

The Man in Black (Summer Saints Series: Johnny Cash)

A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on June 16, 2024

Friendship Presbyterian Church

When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, 'Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?' Jesus answered them, 'Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me.'

As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: 'What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written,

*"See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way before you."*

Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force. For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John came; and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come. Let anyone with ears listen!

'But to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the market-places and calling to one another,

*"We played the flute for you, and you did not dance;
we wailed, and you did not mourn."*

For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, "He has a demon"; the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, "Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax-collectors and sinners!" Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.' (Matthew 11:2-19, NRSV)

Last week we began our Summer Saints sermon series. On each of these Sunday mornings, we will take up a "saint" ... not necessarily one canonized by any church, and not necessarily one who belongs to our own tradition. And being selected as a "summer saint" certainly doesn't mean that one was or is "better" than anyone else. You will see that they are a diverse lot, these summer saints. All have died, and yet all are relevant in a most living way. Perhaps, upon hearing each name, it may be hard to imagine *what* they have to teach us, but I do believe that each offers something – something very valuable if we're open and ready to listen. Our summer saints are saints in exactly the same way that *we* are saints ... imperfect people who are loved by God, claimed by God, and who, sometimes in spite of themselves, were used of the Spirit to convey something of God's love and goodness.

Most of our summer saints achieved at least some degree of fame in their lives. But only one saint this summer can be said to have risen to the level of “icon”, and that would be today’s – Johnny Cash, “the Man in Black.” Known for his unforgettable deep-baritone voice, trademark look, and a rebellious image later tempered by an increasingly humble demeanor, Cash was one of the most influential and recognizable musicians of the last century, who traditionally began his concerts with the simple “Hello, I’m Johnny Cash”, followed by his signature “Folsom Prison Blues”. Though mostly associated with country music, his songs and sound spanned rock-and-roll, blues, folk, and gospel, earning him the rare honor of inductions into the Country Music, Rock and Roll, *and* Gospel Music Halls of Fame.

As with his contemporary Elvis Presley, his career and life won him the heartfelt devotion of countless fans. I have a dear friend who is also a Presbyterian minister who told me the story of a funeral he performed for – his words – “a crazy family.” The deceased, it turns out, was a huge Johnny Cash fan, and so his memorial service was filled with the iconic singer’s most famous songs. After the service, the family and my minister friend gathered on the front steps of the church for a picture. At that very moment, the neighbor across the street from the church was blaring Cash's “Ring of Fire” as a tribute. Many of you will recall the refrain:

*I fell into a burning ring of fire,
I went down, down, down as the flames went higher
And it burns, burns, burns,
The ring of fire, the ring of fire.*

Not to miss the moment, the deceased man’s wife, hearing about falling into a burning ring of fire, and thinking of her husband, smiled and said, “Well, that’s probably true.”

Johnny Cash was born in 1932 in Kingsland, Arkansas – one of seven children. He was raised on a farm, and experienced struggle and hardship growing up. But gospel music and radio always provided comfort. Taught guitar by his mother and a childhood friend, Cash began playing and writing songs at the age of twelve.

After four years of service in the Air Force from 1950 to 1954, he returned to the states, got married, and moved to Memphis, Tennessee, where he sold appliances while studying to be a radio announcer. But he hadn’t forgotten his dream of breaking into music, and so he worked up the courage to visit Sun Records studio. After he first auditioned for a man named Sam Phillips, singing mostly gospel songs, Phillips told him that he didn't record gospel music any longer. It was said that he told the young Cash to "go home and sin, then come back with a song I can sell." The producer was eventually won over with new songs delivered in Cash’s early rockabilly style, which in 1955 were recorded and released, meeting with commercial success.

From there, his career took off. But constant touring and the perils of fame took their toll. Cash started drinking heavily and became addicted to amphetamines and barbiturates. For a brief time, he shared an apartment in Nashville with Waylon Jennings, who at the time was not

exactly a paragon of sobriety himself. Cash used the uppers to stay awake during tours. Friends joked about his "nervousness" and erratic behavior, many ignoring the warning signs of his worsening state. In a later reflection on his early career, he claimed to have "tried every drug there was to try." Unsurprisingly, his marriage failed after 15 years in the shadow of multiple affairs and an alcohol and drug problem that was getting out of control.

But it was a powerful *spiritual* experience – supported by the constant, unfailing love of his friend, fellow country star, and eventual wife June Carter – which began the long process of turning his life around. In early 1968, he had hit rock-bottom, and under the influence of drugs, he walked into a cave with the intent of committing suicide. Descending deeper and deeper into it, he was trying to lose himself and as he put it later, "just die", when he passed out on the floor in exhaustion and despair. But then something happened. He felt the presence of God in his heart, and with a strength not his own, managed to struggle out of the cave by following a faint light and slight breeze. To him, it was his own re-birth.

But then the hard work had to be done. June, Maybelle, and Ezra Carter moved into Cash's mansion for a month to help him overcome his addiction. And this concerned, compassionate love blossomed into a life-long commitment. He proposed to June onstage at a concert in Canada soon after; and they married not long after that. In the process, he rediscovered his Christian faith, answering an "altar call" at Evangel Temple, a small church in the Nashville area – a commitment he ever-after strove to live into more and more. But as many others can attest from their own experience, his deep and sincere faith didn't end his struggles.

Inspired by the birth of his son John Carter Cash in 1970, he managed to quit all use of amphetamines and stayed off them completely for several years, before slowly succumbing to them again and seeking treatment. It was a back-and-forth process that never completely ended until 1992 when he entered rehab for the final time, with a success that proved to "stick", though the struggle to stay clean would continue for the rest of his life. And through all these struggles was the support of June.

Johnny and June continued to work together and tour for 35 years until June's death in May 2003. In rapidly declining health himself and in great grief over the loss of his wife, Johnny Cash died four months later in a Nashville hospital from complications related to diabetes. He was 71 years old.

But his musical legacy lives on. So much of his music echoes themes of sorrow, moral tribulation, and redemption, especially in the later stages of his career. He was a troubled and deeply devout Christian who was intimately acquainted with the daily struggle of Light and Darkness in the human heart, and he gave voice to all those for whom life is not clean or simple, but rather chastened by pain, challenged with temptations, and full of contradictions.

In later life, in words that I love, he described the music he sought to create:

I love songs about horses, railroads, land, Judgment Day, family, hard times, whiskey, courtship, marriage, adultery, separation, murder, war, prison, rambling, damnation, home, salvation, death, pride, humor, piety, rebellion, patriotism, larceny, determination, tragedy, rowdiness, heartbreak and love. And Mother. And God.

But nothing sums up what Johnny Cash was about better than his iconic image as “the Man in Black.” It started out merely as a desire to look “different,” to be rebellious ... to project through his clothes a “bad boy” image, which stood in contrast to the costumes worn by most of the major country acts of his day – rhinestone suits and cowboy boots. “I wore black because I liked it,” he once told an interviewer. “I still do, and wearing it still means something to me. It's still my symbol of rebellion -- against a stagnant status quo, against our hypocritical houses of God, against people whose minds are closed to others' ideas.”

But later, as he was living through his own inner struggles, and into an ever-deeper, humble awareness of his own brokenness, he came to re-interpret his wearing of black. What had initially been merely about image, symbolically became an empathetic identification with the downtrodden, the fallen, the weak, the all-too-human, the poor, the lonely, the addicted, those broken by life. His growing awareness inspired a deep compassion for others, which he increasingly expressed through both his music and his activism – for prison reform, for Native Americans, for the alleviation of poverty, and against the war in Vietnam. His free prison concerts – especially at Folsom Prison and San Quentin – were legendary.

He wrote a song in 1971 appropriately called “The Man in Black” to express more fully what had shifted in his soul. Listen carefully to the words:

*Well, you wonder why I always dress in black,
Why you never see bright colors on my back,
And why does my appearance seem to have a somber tone.
Well, there's a reason for the things that I have on.*

*I wear the black for the poor and the beaten down,
Livin' in the hopeless, hungry side of town,
I wear it for the prisoner who has long paid for his crime,
But is there because he's a victim of the times.*

*I wear the black for those who never read,
Or listened to the words that Jesus said,
About the road to happiness through love and charity,
Why, you'd think He's talking straight to you and me.*

*Well, we're doin' mighty fine, I do suppose,
In our streak of lightnin' cars and fancy clothes,
But just so we're reminded of the ones who are held back,
Up front there ought 'a be a Man In Black.*

*I wear it for the sick and lonely old,
For the reckless ones whose bad trip left them cold,
I wear the black in mournin' for the lives that could have been,
Each week we lose a hundred fine young men.*

*And, I wear it for the thousands who have died,
Believin' that the Lord was on their side,
I wear it for another hundred thousand who have died,
Believin' that we all were on their side.*

*Well, there's things that never will be right I know,
And things need changin' everywhere you go,
But 'til we start to make a move to make a few things right,
You'll never see me wear a suit of white.*

*Ah, I'd love to wear a rainbow every day,
And tell the world that everything's OK,
But I'll try to carry off a little darkness on my back,
'Till things are brighter, I'm the Man In Black.*

It's a song of protest, a song of mourning. It's a song of refusal to look away any longer. It's a song of solidarity, of identification with those who are so often forgotten or ignored. And it's a song that makes me think of Jesus – one who was accused of being a “friend of tax collectors and sinners” ... one who was unafraid to touch lepers ... one who told an angry crowd about to stone a woman caught in adultery, “Let him who is without sin cast the first stone” ... one who declared good news to the poor and the broken-hearted.

Johnny Cash was able to identify with the broken, because of his deep sense of his own brokenness. He had the strength to stand with them, because another man – his own body broken – stood with *him*.

Wasn't Jesus the original “Man in Black”?

It is *this* Man in Black who calls us and the world to come, just as we are, to himself.

Come, he says, if your heart is torn in two and you don't know where God is anymore.
Come, if your heart is full of gratitude for the blessings in your life.
Come, if you are struggling to forgive but you just don't think you can do it.
Come, if you wrestle everyday with something in your life that you hate but haven't overcome.
Come, if you know how deeply you are loved and how much grace surrounds you.
And come if you *don't* know – but want to.

For in this invitation and responding to it, a miracle happens: The miracle of brokenness being transformed by Love into healing and life.

Jesus, the original Man in Black, is the one who calls: "Come unto me, all you who labor and are heavily burdened, and I will give you rest."

To the glory of God! Amen.