

I Will Survive

December 17, 2023

Do you remember Gloria Gaynor's 1978 smash hit, "I Will Survive?"

Even though I grew up in the '80s, a little too close to the disco era for it to be retro-cool, this song has always been one of my favorites. From the tingling first notes, it's an anthem of not just surviving, but thriving. It's a victory song! It weaves a compelling story of someone who was in tough straights, and who, by the grace of God, has come out the other side with a backbone and dignity to spare.

Despite the fact that my record collection in high school skewed more toward the Beatles than the Bee Gees, this song, with its catchy beat and Gaynor's brilliant vocals, has always been a favorite. (If you're more of a fan of opera than disco, think of Pavarotti singing "Nessun Dorma," and the final "Vincero! Vincero!" Actually, "Vincero" translates pretty close to "I will survive, hey, hey!")

In both Gloria Gaynor's "I Will Survive," and Puccini's "Nessun Dorma," we find songs that are oozing with confidence and determination. When you sing along, there's an assurance that "You've got this." Oftentimes, when we hear or read or study the text of Luke 1:46-55 which is the basis of the hymn we just sang, it is approached like "I Will Survive" and "Nessun Dorma." Folks hear Mary saying, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, who has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed," and see someone who is confident in God's plan and her role in it.

Barbara Brown Taylor, one of my favorite authors, says: "Christmas almost succeeds in making humans what God intended us to be all along." At the same time, this also can be the season of our greatest pain and deepest despair. Whether we're dealing with recent loss or generational trauma, as much as Brown sees Christmas bringing out the best in people, C. S. Lewis was also right when he wrote: "For some, it seems life is forever winter, but never Christmas."

Another of my favorite authors, Anne Lamott, talks about how she has inner voices, one of which she calls "the bad voice." This voice regularly reminds her of past failings and lifelong feelings of shame and inadequacy. If we're honest, a lot of people have that voice in their heads. It's the voice that tells us that we're not enough – not good enough, smart enough, successful enough, thin enough, healthy enough, wealthy enough, whatever enough.

One of my colleagues, Rev. Joe Kay, puts it this way:

"We have voices all around us that reinforce the message that we don't measure up. We're told nonstop in ways overt and subliminal that we're not desirable unless we look a certain way, live a certain way, believe certain things, own certain things. Political and religious demagogues tell us that only certain types of people are acceptable. We internalize those many voices, and we set out to try to satisfy them. What's worse, we echo them back into the world, making them stronger. If you want a contemporary definition of sin, there you have it."

The Scriptures

Kay also points out that Advent “reminds us that there is a different voice, and that one calls us by name.” Just as the angel Gabriel said, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God,” this message is for us, too. Do not be afraid Bob or Clarence or Sophia, for you have found favor with God.

Now, I’m always one to point out that anytime someone says, “Don’t be afraid,” it’s inevitably because there’s something to be afraid of. Gabriel has just given Mary news that will turn her life upside down and her world inside out. This is scary, life-altering stuff. We’ve all had this. Hearing, “You’re fired,” or “I’m leaving,” or “It’s malignant,” or “It’s over,” or “She’s not going to make it.”

Every life has some harrowing turns. Turns that, at the outset, look like they might break us.

That’s where Mary is when we pick up her story in the Magnificat. She’s a teenage girl, recently betrothed, who learns that she’s pregnant and the father is not her future husband. I remind you, the Book of Deuteronomy teaches that, if a man discovers that the woman he has just married or betrothed is not a virgin, “the men of her town shall stone her to death.” (Deuteronomy 22:20-27)

The angel had every reason to expect that Mary would be afraid. And so it’s brilliant that the angel calls Mary by name, just as God knows your name. “Mary lives in a culture that tells women they’re more property than persons. Galilee is considered the armpit of her society. Her religion portrays God as mostly a distant and disinterested deity.” (Kay)

For our part, we’re told that our houses need to be Instagram ready, we’re morally lacking if we don’t close all of the rings on our watches, and any tragedy that befalls us is a result of not praying hard enough or not believing in the right way.

With whatever indictments are ringing in our ears, what Advent invites us to do is, instead of listening to what Anne Lamott calls the “bad voices,” listen to the angels, the messengers of God. What if we listen to the voice that knows our name? That calls us blessed?

If you’ve been around here long enough, you’re familiar with the breath prayer I use whenever I lead our children’s sermons. We breathe in, praying, “Holy Spirit,” and we breathe out, “bring us peace.” A breath prayer based on our scriptures today might be, “Do not...be afraid,” or “I am...God’s beloved.”

Conclusion

I started out today, reflecting on how Gloria Gaynor’s “I Will Survive” is an anthem of victory. Even though the lyrics are, “I will survive,” with the confidence with which Gaynor sings the song, it’s probably better named, “I Have Survived.”

In the ‘90s, the band Cake covered “I Will Survive.” Now, I’ll admit, I’m a sucker for a good cover song, especially if the new version changes things up, gives us a way to hear something completely different in the song than the original does. Cake’s “I Will Survive” does exactly

that. They slow it down. The disco beat is replaced by bass guitar. And most importantly, the vocals aren't nearly as confident. Gloria Gaynor has survived. In the Cake version, you're not so sure. The Cake version is trying to convince themselves that they will survive. In the Cake version, the wound is still raw.

I like reading the Magnificat through both of these lenses, through the triumphant, Gloria Gaynor, "you've got this" lens, and through the Cake, "I don't know how I'm going to survive this," lens. Not only does the second feel more real to me, it feels more useful in my prayer and spirituality.

Imagining Mary singing, convincing herself that things are going to work out, gives me tools to use when I'm scared and lonely and afraid. It's a way of reminding myself that God has helped people out of worse places than this. It's interesting to note here that, just as Cake covered Gloria Gaynor, in the Magnificat, Mary is actually covering the song of Hannah from the First Book of Samuel. Sometimes, the best way to pray is to pull out the anthems that we know by heart and just belt them out.

Let's hear the Magnificat again, but this time, imagine Mary is singing it from the "I'm really hoping all of this is real" side of history rather than on the "this is a done deal" side:

"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

(I can imagine someone singing this, thinking, "I'm not feeling this right now, even though I know it's true.")

who has looked with favor on my lowly state. Surely from now on all generations will call me blessed.

(What I'm going through right now doesn't feel like favor, God. Help me to see where the grace is in this.)

The Mighty One has done great things for me...mercy is for those who fear God...from generation to generation.

God has shown strength...has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts, has brought down the powerful from their thrones, has lifted up the lowly;

(There's precedence here. God, you've been truly marvelous in the past. Don't let me down now.)

God has filled the hungry with good things, sent the rich away empty, come to the aid of Israel...according to the promise made to our ancestors...to Abraham and to his descendants forever.

Friends, songs have power, and how we sing them has power, too. Our Music Director, Haley Steele, initiated a Christmas Caroling event last week in which we had three groups of people

carol both to some of our members who don't join us regularly and also to some care facilities in the area. I hear that it was particularly meaningful, especially in the memory care units, where Christmas carols seem to transcend diminishment. We brought some holiday cheer, but even more, we carried the divine with us, saying, "You matter. You're not forgotten."

As we round the corner on Christmas, I invite you to join Mary and the band Cake in praying by giving a beloved song a twist. Whatever is going on in your life, whether you're triumphant or fearful, full of joy or dread, pull out a song that you know by heart and offer it to God. I don't care if it's a hymn or "I'll Be Home for Christmas," or "Jingle Bells." Whether it's a disco anthem or alt-pop remix. Whatever speaks to your current situation, allow the power of song to align you closer to the divine.

You WILL survive. Hey, hey!

Rev. Bridget Flad Daniels
Union Congregational United Church of Christ
Green Bay, Wisconsin
Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24, Luke 1:46-55
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