiken (evening concerts) which Buxtehude conducted at St. Mary's Church on the last two Sundays after Trinity, and the second, third, and fourth Sundays of Advent.

He arrived in Lubeck just in time for these events and found that the reality exceeded his expectations. He was spell-bound in Lubeck and the idea of returning to his job at the end of four weeks was completely forgotten. The only thing that mattered to him was to absorb all of the intricacies of Buxtehude's art. It was even hinted to him that he might become Buxtehude's successor, provided he marry, according to custom, the master's daughter, Anna Margreta, then 30 years old. He declined, although the position at St. Mary's must have seemed alluring to the organist of the smallest church in Arnstadt.

It was after an absence of four months instead of four weeks that Sebastian re-appeared at his job in Arnstadt. Very soon the congregation noticed a change in their organist's playing.

Encouraged by what he had heard at Lubeck and overflowing with new ideas, J. S. Bach became rather unconventional in his accompaniments of the hymns and his improvisations between the verses seemed never to come to an end. The congregation was amazed, bewildered, outraged and at times unable to stumble through the hymns.

The organist was again reprimanded by the authorities of the congregation, first for his overlong absence and then for his many curious variations in the playing of the hymns. Strict orders were given him to play more conventionally. Sebastian could do nothing but obey these instructions and the joy went out of his work. If the congregation wanted a dull organist, he could satisfy them.

So went the year 1706, complaints, cross-examinations, ultimately issued to the organist, who promised to answer in writing and never did. His fiancé, Barbara, seems to have been the cause of another disagreement with the church. Someone had heard Barbara singing to Bach's accompaniment in the church when it was empty of anyone else. Some suspected there was more than singing going on and Sebastian was again summoned by the Consistory to explain the presence of a strange maiden in the organ gallery.

Bach became aware that it would be best to look for another position. He obtained a new job as organist at the church in Muhlhausen. He was now 22 years old and eager to end his bachelor existence. He married Barbara. With her he had seven children. She died while yet a young woman and Johann married again. With his second wife he had 13 children.

Bach stayed at Muhlhausen only two years. He reached maturity as a composer during his service at the court of Weimar in the year 1708-1717, although he had been composing various kinds of music all along. At the court of Weimar, his position was that of court organist and chamber musician. Some of his finest organ works were composed during this period and he wrote many cantatas for services in the chapel.

Because he was a church musician at heart and longed again to be a church organist, he applied for the position at Leipzig. This became his most productive period as a composer. Countless cantatas were written for church services, some of them put aside after their first performance, never to be heard again. Five Passions of which only the first and the last, the St. John and the St. Matthew, survive; a few chorales and many harmonizations of chorales; most of the choral preludes; and the Mass in B Minor, which was never performed in its entirety during Bach's lifetime.

Throughout his lifetime, Johann Sebastian Bach composed music for all sorts of instruments as well as for singing. Overall, we find Bach turning again and again to the simple choral for inspiration.

The last few years of Bach's life contained elements of tragedy. His misunderstandings with his employers placed his position in jeopardy on many occasions. During the last year of his life, when he was ill and blind, he must have known that the officials were impatient to replace him. He continued to work, however, even through his hours of greatest suffering. He set the Chorale, "When We Are in the Greatest Need" in four parts, dictating it to his son-in-law. On his deathbed, he also dictated the Chorale, "When Before thy Throne I Appear."

When Bach died on July 28, 1750, his successor was appointed before his funeral was held. But what must have saddened him more than anything else was the fact that younger musicians, his own sons among them, were tiring of his style of music.

After his death, the sons of his first marriage took possession of all music they thought was of value and sold the rest of the property. Bach's widow, his second wife, was allowed her husband's salary for 6 months, after which. receiving no help from her stepsons, she supported her younger children as well as she could. She died being very poor and was buried in a pauper's grave.

Following his death, Bach's music fell more and more into oblivion, and for a time his name seems to have been almost forgotten. Many of his original manuscripts were left lying in cupboards unnoticed. It is said that in later years if a schoolboy wanted a piece of paper to wrap his sandwich, he was allowed to tear out a sheet of paper from one of Bach's manuscripts."

Thus, it is that often true genius is not recognized when it is among us. We're too close to it, yet God often works in and through such persons who are almost forgotten in their own time.

Furthermore, persons like J. S. Bach are themselves un- aware of what they are contributing to the world in their creativity. Bach knew that he loved music and loved the church and that he like to compose and create music. He wasn't really worried as to whether or not he would be remembered or whether his music would survive to be played centuries later.

Many of our greatest contributions have come to us in that way. They have come from faithful men and women who were doing what they could do to the best of their ability, not being concerned as to what history would say about them.

The Apostle Paul, St. Augustine, Martin Luther, St. Francis, J. S. Bach, and many more were only being faithful to their own calling, and we are the better for it. God grant that we may be as faithful in our own tasks. So. Happy Birthday, Johann Sebastian Bach! Amen.