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Acts 1:1-11; Ephesians 1:15-23; Luke 24:44-53

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Beautiful Music

My husband, Julian, recently wandered out of his study to find me in the kitchen, and asked, “Did you ever watch Bonanza when you were a child?” Now, for those of you who have never met him, Julian is English, and did not come to the United States until he was an adult. An old TV show such as Bonanza would not have been part of his childhood experience, so he is often curious as to what might have been a part of mine. And since I know he also likes to have the TV turned on to vintage stations as background noise while he works, suddenly being presented with such a question wasn’t as far out in left field as it might seem.

However, after affirming that I had indeed watched Bonanza as a child, he then asked, somewhat hopefully, “Do you think that many people who saw Season 3, Episode 16 – yes, he had just looked it up; he is an academic, after all – [Jan. 7, 1962 The Tall Stranger] do you think they would have recognized that at the high point of the episode the music playing in the background was the chorale at the end of Brahms’s First Symphony?”

I slowly put down the dish cloth and turned to him, giving him my best “Are you out of your everlasting *mind?*” stare, and after a moment said that no, I imagine most people watching the program probably had not recognized the music as Brahms, and even fewer would have been able to pinpoint from which symphony it came, even had they nailed the composer. Privately I thought that it was even less likely that a TV western viewer would recognize Brahms than it was that a kid watching Saturday morning cartoons would be able to pick out the Wagner in a Bugs Bunny episode.

But, really, it wasn’t as silly a question as it seemed, given my husband’s own childhood. Julian grew up surrounded by music from the time he was born. Everyone in his family either played an instrument or sang, some professionally, and the rest for the sheer pleasure of it. It’s entirely possible that, had Bonanza been on in their household in 1962, *somebody* would indeed have recognized the Brahms at the end of that episode, and taken delight in pointing it out to the others.

But whether a Brahms chorale in a Bonanza episode would be recognized as such isn’t the real question in my mind. I think the bigger question is, “What was the music doing there in the first place?” Turn on any movie, any TV drama, or any commercial, for that matter, and you’ll find that every dramatic point has a sound track, and that musical accompaniment serves a subtle, but very important purpose. It’s there to set the mood.

It’s there to tell us how we’re supposed to feel about what we’re seeing. It’s our emotional guide through the drama. When the music gets tense, we tense, because our emotions pick up the signal that something maybe not so nice is going to occur. And when the music is glorious, we relax and know that something good is on its way, and all shall be well.

Music has the remarkable ability to feed and shape our experiences. We listen to it because it does something to us...and for us. We use it to energize and soothe, to inspire and to strengthen us to face the days ahead.

And just like music, I believe that scripture can be the music to feed our souls. When I take the time actually to read the Bible outside of church, inevitably certain passages begin to stick in my mind, not unlike favorite songs or melodic themes that become familiar through repetition. I begin to build a scriptural playlist that, if I allow it, becomes the theme music to the story of my life. And the more I read, the deeper and richer the music becomes, strengthening and sustaining me.

A larger scriptural playlist also allows me to begin to see themes and similarities. I come to intuit that when certain words are used, they are placed there to guide me into understanding something more profound than what I might have seen to begin with. They are put there to help me make connections between passages so that I come to a greater understanding of who God is in Christ Jesus. And each of the four Evangelists – Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, tell the story of Jesus in unique ways, each opening our eyes to the depth of God’s love.

The account of Jesus’ ascension in the book of Acts that we heard earlier has a couple of these connection gems, and they are not there by accident. They, like a musical accompaniment, are there to guide us to a certain end, to open us up to experience God in a deeper way. This is the one I find most compelling:

“After his suffering, he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.” Forty days. Now that’s a familiar number. Where else does the number 40 appear in the Bible?

- Noah spent 40 days cooped up with the animals on the ark, and then they were released to begin populating the earth again.
- Moses and his company spent 40 years wandering in the wilderness before entering the promised land to begin to rebuild the Jewish nation.
- Jesus fasted for 40 days in the wilderness before beginning his earthly ministry.

The number 40 is consistently associated with journeys culminating in new beginnings. Coincidence? I think not. And so rather than merely taking at face value that Jesus toiled around for 40 days before ascending into heaven, scripture prompts me to stop and ask, what might the new beginning be here? What is the musical theme underlying the text?

The disciples wondered if this new beginning might be the restoration of the kingdom to Israel, since that is what the Messiah was expected to do, but Jesus tells them that that particular event’s timing is not for them to know. What, then, is the new beginning? Jesus tells them that the Holy Spirit will come upon them, and that they will be witnesses to him to the ends of the earth. It sounds as if the new beginning this time is the birth of the church.

Is this an earth-shattering revelation? No. But I think that what this, and other interesting scriptural nuggets do for me is to add another layer of depth to my appreciation of how the New Testament writers saw Jesus as the fulfillment of God’s promise in Scripture and tradition. Almost two thousand years ago they set about composing complex symphonies of love, rich with the musical texture of salvation, and full of melodies that I can carry in my heart. Melodies that draw me ever closer to God in Christ. Melodies I’d completely miss if I didn’t read the Bible.

These melodies move me, perhaps a bit in the same way that I am moved by the melodies artfully placed as accompaniments to the main dialogue in a movie, or, dare I say, even a TV show like Bonanza. I may not have known that it was Brahms which was playing in the background, but that does not stand in the way of my being moved by the beauty of the combination of tune and script. But now that I know that it is Brahms's First Symphony, I have a better appreciation for what the writers were attempting to do by including it.

That being said, knowledge falls flat if not paired with love, and so I want to leave you with what Julian had to say about knowing Brahms was playing in Bonanza:

Analysis is nothing if it ends up being a distraction, standing between the sounds we call music and the ears and hearts that hear them. Just so: As music is to be played, and listened to, and so shapes and strengthens our inner emotions and intellect; so too Scripture is read to be heard, and believed, and lived by – to give shape to our...identity in this life, and for the life to come. (...) Sometimes, it really is quite simple, at least in plain words: 'Love Jesus, and keep his commandments.'

Today, that's all. If together we can do these things, or by the power of the Spirit of Truth, the Advocate, give it our very best shot, I doubt that God will care whether or not we can 'Name that Tune' – chapter and verse, or composer and composition. It is enough to name Jesus.

Because God knows what we need to hear and when, if only we will listen."

Amen.