As I’ve mentioned quite a few times, I am a huge fan of music. Music is with me constantly and everywhere. And I listen to a lot of different types of music and the type or style of music that I listen to at any given time, is often if not always, dictated by my mood or what I’m doing or even what the weather is like. It may sound a bit strange but hopefully some of you can relate. One of the styles of music I used to loath was classical. I don’t feel that way anymore and as a matter of fact I probably listen to more classical music now than any other type of music except, perhaps, Jazz. One of the pieces that led me to give classical music a chance is a piece by Bach called, “Jesu, Joy of Man’s Desiring”. The piece was composed as the finale for a liturgical piece by Bach celebrating the miraculous pregnancies of Elizabeth and the Virgin Mary that is celebrated on the Feast of the Visitation, the gospel of which we will hear in two weeks. Because of this, it is common to hear this piece at this time of year and maybe some of you already have. I’m sure almost all of you are familiar with it, if not by name then I’m sure you’d recognize it if you heard it. {♫ ♪}

This piece is one of my all-time favorites for a number of reasons. First of all, the piece is light and upbeat, yet with a contrastingly slower tempo for the vocal melody. Mostly, I like the piece because it has such an incredibly catchy melody, a toe-tapping rhythm, and the use of scales that makes you feel like you’ve been up and down a ladder several times throughout the piece.

Over time, however, what I realized I love the most about the piece is the title: “Jesu, Joy of Man’s Desiring.” The title is dramatic and triumphant and it captures, as does the music, so profoundly, the “Joy” and the active “Desiring” that its title promises. The “Joy” in this name though, is more than just a feeling or an
emotion but is in fact the personification of Jesus himself. Jesus is the “Joy” or object of man’s eternal “Desiring”. And note, that the word is not desire but rather, desiring, meaning not simply something achieved or satisfied; the Desiring is active and ongoing. It is within this context that this piece came to mind as I was reflecting on this week’s readings, that and I heard while preparing. Jesus is the “Joy” of all we as mankind are “Desiring” and it is for this that we are constantly being called to prepare. Therefore, this piece also serves as a reminder, for me at least, of what it is that we are preparing for in this season of Advent: the coming of God into our world for fulfillment of our salvation.

Our readings today, and our gospel in particular, show that the “Joy” of Man’s “Desiring” is set with in the context of human history which is the purpose of Luke’s chronology at the beginning of this gospel. Likewise, in our first reading from Baruch we hear of the “joy” of the people of Israel as their exile – a definite moment in history – comes to an end as God had promised. These events didn’t happen in a made-up time or place but can be fairly well placed in human history by other contemporary historians of the time. God, in the person of Jesus, came into our world in His human nature to be the “Joy” or “object” of our eternal “Desiring”. In all our readings, there is a preparation for the “Joy”, as well as a “Joy” in the preparation of the fulfillment of God’s promise to be realized. As we hear in Baruch, “Jerusalem, take off your robe of mourning and misery; put on the splendor of glory from God forever”. Likewise in our Gospel John the Baptist, the prophesied, “voice of one crying out in the desert,” heralds the need for repentance from sin as the ultimate preparation for God’s promised “Joy” that Jesus will usher in through His death and resurrection. In other words, the “Joy” as stated at the end of the gospel quote from Isaiah, “and all flesh” – i.e. all humanity – “shall see the salvation of God” is the “Joy” that Jesus came bring to all humanity. This “Joy” is in fact Jesus, a person of history and the object of humanities “Desiring” whose coming is not off in the future nor relegated to the past, but rather is immanent and upon us.

And so, even though “Jesu, Joy of Man’s Desiring” was written to celebrate the miraculous nature of the John and Jesus’ conceptions that we will celebrate in a couple weeks, it seems – to me at least – no less
appropriate to think about it today as John and Jesus are together again on the verge of fulfilling the purposes, together, for which they came as promised. As such, this piece of music can help us to remember that it is with joy that we should be preparing this advent season for the True “Joy” that we will celebrate at Christmas as the realization of our long “Desiring”. It is easy to be overwhelmed by the planning and shopping and preparation that go into our Christmas celebrations. I understand this myself and get caught up in focusing on the “things-to-be done” too. Hopefully though, today’s readings and hearing “Jesu, Joy of Man’s Desiring” sometime during this Advent season will remind you – and me for that matter – that our “Joy” is already upon us and that our “Desiring” is always satisfied in when we seek that “Joy” in the person of Jesus. For as the piece’s title aptly reminds us, the greatest gift we have or will receive is the abiding presence of “Jesu, [the] Joy of Man’s Desiring.”

1.) The evolution of “Jesu, Joy of Man’s Desiring”, Posted on December 17, 2017 by Victoria Emily Jones (excerpted from “Art and Theology”)