

Don't Know What You've Got Till It's Gone

May 28, 2017

In an odd way, I'm part of my generation and yet not. I know what I would call a moderate amount of pop culture, but I am much better acquainted with the books of the Bible than Instagram. When I went to seminary, I forced myself to listen to Top 40 radio, so that I wouldn't completely lose touch with people my age, but now that's the most current music with which I am familiar. It would never occur to me to not recycle, but I couldn't Snapchat if my life depended on it. In the Gospel of John we are told to be "in the world, but not of it." Well, I wonder sometimes if I am in my generation but not of it.

Still, one of my little fantasies, one of the things that my mind wanders to every now and again, a fantasy that I'm pretty sure would be unique to Generation X ministers, is to compile a music PLAYLIST of secular pop songs from the last 60 or 70 years that coincides with the church calendar. It would start with Advent with Curtis Mayfield's "People Get Ready." And Advent might also include "The Lion Sleeps Tonight," since during Advent we often read Isaiah's vision of the peaceable kingdom in which the lion sleeps with the lamb. Since this is a secular PLAYLIST, there wouldn't be any of the usual Christmas songs, but maybe we could include "When You Wish Upon A Star."

For Ash Wednesday, of course, I'd include the stadium rock ballad, "All We Are Is Dust In the Wind." Pentecost would have two songs, because I couldn't pick between Bruce Springsteen singing "Fire" and Johnny Cash singing "I Fell In To A Burning Ring of Fire." I've got lots of ideas for Easter, but my favorite would be Frank Sinatra singing "My Way." Puts a new spin on the song, doesn't it?

Okay, so now you can see that I've put a little too much time into this – this dream PLAYLIST has been many years in the making. I have plans for sequels, too – the one based on Bible passages includes "Sentimental Journey" and "Stormy Weather," and the one based on the parts of worship will have a whole section of Air Supply songs dedicated to the prayer of Confession.

Like I said, you can see I've spent some time on this. That's why I was so surprised this week when I realized that I would have to revise my playlist because my understanding of the Ascension has changed drastically. For years I had been expecting that the Ascension song on my fantasy PLAYLIST would be "High Enough" from Styx (do you remember that one – can you take me high enough?), or maybe Jackie Wilson singing "Your Love Is Taking Me Higher." But, as I studied and prayed about the Ascension this week, I realized that I'd need to find a new song.

You see, I think that the dominant, mainline, traditional view of the Ascension being about the heights is all wrong. I'll admit, I love singing our opening hymn, "Alleluia, Gracious Jesus! Yours the scepter, yours the throne! Alleluia! Yours the triumph, yours the victory alone!" But if we turn to today's scripture text, Acts 1, which is the fullest description of the Ascension in the Bible, we don't see any mention of triumph, no hint of royal trappings. Granted, there are plenty of texts in the scriptures that speak to us of God's majesty and splendor, but, friends, the Ascension is not one of them. Jesus in the clouds is just a minor portion of this text. So let's look at the text to get an idea of what it is (page 118 in the New Testament).

The first five verses give us our context clues. Luke begins by mentioning someone named Theophilus, literally, God Lover, a name that could be referring to his patron as he is writing this text, but which is intended to be an “every person” character, an invitation at the beginning of this tremendous tale, to put ourselves into the story. This is a literary device that Luke uses to invite us into imagining ourselves on this transformative journey – this is for you, God Lover.

We also read that it is 40 days after Easter, 40 evoking images of Noah and the flood, Moses receiving the commandments, the Israelites wandering in the desert, and Jesus’ days in the wilderness. If you think of all of those stories, something tremendous always happened at the end of 40 days or 40 years. To start a story with “After 40 days...” in first century Palestine was to tell your audience, “Listen up, something big is about to happen.”

So now the first hearers of this text are sitting on the edge of their chairs, they’ve got their ears cocked, and then Luke drops in verse six in which the disciples ask, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?”

The disciples have been personal witnesses to Christ’s resurrection. They have been experiencing the risen Christ in their midst for 40 days, and now their question is “are you going to restore the kingdom of Israel now?” Are you going to do what we want now? It’s as if they’re saying, that’s all fine and good, triumphing over sin and death, proving that the powers of evil and brokenness do not have the last word, but now back to our agenda. After all of that Easter stuff, are you going to do what we expect now?

When I read that verse, the cynic in me wonders whether Jesus’ Ascension didn’t happen because the disciples question had made his head spin so fast he lifted off of the ground like a helicopter – I gave you the promise of new life, and what you ask about is your old agenda. Good grief. Take me home.

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