

Farther Along
November 6, 2016
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When I was growing up, I didn't have much exposure to the Bible, some in Sunday school, but it wasn't something I knew well enough to really wrestle with, or sing along to, as it were. What I did have for scripture, was folk music. We had a lot of folk music in my house, contemporary and traditional, with some country and pop thrown in. In that music I could hear what was important to people, learn about issues in the world. I could hear people I admired sing things I didn't agree with, and be challenged to understand what they were trying to communicate with their songs. I learned to work the record player to listen to Arlo Guthrie, Pete Seeger, Willie Nelson, Dolly Parton, and listened to tapes of local folks singers that came to our church coffee house. When we examine an idea through art or story, we don't just see or hear facts, but the conclusions and feelings that artists have about them. Our beliefs, our understandings of truth and meaning, in part come from our experience, and our experience is shaped by our scriptures, holy texts, and spiritual lives.

One of my family's favorite singers has always been Arlo Guthrie. My parents named our first cats Arlo and Alice, and even though I called the cat Boo-Boo, because I couldn't say Arlo when I was two, I knew they were named for a song. I took my parents to hear Arlo play this Friday night in Northampton. During the intermission my mom and I were talking about a documentary she had seen on PBS about the ongoing aftermath of Hurricane Irene in Vermont. She was talking about the people who had lost everything and some of the ways they were being taken advantage of by others. Three homes were washed away in the floods at the bottom of my parents' street, and my mom could relate to the stories of people who had nothing, and were so vulnerable. Her eyes got all teared up when she asked, "how can people be so terrible to one another?" I don't know the answer to that question, but as I try and grapple with big questions like this, I go back to my scriptures. I think about songs people have sung, wrestling with this question. I thought about it later in the concert singing along to "City of New Orleans," and "My Peace" at the end of the show. I remember learning about change and economic struggle from "City of New Orleans" as a kid, through the melancholy beauty of the song.

Good night, America, how are you?
Say, don't you know me? I'm your native son
I'm the train they call the City Of New Orleans
I'll be gone five hundred miles when the day is done

I thought about all the lives Woody Guthrie touched not only in his lifetime, but through the volumes of work that he wrote that people have been putting music to in the last ten years or so, like the song "My Peace," which we sing here together often. Arlo talks about this song as a way to put our voices out into the universe, knowing that somewhere someone needs to hear:

My peace, my peace is all I've got that I can give to you
My peace is all I ever had it's all I ever knew
I give my peace to green and black and red and white and blue
My peace, my peace is all I've got that I can give to you.

I have vivid memories of being in the back seat of our station wagon as a kid, hearing Dolly Parton, Emmylou Harris, and Linda Ronstadt belt out “Farther Along” from the stereo. Songs like that helped me to hear in my body, stories about suffering, and trying to make meaning. It is an old American spiritual, that points to a time when we will better understand the meaning of it all and why some people suffer and some, seemingly, do not, though of course, everyone does. Listening to the song today, and from my own experience, I hear and resonate with the confusion and sadness of the singer, and I think about not knowing, and what I need in order to be able to hold that unknowing. I am going to sing the song, feel free to join in if you know it.

Sing Farther Along

Tempted and tried we're oft made to wonder
Why it should be thus all the day long
While there are others living about us
Never molested though in the wrong

Chorus: Farther along we'll know all about it
Farther along we'll understand why
Cheer up my brother live in the sunshine
We'll understand it all by and by

When death has come and taken our loved ones
It leaves our home so lonely and drear
And then do we wonder why others prosper
Living so wicked year after year

Chorus

Often I wonder why I must journey
Over a road so rugged and steep;
While there are others living in comfort,
While with the lost I labour and weep.

Chorus

This song, written in the Christian tradition, echos the text of Job and many Psalms, especially the 73rd:

Truly God is good to Israel,
To those who are pure in heart.
But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled,
My steps had nearly slipped.
For I was envious of the arrogant
When I saw the prosperity of the wicked.

The Psalms and Job are part of what scholars call Wisdom Literature in Hebrew Scripture. These

writings are some of the oldest in the Bible and are full of lamentation, asking God for help, trying to understand experience, and offering wisdom to the listener. Thousands of years ago, when these words, or in the case of the Psalms, songs, were written down, those communities were dealing with some of the same kinds of questions we face today. No matter who we are, everyone experiences suffering. Sometimes it is random, like a storm sweeping away a home, and sometimes it the result of human choices, like how we treat each other, and what we are willing to do for money and power.

“Farther Along” was probably written around 1910, but apparently there are at least three origin stories for it, according to a music librarian from Texas.¹ No matter who originally wrote the song, it is clear that it came from a Christian context, and in the chorus, it is talking about greater understanding, and I assume because of it's history, coming after death. That theology of waiting for enlightenment after death is not something that is particularly resonant for me, but seeking an answer, struggling to make sense of suffering, believing that better relationships and justice are possible farther along, that does.

There are some things that we are invited to learn throughout our lives: how to empathize with someone else's story, how to wrestle with big questions, how to sit with not knowing answers, how to not take our own experience and extrapolate it to infinity. *I* do these things best through singing about them, but of course for each of us it will be different. Today as we celebrate music in our community, and the great varieties of expression we have, I invite you to think anew about what is your holy text. What is the body of work or experience you go back to again and again that challenges you, invites you to *new* experience, and shares wisdom? Whatever that body of work, may we know that we are never alone in the journey to better understand ourselves and this world where we live. I am so grateful for the human expression of music that helps me to figure out my way forward. Why do people hurt one another? Why is there suffering? There are no easy answers. But I for one will keep singing until I get closer.

Happy music Sunday. Amen.

¹ <http://drhamrick.blogspot.com/2013/12/farther-along.html>