

## **A remembrance for the fiftieth anniversary of the dedication of the Phelps Opus 1 organ**

**St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Fort Collins, Colorado,  
based on a sermon delivered on November 10, 2024**

**The Rev. Joseph Britton**

*This Sunday coincidentally followed the presidential election of 2024.*

*At the beginning of the service, the Rev. Krista Dias, Rector, read the following text in response  
and as a way of setting the stage for the service which followed:*

"This is precisely the time when artists go to work. There is no time for despair, no place for self-pity, no need for silence, no room for fear. We speak, we write, we do language. That is how civilizations heal.

I know the world is bruised and bleeding, and though it is important not to ignore its pain, it is also critical to refuse to succumb to its malevolence. Like failure, chaos contains information that can lead to knowledge—even wisdom. Like art."

Toni Morrison, 2004



The winged ox, a symbol of humility and sacrifice,  
with the inscription on the scroll: "Saint Luc Evvangeliste."  
14<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> century French, located in the parish courtyard,  
from The Cloisters, Metropolitan Museum of Art.

What I have to say today is really more of a memoir than a sermon, so I hope you will hear it in that spirit. I want to tell a story about how the Phelps organ in this church—dedicated exactly fifty years ago today, Sunday, November 10, 1974—had such a huge impact on the life of both this congregation and the Fort Collins community, and the lives of many individuals within them, including my own. It's a story of a time that called forth the best in people, even amidst a great deal of anxiety and tension, and so it's a story that is deeply relevant to our circumstances today.

The story begins with the arrival of the Rev. Edward Ostertag as rector of St. Luke's in July of 1960. At that time, St. Luke's was an old stone building dating from 1883 located downtown at the southeast corner of Oak Street and South College Avenue. Fr. O (as he was known) soon brought a new vitality to the congregation, and it quickly outgrew its building.

And so, the people of St. Luke's began the process of imaging and constructing a new larger church. Fr. O. told the Vestry that he first wanted them "to throw out every preconceived idea you have of what a church 'ought' to look like." Instead, he gave them a challenge to answer the question: "What do we want to say with our new building?"

The result is the space we are in today, designed by noted local architect William Brenner of the firm William Robb, Architect (later Robb and Brenner, Architects and Planners). It was finished in 1965, and consecrated that fall on October 18, the Feast of St. Luke. The concept as it was envisioned by the Vestry is simple: it is an architectural narrative of the course of Christian life, oriented around the two focal points of Baptism and Eucharist. That is what the Vestry decided to "say" with their new building. Thomas Hoving, Director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, described it as "One of the loveliest examples of contemporary church construction in this country or in Europe." (Thomas and Nancy Bell Hoving were personal friends of Ed and Caroline Ostertag; Thomas Hoving arranged for the sculpture of the winged ox, symbol of St. Luke, to be placed in the courtyard.)

You come into the church at the rear from the side, not sure of where you are heading. You first see a small side altar directly in front of you, with images and votive candles that invite you forward, identifying it as a sacred space—but as yet nothing more. Then, as you pass through the low doorway and into the nave, the space dramatically opens up around you, and you suddenly realize that you have entered a place of great spaciousness. As you pass by the font (brought from the original church building), it gives you the interpretive clue to what this expansiveness is all about: the font is eight sided, symbolizing the "new creation" that comes about on the "eighth day," the day after the seven days of the first creation (Sunday is always the eighth day of the previous week). Baptism as the beginning of Christian life leads you into the path of lifelong spiritual growth offered in this new creation, symbolized architecturally by the turn you take from the font into the center aisle.

As you make this turn, you see before you the route that leads directly toward the altar, the visual representation of God's presence among us. The altar is surmounted by a baldacchino marking the table beneath it as the meeting point between the human and the divine, the ultimate object of human longing. But then the towering blank wall rising into the shadows above the altar indicates that this intimate encounter draws us beyond ourselves toward a God who is ultimately beyond our knowing, lost in an abstract, mystical emptiness (the wall was originally intended to be left blank and lost in the shadows). Joan Gardner, an artist from Kent, England created an exquisite frontal for the altar entitled "The Way" (now hanging in the narthex). She explained she wanted the gold and silver threads that "seem drawn irrevocably toward the center from the rest of the design" to express the "belief that no matter where life leads, we shall eventually be drawn into the vortex of light and love."

The windows at the rear and front of the church emphasize these themes as well. At the back, on either side of the font, the blue hues are placed toward the bottom, evoking the waters of baptism. Higher up are the reds and oranges, coming down as the tongues of fire of the Holy Spirit. Then at the front, the blues move to the top, suggesting the skies of heaven. The

long side walls, bending inward toward the front as if toward the prow of a boat and surmounted by an upward lifting ceiling, make us think of Noah's ark (also hinted at by the eight-sided font, which evokes the eight people aboard the ark from whom humanity was begun anew). In fact, the early Christians understood the ark to be a foreshadowing of the church itself. The building thus surrounds us with a sense of spiritual safety that encourages us to aspire to fulfilling the full dignity of our human nature, to achieve our greatest God-given potential both as individuals and as a community.

And so ... soon after St. Luke's moved into this remarkable new space, its people began to yearn for a musical instrument that would be worthy of the visual richness of the church. The desire for a new organ was inspired in part by the fact that in 1968, Colorado State University installed a new organ made by Lawrence Phelps, president and tonal director of Casavant Frères, a premier organ building firm in St. Hyacinthe, Quebec. The installation was overseen by Robert Cavarra, the professor of organ, and the organ's sophistication as a modern interpretation of the German Baroque soon began to attract international attention. Organists from all over the world came to play and teach—climaxing in the summer of 1973 in what was known as "Little Haarlem" (after the famous organ academy held in The Netherlands), when Marie-Claire Alain of France, Anton Heiller of Austria, and Luigi Tagliavini of Italy all came to Fort Collins to perform and lead master classes. Gillian Weir of England was also a frequent guest artist. The St. Luke's community caught the bug, and dreamed of having its own organ designed and built by Phelps as a complement to the CSU Casavant. They wanted an organ to meet the liturgical needs of the parish, but also to enrich the cultural life of the wider community.

That possibility became a reality when in 1972, parishioner Elliott Huidekoper gave a gift to fund the acquisition of a new organ, to be dedicated in memory of his close friend Lilian Montrose-Grahame, a prominent local music teacher and community builder of Canadian origin, descended from the Scottish Duke of Montrose. "Huide" as he was affectionately known (pronounced like "Heidi") came to Fort Collins after Army service in World War II. Born into a branch of the DuPont family, he was an enthusiastic Arabian horseman, philanthropist, outdoorsman, and world traveler who dearly loved St. Luke's Church. (He also gave the two Russian Orthodox icons in the chapel, which he acquired on a trip to Alaska.) With Huide's gift for the organ in hand, the parish entered into negotiations with Casavant Frères and Lawrence Phelps, but just when they were about to sign the contract, Phelps announced that he was leaving Casavant to found his own firm.

Once again, Fr. O put a question to the Vestry: Do we go with the known firm of Casavant, or take the risk of signing a contract with an untested firm, but one headed by the best organ builder in the world? In the end, and with the encouragement of Robert Cavarra as consultant, they decided to take the risk: the contract between St Luke's Church and Lawrence Phelps and Associates ("A Corporation for Organ Building") was signed on March 13, 1972. And the organ we hear today is the result: Phelps Opus 1.

The organ was to be built in a French classical style (inspired by the eighteenth-century organs built by François-Henri Clicquot in places like the cathedral in Poitiers), and it was delivered in the fall of 1973. By Christmas it was mostly installed but only roughly tuned (except

for the reed pipes, that is, those pipes that have a more “nasal” sound characteristic of French organs, which were temporarily stored down the hall in a Sunday School room).

And this is where I come into the story. On a bit of a whim, my brother and I (who had grown up Southern Baptist) came to the midnight mass of Christmas that year. He was a freshman in college, and I was in 8<sup>th</sup> grade. We had to sit toward the back of the church because it was so full; extra chairs were set up in all the aisles. The prelude was elegantly played in the candlelit church by a string quartet, with votive candles toward the front of the church suspended by wires from the ceiling, looking like twinkling stars in the night sky. The processional hymn, accompanied by the strings, was “Hark! The herald angels sing,” and the musical setting of the mass was Charpentier’s Midnight Mass for Christmas. Then (if I remember correctly), when it came time for the procession to the crèche following the reading of the nativity story—as if by magic the organ suddenly broke into the refrain of “O come, all ye faithful.” The entire congregation gasped as we all turned around in delighted astonishment to gaze on the organ at this, its first public hearing. It was an electrifying moment.

In fact, my encounter with the organ that Christmas Eve changed my life. It opened to me the beauty of an ancient and deeply grounded way of life which I still call my own. It drew me to the Episcopal Church, and I was baptized, confirmed, and received my first communion here at St. Luke’s all on one night the following Advent. This is where I eventually found my vocation as a priest, inspired by the example of Fr. O. And it introduced me to the organ world of Fort Collins, through which I met my future wife, Karla Cavarra. I became a student of the parish organist, Mary Lou Kallinger, who had been a graduate student of Bob Cavarra at CSU. In summers during college I also studied with him on the Casavant organ at the University. You can see that I really owe the shape of my life to the influence of this instrument!

The organ was finished in the early months of 1974, with another of Professor Cavarra’s former students, David Young (who is here today), assisting Phelps in the voicing, while technical director Clive Webster perfected the action. (Another former associate of the Phelps firm, Steve Thomas, is also here today.) The fully completed organ was first played on Palm Sunday, April 7, 1974, which led to a concert debut played by Robert Cavarra on April 28; a second recital on October 20 given by Robert Finster of St. John’s Cathedral in Denver; and finally the dedicatory recital given jointly by Mary Lou Kallinger and Robert Cavarra on November 10. The recital was given twice: once in the afternoon and again in the evening, with the afternoon performance preceded by a dedicatory service including a blessing of the organ by William Frey, the Bishop of Colorado.

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So what might we take today from this story that is now fifty years old? For a clue, let me circle back to the reading from Hebrew scripture that we heard a few moments ago (I Kings 17:8-16). It is the story of the prophet Elijah coming to a poor widow in Zarephath. The widow has given up hope. The times are hard, and she and her son have only a tiny bit of oil and a morsel of bread left, and when they will have eaten it, they will have nothing left and so face starvation. But Elijah nevertheless calls something generous and noble out of her: he asks her

to share what little she has—and sure enough, because of her generosity, the supply does not give out.

That experience of having something great called out of us even in times of trouble and distress has a lot to do with the story I've told here today. Think back to the dates I've mentioned: in 1965, when this building was consecrated, the country was still recovering from the shock of President Kennedy's assassination. The Vietnam War was heating up, and tensions surrounding the Civil Rights Movement were high. Yet the congregation looked deep within itself and called out a determination to do something creative and life-giving, in spite of it all.

Then fast-forward to 1974, the year the organ was dedicated. Richard Nixon had just resigned as president, and the Vietnam War was still raging (that didn't end until 1975). The Episcopal Church was torn apart by debates over Prayer Book revision and the ordination of women (which was still several years away). Yet again, the people of St. Luke's decided to call forth something extraordinary from within themselves by commissioning this instrument—a work of art that speaks powerfully to us even now of the best rather than worst of human nature.

Perhaps that is the message for us today: even in difficult and uncertain times, we can choose to live into the vision God has of who we are meant to be; even when circumstances around us seem to resist and try to draw us into anger, confusion, and bitterness, there is still the possibility of achieving our God-given nobility. Remember, then, whenever you come into this church: that hearing this organ, you are in the presence of greatness, the very greatness which the building narrates as the authentic destiny of humankind. And the greatness here can call forth from *you* something more truly creative and noble than you ever imagined.



The Phelps signature on the organ console



St. Luke's Church, "The Ark"  
William Brenner, architect, 1965



*Dedicatory plaque in the choir loft, which reads:*

November 10, 1974  
On this day the  
Lilian Montrose-Grahame Memorial Organ  
the gift of Elliot Huidekoper to  
this church was dedicated in  
joyful and thankful ceremony and music.  
This plaque is additional expression  
of thanksgiving by the entire parish  
and tribute to those whose gifts  
assisted installation of the organ



The route from the font to the altar,  
from Baptism to Eucharist,  
from the human to the divine



*Commemorative plaque at the font, which reads:*

In appreciation to  
Elliott Huidekoper  
from St. Luke's Parish and  
the City of Fort Collins  
for his gift of  
the Phelps pipe organ  
designed and built by  
Lawrence I. Phelps in 1974



Joel Bacon, Stewart and Sheron Golden Chair in Organ and Liturgical Studies at CSU, performs J. S. Bach's Fantasy in G Major, BWV 572, as the postlude of the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary commemorative service

*Joseph Britton was active at St. Luke's Church during his high school years, singing in the choir, serving as Acolyte Master—and studying organ. He gave a senior recital on the organ in 1978. He was later sponsored for ordination by the parish, serving congregations in New York City, Boston, Berkeley, Paris and Albuquerque. He was also dean of the Berkeley Divinity School at Yale, teaching Anglican history and theology. He now lives with his wife Karla in Albuquerque and Hillsboro, New Mexico, where he is vicar of Christ Church mission.*