

Isaiah 42:1-9
Matthew 3:13-17

word count: 2,367

Waiting for the traffic to ease up one night, I pulled into the South Coast Plaza to catch a fast supper before heading home. This particular restaurant is informal, and has tables inside as well as some in the mall hallway, separated by a counter-height wall. I ordered my meal, took my number and sat down. Others did the same, and the place began to fill up. On the mall floor side, a large family sat down on chairs. An attendant passed them a booster seat for the smallest child, and they put her in it, presenting her with a box as they did. Then, mom opened the box, and a very pretty tune started. It was clearly a good music box, and it played, “Somewhere Over the Rainbow.”

I was seated the furthest away, so I was able to gauge the reactions in the restaurant. There were smiles, mostly, and the couples at their separate tables may have made some remark about the little girl and her music box before turning back to their conversation. Then, the music stopped.

Then, the music started again. Now, people looked up and stared. The family did not notice us at all, sitting there out on the mall floor, involved as they were in conversation.

Since I was the furthest away, I counted on other diners sitting closer to make the clever, friendly remark about the music box. “Gee, that’s a nice music box. We’ve been listening to it all the way in here. Where did you get it? Uh, huh...and does it come with a switch to turn it off after it has played a couple of times, or do you just put the lid down?”

But no one did this. The music started again and played several times. Gradually, the tune slowed down and the rainbow appeared to sag a little, almost droop, until the last little ping of a note hit somewhere near, but not at, the end. Silence.

Then, the slow rising wail of a little girl. Mother picked up the box, turned it over, and we heard winding. She lifted the lid, and at least one person, the little girl, was delighted.

“Somewhere over the rainbow
Way up high,
There’s a land that I heard of
Once in a lullaby.”

The room adopted a “grin and bear it” demeanor, as the music tinkled on and on until it wound down, only to be rewound and played again. Others leaned into their conversations, speaking distinctly and with great resolution that this was not going to bother them. Alone, I took notes on the back of receipts and stuffed them in my wallet in case they might come in handy for a sermon someday.

It was in my head, in the background, and traveled with me. I wondered about the other diners that night—did they take it with them as well? Were they even now driving home to the land that they heard of, once in a lullaby?

I took a walk after dinner, and went up the escalator to the stationery store “where troubles melt like lemon drops, away above the chimney tops, that’s where you’ll find me.”

Leaving, I was walking at a fast pace with the music box in my head. Out the front doors, searching for a red Chrysler in the South Coast Plaza parking lot where, “skies are blue, and the dreams that you dare to dream, really do come true:

I turned the ignition key and cranked up the radio.

What is the soundtrack that is playing through our heads when we come to church on Sunday? Do you bring it with you, or do you find it already playing here? Is it sometimes silent; the lid closed? Does it stay with you during the week? Is it something moaning and low; a dirge accompanying a world, and perhaps a personal experience, where all is not right—playing over and over as if sung by an Old Testament prophet?

Is it a song of hope, even joy? Perhaps the music feels unresolved, provoking questions or doubts; maybe it makes you wrestle with faith like Jacob did with the angel until dawn.

Perhaps you have heard of, “an earworm”? It is a word that hasn’t yet found its way into the dictionary, but it will. An ear worm refers to anything that is so catchy that it feels like a worm has crawled into your ear and eaten away all the distracting parts of your brain that keep you from humming the same song all day long, no matter if you like it or not.

What is the music that plays in our heads when we leave places like this, how do we carry the sounds and stories through the week? I’m not necessarily talking about the anthems we hear, (although they are magnificent) the hymns we sing, or the beautifully executed pieces that Jill has played for us for so long that we cannot imagine what it will be like without her.

Rather, how do the faith stories of the church that are told in patterns, week after week, play over and over in the background until they pervade our being and finally call us to change—to be a better, healthier, more responsible, less judgmental, forgiving, justice-seeking people?

Do these faith accounts make us better? I wonder: Given the sudden, sense-less tragedies that occur from time to time; from the killing of a judge, a nine year old girl, and the assassination attempt on a member of the House of Representatives in Tucson, among other terrible losses, to the cold-blooded murder of a high school vice-principal in Nebraska this week; what is the sound-track that we are playing as Americans with such lyrics of hatefulfulness, separation, isolation and ideological certainty that we are forced to look in the mirror today and see how our culture has caused us to act this week?

Diana Butler-Bass wrote an article yesterday as the tragedy in Tucson was playing out called, “Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords: Speaking for the Soul.” In this article, which has circulated among many of my colleagues, she tells us to get into our pulpits today without blaming.

Bass says, “I hope that sermons tomorrow will go beyond expressions of sympathy or calls for civility and niceness. Right now, we need some sustained spiritual reflection on how badly we have behaved in recent years as Americans—how much we’ve allowed fear to motivate our politics, how cruel we’ve allowed our discourse to become, how little we’ve listened, how much we’ve dehumanized public servants, how much we hate.

We are called by many, a “Christian nation.” Is there much that can be said of our ghettoized exercise of Christianity in America that is “Christian,” given the political hatred that we see on opposite sides of the political aisles today? And we—don’t we find ourselves laughing at the clever put-down, or gaffe from the other side?

What is the story we come to hear every Sunday all across America that we hope might transform us, and does it transform us? From knowing many of you and seeing how you live your lives reaching out to others, I have to believe that it is transformative.

It is a story that starts every year near the end of November, and often we hear it with new ears as if for the first time. The story starts with watching and waiting, where it is promised that swords shall be beaten into plowshares, and nations will not study war anymore. John the Baptist comes from the wilderness preaching about repentance and forgiveness. Mary’s Magnificat is in our ears, and the story of birth shows a God of second chances in the darkest and coldest of seasons.

Ah! There is hope after all, and hope arrives to those who least expected it. Once again, there will be a star that will shine in the skies, filling the earth—worth the following.

Today, the story of the baptism of Jesus is told, as it is every year at this time from a different Gospel, and this year we follow the Jewish Gospel of Matthew. Here is a Jesus who understands his baptism as a call to walk in the ways of righteousness, and his example reminds us that by our own baptisms we are to do the same. Isaiah the prophet appears today to give us strength to accept that call. He talks about a Ground of All-Being that gives breath to the people upon it and spirit to those who walk in it: “I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness.”

How do you hear those words today? Will they stay with us as an earworm— playing over and over in our heads—calling us to something new, something better? Because it has to start somewhere, so it might as well begin with you and me.

Butler-Bass says, “Jesus’ baptism in water symbolizes life, the newness that comes of cleansing. But there is a darker symbol of baptism in American history: that of blood. In 1862, Episcopal bishop Stephen Elliot of Georgia said, ‘All nations which come into existence . . . must be born amid the storm of revolution and must win their way to a place in history through the baptism of blood.’ Baptism as water? Baptism as blood? Baptism accompanied by a dove or baptism accompanied by the storm of revolution?”

She goes on to say that, “American Christianity is deeply conflicted, caught between two powerful symbols of baptism, symbols that haunt our political sub-consciousness. To which baptism are we called? Which baptism does the world most need today? Which baptism truly heals? Do we need the water of God, or the blood of a nine-year old laying on a street in Tucson? The answer is profoundly and simply obvious. We need redemption gushing from the rivers of God’s love, not that of blood-soaked sidewalks.”

Again, how do we hear the story of our own faith playing in our ears—forming us, shaping us, making us into something new?

This year, Jesus will walk down by the Sea of Galilee, meet Andrew and Peter, and invite them to become “fishers of people.” He will gather on the mount near Galilee and preach that the meek shall inherit the earth. The prophet Micah will talk about doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly with your God.

We will hear stories of healing and teaching—some will find their way to our heart or else they might feel tremendously uncomfortable. Others will raise questions that call us to believe in either the power of metaphor or perhaps even, the possibility of miracle. The road will lead slowly from Bethlehem to the Garden of Gethsemane and beyond to Golgotha, causing us to see the cost of discipleship in following this radical with a message that goes against everything that is safe; all that represents conventional wisdom and thought, at least as we have been taught.

Death and Re-birth will come once again in the spring. This summer, Abraham will be the tested as he prepares to sacrifice Isaac. Jacob will dream again and the ladder will reach to the heavens. Joseph will be sold to slavery by his own brothers, and will forgive them when he has fulfilled his destiny. Moses will stand by the burning bush, and with his staff he will lead his people towards the Promised Land.

There will be loaves and fishes, and the subsequent message that where there is faith, there will always be more.

Prophets will rail, psalms will be played on harps; the sounds of anguish from people looking for justice will ring out. Wisdom will speak and parables will sound completely different as you come to a new place in your lives from where you once were.

The soundtrack will play, “wherever two or three are gathered, I will be there also,” and it will play so much more for those who want to begin to place their own understanding of faith next to these stories.

And then, the key on the bottom of the box will be wound, and the story will begin again next with Mark, and then with Luke, with a liberal peppering of John. And so it goes, the great faith story in the background, ones that are authentic and ring true, ones that raised up a Martin Luther King, Jr. and a Mel White, a Dorothy Day and a Sr. Helen Prejean, a Rosa Parks, an Oscar Romero and a Clarence Jordan.

Butler-Bass talks about an “American Christianity that is deeply conflicted, caught between two powerful symbols of baptism, symbols that haunt our political sub-consciousness. To which baptism are we called? Which baptism does the world most need today? Which baptism truly heals?”

How do *you* hear these words today as they inform how you will walk back out into the world to serve? The words of Isaiah are right there by your side.

“I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness.”

How do those words call us to act in the world tomorrow? You can, if you choose, be among those who heal or teach. You may, if you wish, be one who helps build a bridge between people. You will, if you want to, take the faith stories that are heard and read here every week on a continuous loop, feel how they affect your being, and be that change we want to see in the world. Speak for the soul. Because, in the end, “If we don’t speak for the soul, our silence will surely aid evil.”

Scripture for Sunday, January 9, 2011

Isaiah 42:1-9

1 Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations. 2 He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; 3 a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice. 4 He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his teaching. 5 Thus says God, the Lord, who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and what comes from it, who gives breath to the people upon it and spirit to those who walk in it: 6 I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, 7 to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness. 8 I am the Lord, that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to idols. 9 See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth, I tell you of them.

Matthew 3: 13-17

13 Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. 14 John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" 15 But Jesus

answered him, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented. 16 And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. 17 And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

Jill Brenner

There are moments of transition in the life of a church when we get to welcome new people, and then there are the times when we have to say goodbye. These are natural, and we know that they will happen someday, but when they come it is very difficult.

Jill, you have brought such elegance and grace to our chancel each and every week for almost thirteen years. It should be no surprise to you that this congregation has always valued your musicianship, your expression, your own Christian faith and your presence here with us. It is very hard to say, "goodbye."

We know that you will be back with us from time to time as a substitute, and we greatly look forward to welcoming you back with us.

Friends of yours here at IUCC decided that when you return, you will find a custom-made conductor's stand that is being commissioned in your honor, and it will bear your name, so that we always have you close to us in music.

It should be clear to you today from the expressions of love and gratitude that we all feel for you in this room, including those of several dear friends with whom you have worked here in the past, that we greatly value you and the music you brought to us, flawlessly, week after week.

Connie has a special gift for you, and I will let her present it, but I want to tell you what a joy it has been for me personally to have you as a colleague, and I think the congregation would like to thank you now as well.