

**Why Bagpipes?**  
**A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Scott Herr**  
**First Presbyterian Church, New Canaan – April 23, 2023**

**Please read:**  
**I Peter 1:17-23**  
**Luke 24:13-35**

There is something about the wail of a bagpipe that seems especially appropriate to the nexus of experiences and meanings that takes place on Scottish Heritage Sunday. This is our 49<sup>th</sup> year of celebrating our Presbyterian Scottish heritage, and Jonathan Henken and the Mount Kisko Scottish Pipes and Drums band have been leading off the procession almost every year since. This is only my second year, as I'm of Swiss origin, but when I tell people about this Sunday, I get most excited about the bagpipes... which is amazing, because they really are of dubious value.

You've probably heard the typical jokes about bagpipes, like, "What's the difference between a bagpipe and an onion? No one cries when you chop up a bagpipe." Or "What's the difference between a bagpipe and a trampoline? You take off your shoes when you jump on a trampoline." Or finally, "What's the difference between a lawn mower and a bagpipe? You can tune a lawn mower."

So, it got me to wondering, what's the big deal about this loud, somewhat weird yet hauntingly beautiful instrument? Today, I invite you to explore with me what the bagpipes have to teach us about why we're really here.

First of all, how bagpipes showed up in Scotland is a bit of a mystery for historians. Some believe that bagpipes originated from ancient Egypt and were brought to Scotland by invading Roman Legions. Others argue the instrument was brought over by colonizing tribes from Ireland. There is on record pipes being played in Thebes around 400 BCE, and strangely the Emperor Nero was said to be playing the pipes while Rome burned...<sup>1</sup> The point is, bagpipes have existed in varying forms around the world. So... "Why bagpipes?"

The first and most obvious thing about a bagpipe is that it's got to be the loudest wind instrument, rivaled only by the organ! You can't miss it, and most of the time we say (with all due respect), bagpipes are an "outside" instrument! Having a whole pipe and drum band play inside feels like we're having a rock concert in the sanctuary. Perhaps because it sounds like a one-man rock band, the bagpipe is a festive instrument, one of celebration, like those common in so many parades. For me, pipes call up the joy and dynamism of Jesus' entry into our world. After all, Jesus came that we might have life, that our joy would be complete!

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.historic-uk.com/HistoryUK/HistoryofScotland/The-Piob-Mhor-or-the-Great-Highland-Bagpipes/>

At the same time, the bagpipe is a martial instrument, with a long history of being present in battle. I'm honored to be wearing a Scottish Highland Regiment kilt that was worn by Peggy Hooker's father-in-law in WWI. You've heard the well known aphorism by George Santayan, a late 19<sup>th</sup> century Harvard scholar, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." Skeptical Mark Twain was said to have added: "History doesn't repeat itself, but it does rhyme."

Indeed, pipes are part of our remembering the rhyme of our history, our heritage and the values we believe are worth fighting for. The pipes remind us that many have marched into conflict, suffering, and death for us. The amazing grace and freedom about which we sing came at a great price and offers great hope. With the pipes, we remember the refrain, *Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again*. Jesus first coming was the most timeless example of "disruptive leadership" and anytime he comes into our lives he stirs things up. Few instruments can convey a sense of turmoil like a bagpipe can, and in remembering our forbearers, we also are called to stand up for all that is good, true and beautiful.

I first met Jonathan Henken during the pandemic. He played at a memorial graveside service at Lakeview Cemetery. The mournful wail of the bagpipe, so often present at a memorial service or graveside, sings the counterpoint to the day's celebration and energy. Whether you only are thinking about the "Caylee" afterwards, devouring the haggis and scotch, there is a somber element to this day, and the pipes make the awareness of that inescapable.

The piper bears an instrument ideal for today and its colliding narratives and competing themes. No matter what they play, some will hear celebration, some militancy, some somberness. Whatever the notes, the meaning belongs not to the piper but to those who hear them.

You heard the pipes and drums bringing us in and the pipes and drums will lead us out. That's an important part of the story that we heard read from the gospel according to Luke. The disciples were heading out. They had thought it was all over. And strangely, wonderfully, Jesus comes alongside them to ask them what was going on? It's a good question to ask ourselves today? What's really going on here after all?

The story goes that Jesus shares with the disciples how the history and traditions point to him, and as they sat together at the table and seeing him eat Haggis and drink Scotch, sorry, seeing him break the bread and pour wine, their eyes were opened and they remembered, and their hearts were warmed...

Those first disciples went back to Jerusalem, but changed. They went back to share the good news. The Pipes remind us that we are part of the community of the beloved, those who have met the Lord and know the simple good news that we are loved by God, and that like the beautiful strain of the pipes, we are called by God to share this good news to any and all who will hear it...

May I suggest that you too are an instrument of proclamation, and my purpose here is to declare to you as our Scottish forebears did throughout the centuries, that at the heart of the gospel is freedom, that our freedom is not for self-serving ends, but to work for a better life and fairer world for all people.

It is not enough to speak the truth, to repeat the stories of the day, and to let each of you hear what you need for the moment. In hearing again the mysterious story of the road to Emmaus and how in the most surprising ways our eyes are opened to see and comprehend, God makes it possible for each of us to hear what we need of the Gospel — be it the hope of a coming Sovereign, the acknowledgement of a prophet in conflict with injustice, or the empathic compassion of the suffering servant who comes as Savior and Lord to be with us around the tables of our lives.

There's no toning down or quieting the bagpipe; there is simply playing it and hearing its haunting beauty. So too on this day of festivity and remembering: there is no reconciling it, no explaining it, only proclaiming the good news in all its chaotic glory that God is with us and God is for us. And when we go, the question is, what noise will we be making when we are back out there in the world. May the pipes remind you of God's amazing grace, and how our greatest heritage is to live loudly for freedom, justice, love and compassion for all people.

*In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. Amen.*