

Country Music as a Resource for Lenten Preaching

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Country music sings a theology of failure. It comes from and speaks to people who are born to lose. Some say it is soap opera put to music because it tells stories, stories that face life so concretely and so painfully that its renditions of the ragged edges of time sing the songs and the feelings of people in heartbreak hotels, honky-tonks, walled prisons, dead-end marriages, hopeless jobs, lost homes of long ago, and empty Sundays coming down. The music's terrain is one of good men and bad and of cowboys who "ain't easy to love and are harder to hold." It is a place of strong, fine women and of "good girls" who are "gonna go bad" and "take their love to town." It lives on the edge of and in the hell of the wild side of life.

But it is more than the display of sin and loss because it is a *theology* of failure. Smack-dab crowded with transcendence it almost always says more than it says, and no matter how dismal the day, some hint of hope or some clue of a protest claims, if not a certain future, a signal of something *more* that somehow, someday, somewhere will keep the circle from being broken. In blind desperation folks still see the light. These are among the reasons why it is such a fine resource for Lenten preaching.

Ash Wednesday

Traditionally Ash Wednesday is the time to acknowledge the marks of our mortality, to face up to the question of death. While this is done with Easter victoriously before us on the horizon, nevertheless Ash Wednesday places before us the more immediate future of our demise.

Guy Clark's "Desperadoes Waiting for the Train" tells the story of the friendship of two men: one, "an old school man of the world" and the other his young sidekick-of-an-apprentice, whom the former taught to drive when the old man was "too drunk" The old man gave him "money for the girls," took him to "a bar called The Green Frog Cafe/and there was old men with beer guts and dominoes/lyin' about their lives while they'd play." The old man was a hero to the younger man, who one day realizes his friend is eighty with "brown tobacco stains all down his chin/To me he's one of the heroes of this country/So why's he all dressed up like them old men/Drinking beer and playin' Moon and 42...."

In verse one the young man says that "our lives was like some old Western movie" where the two of them waited for the next exciting event, "Like desperadoes waiting for the train." But from verse one where the old man cries and wonders if "every well I drilled run dry" to the last verse when he's dying, the chorus makes a more penetrating impact that these two are every day "Like desperadoes waiting for the train" of death. The old man questions the futility of his life as "a driller of oil wells" and, yet in the last verse in what must be their final visit, they dreamed of a kitchen:

*And sang another verse of that old song
Come on, Jack, that son of a bitch is coming
And we're desperadoes waiting for the train
Desperadoes waiting for the train.*

Forty Days, Four Sundays, and Easter

My colleague, Laurence A. Wagley, who teaches preaching and worship, points out that Lent has a thoroughgoing contradiction built into it in that the Lenten forty days of preparation and penitence do not include but take place around the Sundays which are celebrations of Easter. Such a proportion of regret and celebration and such contradiction fit well with the content of many country songs. Dolly Parton's "The Seeker" is such a song.

*I am the seeker
Poor sinful creature
There is none weaker than I am
And you are a teacher
You are a rancher so reach down
Reach out and lead me
Guide me and keep me
In the shelter of your care each day.*

Certainly there is penitence here, but there is also the instructional aspect of Lent when it has been used in the past as training for baptism. Yet, not only is God "a teacher" but "a rancher," a God, as I read it, who seeks out strays. God also "guides" and "leads" and "keeps" which speaks to the issue of discipleship. In the last verse is a powerful image of God and of baptism:

*You are a mountain from which there comes a fountain
So let its water wash my sins away.*

The contradictions of life and Lent can be found expressed quite subtly in country music and sometimes may need to be voiced in order to be seen. Indeed, I believe that the best country music, theologically, is that which is not explicitly religious. Such a case is Kris Kristofferson's "Help Me Make It Through The Night." It begins with a plea to a companion to "take the ribbon from your hair/Shake it loose and let it fall/Layin' soft upon my skin/Like the shadows on the wall." At one point the songwriter says "I don't care who's right or wrong/I don't try to understand/Let the devil take tomorrow/Lord tonight I need a friend."

If one stopped there, the song might deserve the kind of blast Albert Outler gave it as "defiant hedonism" and "self-conscious a-moralism." Outler's wonderful expertise on the eighteenth century and his lack of it about working people in the twentieth failed to hear the chorus:

*Yesterday is dead and gone
And tomorrow's out of sight
And it's sad to be alone
Help me make it through the night.*

It should also be noted that the verse Outler takes exception to is no longer addressed to the companion but ends with the line: "Lord, tonight I need a friend." In fact, a good case can be made that while the first verse and chorus are addressed to the companion, the last ones are addressed to God. This is not "defiant hedonism," it is despair. It

is not “self-conscious a-moralism” it is bankrupt desperation. Yet, the song implicitly says that there is something, finally, worth surviving the night for, and a God to pray to. This is the place for the preacher who knows that Lent is built around Sundays that anticipate Easter. Presumptive preaching that fails to listen to the hurt and the imperative to survive that abound in country music misses an opportunity to address the gospel to millions of people who believe it sings their song.

Surely, however, Lent still has room for humor if at no other time than on some celebrative Sunday. One should not miss the comical opportunity to deal with a song like Ray Stevens “Mississippi Squirrel Revival” where some kids accidentally let loose one of those furry creatures during morning worship at “The First Self-Righteous Church of Pascagoula.” As the squirrel scampers through the congregation scrambling up pants legs and dresses, the members believe that some radical visitation of the Spirit has come upon them and begin to confess sin even to the point of naming names! Such humor would doubtlessly relieve some congregations anticipating another long homily, but such a song can be the occasion for entry into a more serious discussion of Lenten themes of sin and penitence, an entry now made more seemly by a pastor who knows that contradiction is a profound source of humor and points to yet deeper incongruities of life.

Palm Passion Sunday

The more recent reemphasis to combine Palm Sunday and the passion is altogether appropriate. Preaching about the triumphal entry into Jerusalem without dealing with the passion is a misrepresentation of the day and the faith. To wave the palms without the passion, and to pretend not to see the arrow flying through the air relentlessly aimed toward the one oblivious to the winging death, is no picture of Jesus who “set his face” to go to Jerusalem. This short-lived celebration is a foretaste of the victory to come, to be sure, but it is set immediately before treachery, betrayal, desolation, and crucifixion.

Willie Nelson sang “The Troublemaker.” It speaks to the praise that accompanied Jesus’ entry among the young folks, but witnesses even more to the shift of mood that characterized the turning of the week toward torture and death.

*I could tell the moment that I saw him
He was nothing but the trouble-makin’ kind
And his motley group of friends
Had nothing but rebellion on their minds.*

Willie goes on to record the way this troublemaker has “rejected the establishment,” that “he’s never held a job” and that he mainly travels “from town to town stirring up the young folks/Til they’re nothing but a disrespectful mob.” The song tells us that he never signed up for the army to serve “his country like we all have done,” but that he would “rather wear his sandals and his flowers/While others wage the war that must be won.” And then comes the last verse:

*They arrested him last week and found him guilty
And sentenced him to die but that’s no great loss
Friday they will take him to a place called Calvary
And hang that troublemaker to a cross.*

Still, Holy Week has hope and the affirmations in country music are rich with “inspite of” and “nevertheless” songs. Wynona Judd sings Paul Kennerley’s “Live with Jesus,” where the lyrics know hard living but also hope.

*Seen a lot of trouble at my door
I never known a day when I ain’t been pore
But I’m gonna live with Jesus in the end.*

Maundy Thursday

The Last Supper, the betrayal, the arrest, the trial and the torment open themselves to an incredibly wide range of country music songs, though most of them are not expressions of faith and some are ambiguous in content. Nevertheless, country music deals with hard times and with people who do not win. Thursday’s Jesus can speak to such folks even when the songs are mixed in message and practice . . . as if somehow Jesus would worry about the company he keeps. Garth Brooks’ “I got friends in low places” certainly speaks to the marginal people Jesus sought out. Even if the preacher does have to say that Jesus didn’t deal with his Palm Sunday ruining of a “black tie affair” by seeking solace in a place “where whiskey drowns/ And the beer chases my blues away.” But in such places Jesus would certainly appear.

Holly Dunn sings a song that speaks of those who don’t fit and have no place to lay their heads:

*Oh she’s living underneath a bridge that goes
to nowhere
In a cardboard box that stands on hope alone
Sleeping on the ground
She dreams about a place that’s safe and warm
But where do you go when no place is home.*

Then, there’s that wonderful song done by the Gatlin Brothers called the “Midnight Choir.” Not only does it depict the plight of the homeless, but reports an eye-opening eucharist that poses a question sharply awaiting an Easter response.

*The doors to the mission open at seven
And the soup will be ready about nine
Right now it’s six-thirty
They’re ragged and dirty
They’re standin’ and sittin’ and layin’ in line
First they’ll do a little singin’
Then hear a little preachin’
And get saved for the third time this week
A bowl of soup later and a pat on the shoulder
And by midnight they’re back on the street.*

From the mission they find an alley and “an old buddy with a bottle of heaven” that means everything/One bottle for four Thank God someone scored/And now the midnight choir starts to sing:

*Will they have Mogen David in heaven....oh yeah
Dear Lord, we'd all like to know
Will they have Mogen David in heaven....sweet Jesus
If they don't, who the hell wants to go?*

I hope the moralisms of preachers are not aroused by such surface profanation, one that covers a deeply sacred struggle which touches everyone. It is, moreover, a paraphrase of a deeply biblical question: Is there a balm in Gilead? Is there healing? One must remember here, too, that country music, like theology, is not univocal, and more is being said than is being said. Remember, the enemy at the Last Supper was not those suffering some genetic thirst, it was not the poor searching for balm, it was not the few sitting in confusion before Christ and the mysterious events that would befall him and them in the next three days. Yes, for the Midnight Choir Mogen David meant the quieting of jangled nerves yearning for a fix, but it also takes on ultimacy for the healing of the nations. To see into the tacitly understood faith of people who do not engage in the whipsaws of academic hermeneutics but rather who cope and survive and, strangely, hope in God is to witness a trust, or at least the yearning for a trust, that is finally the only foundation any of us truly has. If there is finally no answer, then, indeed, who the hell wants to go?

Crucifixion and Resurrection

I place these together because finally they are the pattern of history and the rhythm of Christian existence. Country music can speak to such with unusual power not only because of the crucifixions that occur daily to people who listen to such music but because of a durable hope that the last word is yet to be spoken. And you find this hope on a host of Golgothas.

Sharon Vaughn wrote a song entitled the "Y'all Come Back Saloon" about a woman who sang to tortured people whose favorite offering was "the losers evening prayer":

*She played tamborine with a silver jingle
And she must have known the words to a million tunes
But the one most requested by the man she knew as
"Cowboy"
Was the late night benediction at the Y'all Come Back
Saloon.*

Today some people see themselves on crosses of lost jobs and lost farms, hung there by principalities and powers over which they have no control. Perhaps their deepest hope is that these have been defeated because their own power and resources are no match for such terrors. Listen to Stephanie Davis' song, "Wolves":

*Charlie Barton and his family
Stopped today to say goodbye
He said the bank was takin' over
The last few years were just too dry
And I promised that I'd visit*

*When they found a place in town
Then I spent a long time thinkin'
'Bout the ones the wolves pulled down.*

The resurrection reveals to us the future and the hope of the creation. It is the victory of Christ over the powers, of life over death, and the ultimate word of grace for the reconciliation of the world. As the people of the resurrection we are called to discipleship to live the practices of a renewed people. As forgiven people we gain strength from this reconciliation. We exist with the freedom of forgiveness and in the Spirit's power of the resurrection. Wayland Holyfield and Richard Leigh sing the implications of Easter, the lived hope of a theology of failure:

*Gonna hold who needs holdin', mend what needs mendin'
Walk what needs walkin' though it means an extra mile.
Pray what needs prayin', say what needs sayin'
Cause we're only here for a little while.
Let me love like I'll never see tomorrow,
Treat each day as though it's borrowed,
Like its precious as a child,
Take my hand, let us reach out to each other,
Cause we're only here for a little while.*

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