

## Occasional Reflections #7

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### Messiaen

Susan Briehl and I led a worship and music conference in Nebraska. My wife Sally was with me. We were on our way after the conference to the Grand Canyon. (The Master of Music graduates at Luther Seminary had given us this trip.) When I mentioned this to Susan she was elated for us and said something about the wonder and scale of the Grand Canyon. Her response was not unusual. Artists have painted the Grand Canyon, photographers have photographed it, sculptors have sculpted it, writers have written about it, explorers have explored it, scientists and historians have studied it—marveling.

Before and after I got to the Grand Canyon, I was thinking about a church musician from whom the Grand Canyon elicited a massive piece of music—Olivier Messiaen and his *From the Canyons to the Stars*, twelve movements that take over an hour and a half to play. Though commissioned to celebrate the Declaration of Independence and inspired by a visit to the Bryce Canyon in Utah, Messiaen nonetheless used bird songs not only from the United States, but from Africa, China, Hawaii, India, and Japan. And the work is not only about birdsong or wildlife and plants. It's about one nation, all nations, the earth below, the stars above, the gift of sound, colors in sound, the mystery of God, healing the broken-hearted, resurrection, awe—all coupled with challenging intellectual and practical problems that require ingenuity and fruitful labor by human beings. It is about everything—the universe, the cosmos.

Everybody who reads these words will not “like” this piece. It is as challenging to the hearers as it is to the performers. The point here is not what any of us may or may not like about Messiaen's music, but this: as with his *Quartet for the End of Time* in a prison camp, the piece is hard to dismiss. It is a testimony to skillful twentieth century composing and musicianship. Not surprisingly, a church organist is its source. The organ, its players, and those who have composed out of its resources—even when no organ is employed—have spawned remarkably substantive gifts for the human race. They still do. It is easy to forget that, along with the wonder of God's church and world that set this in motion, in a culture where superficiality is prized, people's longing for meaning (evidenced in many visitors to the Grand Canyon,

speaking many languages) is often blocked, and those who supply such meaning are abused. We should not forget and need to press on with the substance of our birthright in season and out of season.