

The Park Road Pulpit

Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church

Russ and Amy Jacks Dean, Pastors

The Greatest Thing I Ever Heard

Isaiah 40.21; Luke 2.11

Russ Dean, Christmas Eve 2009



Memory and memories are fascinating. Our whole life – the entire thing – gets recorded within our brains’ amazing chemistry, and though most of a lifetime’s events fade, some never do. Those who have watched a loved one deteriorate with years know that the oldest memories are the last to die. What is it that brings a memory? Sometimes a picture, actual or mental, reminds us of another event. Sometimes a taste sends us reeling. Often, a smell transports us over years and miles to an instantly recognizable moment. Last week, one smell... and I was back on the dusty Camino in the Spanish countryside.

A lot of the memories of my life are associated with sound. Even at 45 years of age, an occasional sensation will trip a synaptic switch and I am at once back in my mother’s arms, a young child, curled on the front seat of the family car, almost asleep with my head in her lap as we return from an evening out. I can still feel her warmth, and the low rumble of the engine mixed with her voice, as she talks to my father... It was The Greatest Thing I Ever Heard.

My father sang and whistled his way through his work and he always announced his return home with the melody a hymn or a Broadway show tune. Sometimes I’d hear him when he left the office next door. I loved that sound. It was The Greatest Thing I Ever Heard.

When I started playing the trumpet in the 6th grade, I was quickly possessed by it, absorbed in the sound of brass. And I was just as quickly influenced by a few classmates, John G. Franklin among them, who were committed to this thing called music. They challenged me to practice, to work, to listen. And one day David Williams invited me to drive with his family all

the way to the Spartanburg Memorial Auditorium to hear the Woody Herman Orchestra. I couldn't believe what I heard out of those instruments. It was the Greatest Thing I Ever Heard.

One Saturday afternoon in a lineup of seven trumpet players on the 50 yard-line of Paladin Stadium, I was overtaken by the energy and harmony of a Latin-inspired piece called Firedance, as I stood with seven trumpets, wailing out the progressions of an extended Latin cadenza. (Screaming, as only shameless collegiate trumpet players can do.) And it was the Greatest Thing I Ever Heard.

And then, she opened that little box on a Christmas Eve, praying, as she recalls, that she could smile if it was just earrings... and she said "Yes," and it was The Greatest Thing I Ever Heard. And standing in front of the altar a year later, she said "I will... I do..." and it was The Greatest Thing I Ever Heard.

And after an anxious moment of silence, a baby boy cried... and it was The Greatest Thing I Ever Heard.

The sounds just keep coming... louder and softer... sweeter and more bittersweet... more joyous and more challenging... the Greatest Thing I Ever Heard is the sound that touches your soul. That place much deeper than an auditory canal. Which rings more than your ear drums. Which lasts longer than the best memory. It is the sound that God has been singing, saying, silencing... for all eternity. *Have you not known? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth?... For, behold... good tidings of great joy... shall be to all people.*

The Christian church has made the Greatest Thing the world Ever Heard a conditional news. A Savior... if you accept. A Lord...if you serve. A Christ... if you give him power. But that's not what the angel says. She said she was announcing great joy – *which shall be to all*

*people.*¹ Period. No conditions. Accept him or not. He offers his joy to the world. Serve him or not. His Way spells joy. Though his power is still misunderstood by poets and priest and politicians... the news, announced so long ago, from the very beginning, really, is great joy – for all people.²

God is with us.

It is the Greatest Thing I Ever Heard.

May it be so!

¹ The angel may not have been a woman, but our angel, that is, the Park Road angel, who makes her appearance every year in the now 58-year-old tradition of “The Judean Hills: A Living Tableau” (a living nativity pageant), certainly is female. And a southern woman, at that. (“*Feah naht...*” she says!)

² I understand that everything is “conditioned” by our own participation or personal experience with it. “You get out of something, only what you put in it.” True enough. So, the experience of Jesus as “Savior” or “Lord” or “Christ,” is obviously conditioned by our own participation in his Way. But the good news of the Christmas angel seems to me, fundamentally, an unconditioned announcement – this great joy is joy that God is announcing, through the angel, to all. ALL. God’s unconditional love – experience it or not, accept it or not, affirm it or not – has been announced. It IS *good news of great joy*. And it is *for ALL people*.