

## “Playlist. (My prayer for you)”

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Though the fig tree does not blossom, and no fruit is on the vines; though the produce of the olive fails and the fields yield no food; though the flock is cut off from the fold and there is no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will exult in the God of my salvation. God, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, and makes me tread upon the heights.  
*Habakkuk 3:17-19*

Choosing to step away from pastoral ministry is seldom easy. On good days, one knows we are helping people connect with the Holy. And on days when people were ornery or downright combative, we can still convince ourselves of the good we are doing. We remind ourselves, and each other, that we never know all the ways we have touched people’s lives.

But this Lyme disease will not be ignored. So, even before my departure was announced in October, I began grieving, and finding ways to celebrate, this transition to medical leave. Today, I share with you a few thoughts from these last months. It is less a sermon than a farewell discourse, but I have long believed that God can and does speak to us through any medium, if only we will hear.

I wrote about this Habakkuk text in one of my recent letters. Since I first discovered it as a teen, it has brought comfort and strengthened my trust in God during difficult times. The author’s litany of terrible happenings is interrupted by one small word – “yet.” It becomes his turning point as his song moves from lament to joy.

As we continue through uncertain times, we can say with Habakkuk, “Yet I will rejoice in the God of my deliverance.” It does not cure our woes, but it does remind us that God accompanies us, and that God will shape every bad situation to the good.

Driving back from Appleton in February, I was feeling low. The fatigue from the Lyme was terrible. The transitions I was navigating were leaving me unsettled. What was ahead? Where did I belong?

I do not have any playlists on my phone though I do have music there; and as I turned onto Memorial Drive my phone synced with the car stereo and began playing. The first song was perfect for my mood. As were the 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, and 5<sup>th</sup>. Coincidence does happen, but not as often as we think. On this day, I had a need and God responded. God as Spirit plainly influenced my receptivity to the songs.

My early life was steeped in music – Johnny Cash, Rodgers & Hammerstein, Mantovani. Singing and taking up piano and then other instruments, I fully expected that music would always be a part of my life, along with a houseful of adopted kids and a caring husband. When I was 9 years old, Beth Nagorny pulled out her portable record player, put on an LP, and my world changed. (No, it wasn’t The Beatles.) It would be more than thirty years before I heard *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* again, but one song stayed with me.

The Bible tells us that Joseph was a well-built and handsome young man. This got him into trouble, and he ended up in prison for a time. Even though God was with him, even if the guard

set him in charge of the other prisoners, it was still prison (Gen 39). I knew the story well from Sunday school. But Sunday school does not teach about Zionism or the possibility that good and bad theology can be woven together. I understand it differently today, yet I still hear Joseph's song of pain and faith.

If my life were important, I would ask, "Will I live or die?"  
But I know the answers lie far from this world.

The song's mournfulness fits well with a recorder. I once played it to the star-filled stillness of the Grand Canyon during a backpacking trip.

*My prayer is that you might recognize God at work in your life. That you will choose to go with that flow – even when it is hard. My prayer is that you know dreams and that some of them come true.*

For all that millions of little girls, and boys, pretend to be Elsa, Frozen was not Disney's finest venture. Still, "Let it Go" captures the release that comes when a person finally permits herself to step outside the box that the world seems to want to put us each in.

You are the only one of you there will ever be. God wants for us each to be fully ourselves – and the world needs us to – but this is a struggle for many of us. From the privacy of my own home, I belt the song out regularly.

*My prayer is for you to know the pain of being an outsider – for it is in pain that we learn compassion. May you grow toward becoming the best version of you that God knows you can be. And may you remember that if people cannot accept you as you are, that is their problem.*

See, a king will reign in righteousness, and princes will rule with justice. Each will be like a hiding place from the wind, a covert from the tempest, like streams of water in a dry place, like the shade of a great rock in a weary land. For the palace will be forsaken, the populous city deserted; the hill and the watchtower will become dens forever, the joy of wild asses, a pasture for flocks; until a spirit from on high is poured out on us, and the wilderness becomes a fruitful field, and the fruitful field is deemed a forest. Then justice will dwell in the wilderness, and righteousness abide in the fruitful field. The effect of righteousness will be peace, and the result of righteousness, quietness and trust forever. My people will abide in a peaceful habitation, in secure dwellings, and in quiet resting places.  
*Isaiah 32:1-2, 14-18a*

Returning from Florence to my sister's home in Wiesbaden, I looked through the window of that small Ryan Air plane to the Alps below, a view I never expected to see. I thought about home. Tears dampen my eyes as I realized I had not experienced "home" in a very long time. Since then, I have thought a lot about this. What is home? Is it necessarily about geography? Can we find home if we move frequently? I counted last week and I've lived in at least 20 different locations.

Home is a place, yes, but it is also more than that. Not so many years ago, I discovered that for me, home is where a loved one is. It's the same for some of you. Home is with children, or grandchildren. Even then, many of us are aware of a God-sized hole within us that can only be filled by the Holy. Augustine of Hippo (St. Augustine) wrote, "Thou hast made us for thyself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in thee."

*My prayer is that you long for home – until you find it. Then, may you live there in love – through the worst and the best of life. May your heart be restless until you find rest in God.*

Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God. Not that we are competent of ourselves to claim anything as coming from us; our competence is from God, who has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of letter but of spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.  
*2 Corinthians 3:4-6*

Do you regularly mess up? Did you see last week's worship video? That was "my bad." I love that "Try Everything" from *Zootopia* gave a generation of young people permission to keep trying new things, to keep messing up and getting back up.

The world does not love people who are not successful. Families and churches don't always appreciate when we let ourselves be vulnerable. And yet, to be ourselves as God intends for us to be demands vulnerability.

We talked about vulnerability in January during our Wednesday study. Talked about the risk and the fear – both of failure and of what others will say. Being vulnerable is incredibly hard – there's a reason Brené Brown entitled her book on the topic *Daring Greatly* – and yet, the path to joy requires it of us. The year after leaving office, Theodore Roosevelt gave a great speech:

"It is not the critic who counts; not the [one] who points out how [another] stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the [one] who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends [themselves] in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat."

I have reminded myself of Roosevelt's words a few times since I first read them four years ago, especially after someone not in the arena with me criticizes my efforts.

*My prayer is that you will enter the arena that requires so much of you. That you strive valiantly for whatever worthy cause stirs your heart, or your mind. May you allow yourself (and others) to fail, to come up short again and again. When you succeed, celebrate and thank God. And when you fail, may you fail while daring greatly.*

When I interned at the White Bear elder care facility, doing chaplaincy, Scott Cartwright, the official (paid) chaplain, assured me that we can have holy conversation without ever mentioning God or Jesus. Many of you have experienced this. God is not named once in the Book of Esther yet people believed this book important enough to be included in the Bible.

Maybe it is because I came late to pastoral ministry, but I have never felt the need to focus solely on the Bible. It is important, yes, and I have read it through, much of it many times. But to emphasize the Bible exclusively says that God's revelation in the more recent millennia does not matter. The UCC's motto is that "God is still speaking." Yes! And God has things we need to hear – about the 21<sup>st</sup> century, about our racism and violence, about pandemic – things that folks in Amos' or Jesus' time would never have been able to hear because it was beyond their experience.

*My prayer is that you will listen for and heed God's messages.*

Except for one last note, I am done. What I have shared is a part of my theology – not of a pastor but of a person who has spent a lifetime watching for and finding God everywhere.

One Saturday early in the pandemic, I was sitting in my little green house, listening to music as I wrote in my journal. A song by A Great Big World came on. Gradually, I stopped writing and began listening more closely. Though I had never heard it this way before, today God gave it to me as a prayer.

You'll be okay. You'll be okay.  
The sun will rise to better days.

And change will come; it's on it's way.  
Just close your eyes and let it rain.

'Cause you're never alone. And I will always be there.  
You just carry on. You will understand.

You'll be okay.

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Andrew Lloyd Webber & Phillip Schofield, “Close Every Door” (from *Joseph And The Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*), 1969.

Kristen Anderson-Lopez, Robert Lopez, “Let It Go” (From *Frozen*), Walt Disney, November 25, 2013.

Drew Pearson, Greg Holden, "Home," from the album *The World From The Side Of The Moon* recorded by Phillip Phillips, November 19, 2012.

Theodore Roosevelt, “Citizenship in a Republic” is the title of a speech given by the former President at the Sorbonne in Paris, France on April 23, 1910.

Sia Furler, Tor Hermansen, Mikkel Eriksen, “Try Everything” (from *Zootopia*), Walt Disney, February 15, 2016

Ian Axel and Chad Vaccarino, “You'll Be Okay,” from the album *Is There Anybody Out There?* recorded by A Great Big World, January 21, 2014.