

Take These Broken Wings And Learn to Fly

April 14, 2024

Blackbird

Have you ever made a bet with someone and regretted it? I'm not talking about actual gambling, but friendly wagers, like "If that movie wins the Oscar, I'll pay for dinner every time we go out for the next year," or "if this sports team or that is any good next year, I'll go to church every Sunday." (Notice: I didn't use the Brewers as an example there, because Tony Baldwin is convinced that my preaching about them is a curse, and baseball fans believe in curses.)

When I was in high school, I made a bet with one of my best friends. I don't remember what the bet was, but I remember our wager. If I won, I would memorize the lyrics to Bob Dylan's Subterranean Homesick Blues, and if Mike won, he would learn to play the Beatles' "Blackbird" on guitar. Thank goodness I won, so that "Johnny's in the basement mixing up the medicine, I'm on the pavement, thinking 'bout the government" is the only phrase from the Bob Dylan song that is taking up space in my brain, and more importantly, I got to hear Mike picking out "Blackbird" on guitar for the rest of the semester. There are some songs that you're lucky to have seared into your brain, and for me, thanks to a bet I barely remember, "Blackbird" is one of them.

Melba Pattillo—Ernest Green—Elizabeth Eckford—Minnijean Brown—Terrence Roberts
Carlotta Walls—Jefferson Thomas—Gloria Ray—Thelma Mothershed

Say their names. Before September 4, 1957, you never would have known who they were – and maybe you don't know who they are today – and if you don't, you're not alone. I had to look them up. They were Paul McCartney's inspiration as he wrote "Blackbird." Before September 4, 1957, they were just nine black teenagers living in a world that neither acknowledged their potential nor afforded them the opportunity to make a difference. A world not as different from the one we live in today as we might care to admit.

And yet on September 4, 1957, 24 hours after a federal judge's order, they tried to walk into previously all-white Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, only to be stopped by a vicious mob and the Arkansas National Guard. Sixteen days later, a federal judge ordered the National Guard to stand down and Melba, Ernest, Elizabeth, Minnijean, Terrence, Carlotta, Jefferson, Gloria and Thelma once again tried to enter Central High School – this time through a side door. This time, they got to attend school for three whole hours before the mob tried to break into the school to lynch them, and the principal sent them home.

Finally, two days later, on September 25, 1957, President Eisenhower federalized the Arkansas National Guard, and sent the Army's 101st Airborne Division to join them so these black teenagers who had become known as the Little Rock Nine were finally able to do this ordinary thing that took extraordinary effort and courage...attend school for a full day. Melba, Ernest, Elizabeth, Minnijean, Terrence, Carlotta, Jefferson, Gloria and Thelma.

Of them, McCartney would write:
"Blackbird singing in the dead of night
take these broken wings and learn to fly.
All your life
you were only waiting for this moment to arise."

The scriptures

Last week in worship, while I was gone, you read the passage from the Gospel of John, often called, “Doubting Thomas,” in which we read that Jesus appeared to the disciples. The first thing he said to them was:

“Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you...
Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them;
if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

The passage we read today is also set on Easter evening (although they didn’t use that word, “Easter” yet). This time, we read the version from the Gospel of Luke, where once again we hear that Jesus’ message to the disciples was first, offering them peace, and then second, commissioning them to be agents of forgiveness.

Even though today’s passage from Luke doesn’t tell us that the disciples were locked away in fear as the similar passage from John does, I think we lose some of its power if we forget just how scared and broken and dejected the disciples are as they have this encounter with the risen Christ. Their Rabbi, the person they had dropped their entire lives to follow – who had been inspiring them to new depths the likes of which they had never dreamed, who had been helping them to reconfigure how they understood their belief system and social structures in ways that helped them to understand that God’s peace and joy and mercy and love and compassion and hope were Good News for ALL people – that Rabbi had just been brutally murdered in a public execution by the state just days before. To say they were in shock is an understatement.

And what does Jesus do in this context? He offers them peace, and then commissions them to be agents of grace. He offers them healing, with the expectation that they then become agents of healing. The eternal wisdom here is that God’s deepest yearning for us is that we find our own peace, and that we then become ambassadors of forgiving, restoring, healing grace. THAT is worth disrupting the laws of the universe, worth coming back from the dead, to try to communicate to us.

Conclusion (aka Blackbird 2.0)

Three weeks ago, in the dark of night, as Maundy Thursday bled into Good Friday, Beyonce, the Queen Bee, did Sir Paul one better. I don’t know if it was intentional on Beyonce’s part that her cover of “Blackbird” would drop on Good Friday, on that day that is symbolic to Christians of the power wielded by all that is broken and hurting and destructive and ungodly in our world. I kinda think it was intentional. After all, Beyonce has mad skills. But whether lining up with the Christian calendar was intentional or not, on Good Friday, Beyonce released what I would call the Easter version of “Blackbird,” because on it, by having four black women who are little known country artists sing with her, she’s modeling what the song is about, she’s doing as has been done for her.

“Take these broken wings and learn to fly.”

She has internalized a different way of being in the world, and now she’s using her power to make that different way possible for others.

Of this, my colleague Mike Kinman, rector of All Saints Episcopal Church in Pasadena, writes:

“Sometimes all it takes is to notice someone or to be noticed for the unique, beautiful, powerful person we are. Sometimes all it takes is to treat someone like the image of God they have always been, to recognize the image of God that has rested on them all along and to help them find the wings to fly.”

It doesn't have to happen on a worldwide album drop. It can happen anywhere, anytime. You were only waiting for this moment to arise. How do we do that, you might ask?

I'd turn your attention back to the passage from the letter to the Romans that Meg read for us:

May your love be sincere; hate what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in love. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, practice hospitality.

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited. Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.

Friends, all too often, we see brokenness and hurt and pain and sin as the end. But the genius of our faith is that something even more beautiful awaits us. When all hope seems lost, Easter is taking our broken wings and learning to fly, taking our sunken eyes and learning to see. Easter tells us that, even beyond our brokenness:

“We are all capable of amazing things. We are all creations of great power and great beauty. Teenagers can stand up against lynch mobs. Black women can revolutionize a Beatles' masterwork. And we can all be a part of setting each other free and all it takes is cultivating the sense to see Christ in every one.”

(Kinman)

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Today's sermon is indebted to the thoughts shared by Rev. Mike Kinman, rector of All Saints Episcopal Church, Pasadena, CA, in his Easter sermon on 3-31-24.