

# ASLSP (As *SLow aS Possible*)

*The LORD blessed the Sabbath day and consecrated it.*  
(Exodus 20:11b)

A sermon by Siegfried S. Johnson on the 11th Sunday after Pentecost, **August 5, 2018**  
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Christ of the Hills UMC, 700 Balearic Drive, Hot Springs Village, Arkansas 71909

As a young seminarian I greatly admired an older minister I met when he guest lectured in our preaching class and who later became a good friend, the late Rev. Horace Dunn. Horace was very well known by Baptists in south Arkansas where he spent so much of his ministry. I recall Horace telling a wonderful story to my class, how one Sunday his sermon was a bit on the boring side, way too long. His wife, Gladys, determined after the service to introduce herself to a man who was clearly a visitor, hoping her kindness might redeem Rev. Dunn's less than stellar effort in the pulpit. Reaching the man before he made it to the door she said with a smile, "*Good morning, I'm Gladys Dunn.*"

"*You're not the only one, lady,*" said the man as he hustled out the door. "*I'm glad it's done, too!*"

I suppose we've all, on occasion, found ourselves a bit listless sitting through a too-long sermon. But it's not just sermons. This morning I want to tell you about a very long organ concert. You can hear it on the internet, by the way, right now, since it's being played as we speak in Halberstadt, Germany. The organ piece, written by composer John Cage, is called "*Organ2/ASLSP,*" and will last 639 years!

ASLSP is Cage's shortening of the words, "*As Slow As Possible.*" I find it ironic that the precise acronym for *As Slow As Possible*, would be *ASAP*, which carries the opposite meaning, *As Soon As Possible*. Cage, a lover of irony, intentionally chose a haphazard assortment of letters (which I've highlighted for you above in red letters). Even the sounding of ASLSP hints at length and complexity.



Now, you may ask, exactly how is a 639 year concert possible? Mechanical organs, like the ones Europeans have built in churches for centuries, can hold notes indefinitely,

making a six century concert possible. ASLSP officially started in Halberstadt at the stroke of midnight on September 5, 2001 (what would have been Cage's 89<sup>th</sup> birthday). The church is a medieval monastery that was used as a pigsty from Napoleon's time until recently. Since the concert was written to begin with a rest, there was nothing to hear for the first 17 months of the concert except the wheezing of the organ's solar-powered bellows, the only part of the organ that existed at the time, the organ being assembled as the recital progressed. The first three actual notes of the concert were struck on February 5, 2003, a steady, unvarying chord heard in the monastery 24 hours a day. The next two notes were added just over two years later, on July 5, 2005.

The word has spread. The last chord change was October 5, 2013, drawing over a thousand tourists, as you see here. That note is played constantly today, the pipes of the

organ surrounded by a cube of acrylic glass to reduce the sound. The chord will be held for seven years, until 2020. If you wish to be part of this group on September 5, 2020, you have plenty of time to make your reservations for the journey! You can go to the project's website, [www.aslsp.org](http://www.aslsp.org) to hear the chord currently being played (it's easy, just



click on "Aktueller Ton"). It's been described as a rather horrible sound to sustain, a cross between a dial tone and an approaching train sounding its horn.

Why Halberstadt? Halberstadt gained distinction in the world of sacred music because the first modern organ was built here in 1361, the first to arrange its keys as they are today, according to musical scales with the black keys raised. That tht prompted the John Cage Foundation to use Halberstadt. From 1361 to 2000 is 639 years, and ASLSP duplicates those 639 years of organ history previous to 2000 with another 639 years on this side of the millennium. The concert will end on September 5, 2640, Cage's 728<sup>th</sup> birthday. The shortest note lasts six months and the longest note an incredible 35 years. There's even a planned intermission in the year 2319. Sad, is it not, that none of us will be around at the conclusion of the concert to say, 'I'm Gladys Dunn!'"

The point of the project is to shine a light on our perception of time, to challenge the inexorable acceleration of the world's pace, reminding the listener of the importance of being attentive to the present moment. Jo West's special music this morning was *Lord of the Dance* and, coupled with this theme, that dance would definitely be a slow dance!

In the For-What-It's-Worth department, *ASLSP* possesses rich numerical symbolism. Like baseball (3x3x3 we go through 9 innings), the Divine Triad is everywhere. 639 is divisible by 3. Cage composed three sections of 213 years, each having three movements of 71 years (3x3x3 through 9 seventy-one year movements). Was Cage a baseball fan?

Perhaps Cage's most famous work is called 4' 33" or Four minutes thirty-three seconds. 4'33" was composed in 1952, 3 movements designed for any instrument or any combination of instruments, the score instructing the performers to have but NOT to play their instruments during the entire duration. All one hears is the sound of the environment. The musicians do nothing but enter the concert hall and sit silently, ambient noise allowed to fill the room for exactly 4 minutes and 33 seconds. Believe it or not, you can view videos of this online, if you dare enter its spaciousness, including one by the entire London Philharmonic Orchestra. Its premiere performance was by virtuoso pianist David Tudor, on August 29, 1952 at a contemporary piano recital in Woodstock, New York. Tudor entered and sat at the piano, opened the keyboard lid, and sat silently, the audience enveloped by the spaciousness of 4'33".

Now, if that feels alien, perhaps even absurd, may I say that those of us who regard, respect, and even love the Sabbath may not feel it so alien, nor so absurd. Do we not seek in worship, entering the spaciousness of the sanctuary, to experience God, both in the sounds and in the silence? If the hurry of the world in six days is our fast dance, cannot this one day in seven be a slow dance with the Lord of the Dance?

I had already planned to tell you about *ASLPS* when, on Tuesday, I golfed with your former pastor, Bubba Smith. When I asked him about his brother's funeral last Saturday, he told me that his first thought was to have the congregation come in to the sanctuary and sit for the entire hour in silence, so that they could experience the world as Bee, who was deaf, experienced the world.

The British Broadcasting Corporation, until 1929, offered two minutes of broadcast silence each day in memory of the dead. That year the decision was made to stop broadcasting two minutes of dead air, and rather to broadcast what they called "*Live Silence*." It was important, they thought, to hear the shuffle of papers, the footsteps of staff, the occasional cough, the ambient noise – what you would have heard at Bee's funeral had Bubba acted on his impulse.

Such spaciousness should teach us that every movement, every change in chord, must have a changelessness beneath it, that in the midst of a world moving fast it was important to slow down and listen to the sounds that remind us who we are. That's the purpose of Shabbat, to be a cathedral in time, a slow dance with the Lord to break the flow of six fast dances with the world, and so re-connection us to our core spirituality. It's in this time that we remember who we are, re-discovering what is real and lasting before we step back into the world to spend ourselves on what isn't.

I think of Elijah at *har ha-elohim* (the Mountain of God) witnessing the rushing fast dance energies of the world -- fire and wind and earthquake. God was found in none of

these vibrancies of nature, crescendo movements full of energy. Instead, he finds God in the slow dance, the still small voice, the sound of shimmering silence. In the slowness he is able to recognize God in this less-than-a-whisper, the ambient noise left over from the cessation of these vibrancies.

The church is not, I think, well-equipped to move in such a fast dance rush with the changes sweeping our culture. The church's culture is an *ASLSP* (*As Slow as Possible*) entity, which I regard as a good thing, undergirding the energies of any rushing movement with a changelessness that connects us to our beginnings.

Movement there must be. Change there will be. But let us be careful to take time, for no movement makes sense unless it has a changelessness beneath it. Oh, what a delightful, and dreadful tension is ours. Driven forward, yet pulled back. How can we be a church living in the *Just-Now* moment, yet connected faithfully to the *Long-Before-Just-Now* moments that shaped our identity? As the world seeks, especially in our time, to give us a whirl on the dance floor, I crave the slow dance with the Lord of the Dance.

Not only in the church and its theology, but also in the wider culture, there are limits to the sustainable pace of social change. When change exceeds those limits the familiar rhythms of daily life, guided by long engrained principles, are disrupted, causing many to lose their bearings, to become disoriented and fearful, even eroding trust in the other person who may no longer share the beliefs that have shaped our communities. This, of course, creates a heightened sense of Us and Them, the very polarization evident now.

Well, here's where the 30 minute lecture could begin, followed by an hour long discussion, but we must stop, and not only because I don't want to hear you say, "*I'm Gladys Done!*" No, my friends we have now a slow dance with the Lord of the Dance, Holy Communion. If you will now dare to enter the spaciousness of God's love expressed in this sacrament, let us begin with our confession that we have sinned and are unworthy even to gather up the crumbs that fall from the table. Yet, unworthy though we are, here we are – invited, loved, forgiven.

Come, let us join the dance!

