

Toe-Tappin'

A message given by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on September 27, 2020
Friendship Presbyterian Church

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

“See, the home of God is among mortals.

He will dwell with them;

they will be his peoples,

and God himself will be with them;

he will wipe every tear from their eyes.

Death will be no more;

mourning and crying and pain will be no more,

for the first things have passed away.”

And the one who was seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new.”

Also he said, “Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true” ...

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. Nothing accursed will be found there anymore. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him; they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign for ever and ever. (Revelation 21:1-5; 22:1-5, NRSV)

Today, we are enjoying a very special kind of worship service – even in the midst of a pandemic! We all know the joy of being lifted up and above the rough and tumble of our lives by the plain-clothed miracle of music. And speaking probably for most all of you, there are few kinds of music that can *do* that quite like some gospel-inspired bluegrass!

It's said that a young boy once asked his father, “Daddy, will there be bluegrass in heaven?” And the father responded, “Don't be silly, son. Of course there will be bluegrass in heaven!” I suppose he could say that because the music so often *looks* to heaven and *takes* people there, in its way. The music lifts us up and sets our hearts soaring, celebrating that

*Some bright morning when this life is over ... I'll fly away
To that home on God's celestial shore ... I'll fly away*

*When the shadows of this life have gone ... I'll fly away
Like a bird from these prison walls I'll fly ... I'll fly away*

*I'll fly away, oh glory, I'll fly away (in the morning)
When I die, Hallelujah by and by ... I'll fly away.*

This is the music of the people of Appalachia. It looks often to that next world, where sin and suffering have been left behind, for reasons not hard to understand. It is a music which was born in the experience of poverty and hardship, and so it draws strength from hope in God and a better life to come.

But it does this without ignoring or glossing over the reality of the world around us and the world within us. It is not naïve about the power and pervasiveness of suffering ... the dark side of life. Tragedies are real, and they occur all the time, on a daily basis, all over the world. Sadness and loss is common to our life, and it's not something that can or should be denied away.

Sometimes the banjo is just the thing that can help us hear the moaning. Sometimes we seek, but cannot quite find that Sea of Refuge, where all are protected. Sometimes paradise seems lost, not found. The banjo can help us praise God, and it can help us lament, too. Such is the power of bluegrass.

Imagine the weeping prophet, the biblical prophet Jeremiah, as from the hills of *Kentucky*, and it's not so big a leap to imagine the words of "Man of Constant Sorrow" as sacred scripture:

*I am a man of constant sorrow,
I've seen trouble all my day
I bid farewell to old Kentucky,
The place where I was born and raised*

*For six long years I've been in trouble,
No pleasures here on earth I found
For in this world I'm bound to ramble,
I have no friends to help me now ...*

But then at the end of the song, in spite of everything, the singer holds on to that glimmer of hope:

*Maybe your friends think I'm just a stranger
My face, you'll never see no more
But there is one promise that is given
I'll meet you on God's golden shore*

Bluegrass music has this power because it's inspired by that larger story of the Bible, which itself is no stranger to confessions of disillusionment and sadness. Listen to its words closely

and you may hear the spirit of bluegrass coming through the words! Jeremiah himself lamented that,

*God has made my flesh and my skin waste away, and broken my bones;
he has besieged and enveloped me with bitterness and tribulation;
he has made me sit in darkness like the dead of long ago ...
He has made my teeth grind on gravel, and made me cower in ashes;
my soul is bereft of peace; I have forgotten what happiness is;
so I say, "Gone is my glory, and all that I had hoped for from the Lord."
The thought of my affliction and my homelessness is wormwood and gall!
My soul continually thinks of it and is bowed down within me.
But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope:
The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end;
they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.
"The Lord is my portion," says my soul, "therefore I will hope in him."
(Lamentations 3:4-6, 16-24, NRSV)*

Bluegrass offers an approach we can take in life, a perspective on things, that is hopeful, regardless of how many paradises have been lost. It is intimately acquainted with the reality of sorrow, but also seeks that place of the heart in which despair gives way to trust, and sadness, ultimately, to joy.

If you've ever been to a bluegrass festival, one thing you might notice is that while people *sometimes* dance to bluegrass music, it's most often listened to by people simply sitting and enjoying the music—even at the big bluegrass festivals. Not a lot of dancing. Now, maybe that's because there are so many Baptists in bluegrass country! But while there may not be much dancing, there *is* a lot of "toe tappin'"!

You may not have your faith all figured out. You may not have the answers to the trials of your life. But in the spirit of bluegrass, you can tap your feet and, in times of sorrow, keep tapping. Foot tapping is an act of faith practiced by the body. One bluegrass blogger I know of once wrote that we should have "foot-faith." It's a way of saying, "I'll keep going, no matter what sorrows I face. I am animated by a deeper rhythm."

He tells of a wise man who was asked about the secret to his life. The wise man said: "Nothing special, but when I fall down, I get up again."

And so, he concludes, "Getting up again, even with only a tapping of the feet, is a form of heaven. There's a rhythm to it that reverberates throughout the mountains, all the way to the heavens. When it reaches the heavens, it then returns to the earth in the form of music" and the "love in heaven floods back into the world." And today, in this place, it's raining down on us with beauty ... to the glory of God! Amen.