

“How Long to Sing This Song?”

Sermon for week 5 of the Lenten journey

Faith Mennonite Church

9 March 2008

Gerald W. Schlabach

We enter the fifth week of Lent. Imagine being on a six- or seven-week journey – a literal journey, a long, long hike. At about this point on the journey your enthusiasm, your energy, begins to sag. You’re still at least a week away from what you think will be a big party, celebrating your arrival. Never mind that Palm Sunday may dash your hopes. You are still a week away from even that illusory burst of energy.

That’s where we are in Lent. That’s where we would be even without the terrible premature layer of grief that our congregation has recently experienced, like an untimely preview of Christ’s own passion.

We are living somewhere in between, somewhere on the journey, we’re not quite sure where. And our Biblical texts do not let us forget. With Ezekiel, we find ourselves in a field of dry bones, yet hear God’s promise of life, breathing hope and spirit into our own sagging steps. With Mary and Martha, grieving the death of their brother Lazarus, we wonder why Jesus has made us wait, yet we cannot quite give up our faith in his promise of miraculous life. And then with Lazarus – wonder of wonders, alive! – we discover that we still must wait a little longer – for Lazarus brought back from the dead lives not in a resurrected body like the one that God will soon give to Jesus, but in a merely resuscitated body that will again decay, while Lazarus awaits his final resurrection hope.

In all of these ways, Lent and the Biblical texts for this day remind us: The groaning that Joetta talked about in her sermon last week may not always be so poignant as our groaning for the loss of our friend and brother Mike Schrock – but it is never entirely absent from the Christian life either.

All the same, sometimes Christians need permission to groan. Sometimes we need permission to name our doubts in the presence of God, not because we have turned away from God, but because we trust God so much that, like the Psalmist, we know there is no better place to speak our minds and lay open our hearts with brute honesty than in God’s presence. This is a lesson I have found that I need to put before my university students – that honest questioning and shaking our fist at God can actually be a sign of deep faith and trust. And one place I have turned for help in conveying this lesson is the music of the band U2 and the witness of its lead singer Bono.

Patty Friesen has preached from the U2 catalog before, but here is a quick primer on the band for beginners: U2 began in Dublin, Ireland in the 1970s. Three of the four band members were part of the charismatic movement, teenagers attending a church called Shalom Fellowship. Simultaneously, though, they were also part of the avant-garde art and drama scene in Dublin. And right there is a clue. From the very beginning, they were living in between, trying to find a space between the demands of their faith and the

pressures (but also the opportunities) of the larger culture. The struggle came to a crisis after only a couple of years, when their congregation told them they had to choose – the church or rock and roll?

The three Christian members of U2 chose the riskier road – insisting that they could live out their faith while becoming a secular rock and roll band. As their career has progressed, U2 never really became part of the “contemporary Christian music” industry. Instead, their choice has been to communicate their faith subtly – through poetry, not piety – in hopes of reaching a broader audience.

Using U2 as a case study, then, I unpack lots of different lessons with students in my Christian morality course. The band represents the challenge of articulating Christian faith in the language of a host culture, any host culture, but in this case popular culture. They voice the faith of the Psalmist, caught between praise and lament, hope and disappointment. They exemplify the faith of the honest believer, caught between the “already” and the “not yet” of God’s kingdom – already inaugurated by Jesus, yet obviously not yet here in its fullness. And for us here this morning, they sing and cry out the faith of the Christian on the journey of Lent.

“40”

War, 1983

I waited patiently for the Lord.
He inclined and heard my cry.
He brought me up out of the pit
Out of the miry clay.

I will sing, sing a new song.
I will sing, sing a new song.
How long to sing this song?
How long to sing this song?
How long, how long, how long
How long to sing this song?

You set my feet upon a rock
And made my footsteps firm.
Many will see, many will see and hear.

I will sing, sing a new song.
I will sing, sing a new song
I will sing, sing a new song.
I will sing, sing a new song
How long to sing this song?
How long to sing this song?
How long to sing this song?
How long to sing this song?

The song “40” is deceptively simple. The lyrics are far more spare and uncomplicated than most U2 songs. They are simple enough, in that they work as an audience sing-along. For many years this was the band’s signature closing. The title “40” refers to Psalm 40, which inspired most of the lyrics. Yet the song incorporates a few key lines from yet another Psalm, Psalm 16. From Psalm 40: I will sing a new song. Praise! Celebration! But Psalm 16 applies a literary twist, a shadow: How long, oh Lord? How long to sing this song?

These few simple lines capture the complex theology – indeed the complicated Christian experience – of living caught between the times, between the unjust and demoralizing old order, and the new world that God is bringing.

Not surprisingly, then, Bono also sings, “I still haven’t found what I’m looking for.”

Is it OK for a Christian to say this? When the album Joshua Tree came out, some evangelical Christians took this song title as proof that U2 had lost it, or never had it – true Christian faith, that is. Aren't we supposed to have blessed assurance, Jesus is mine, no questions asked?

There is another Christian voice, eminently orthodox and equally sure that salvation is through God's grace alone, but hardly surprised when Lenten longing turns out to last a lifetime. If you know nothing else of Saint Augustine's writings – or if you hesitate to quote this Christian "heavy" on anything else – you probably know (and may even have quoted) the famous line from the first paragraph of Augustine's Confessions: God, "you have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in You."

"I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For"
The Joshua Tree, 1987

I have climbed the highest mountains
I have run through the fields
Only to be with you
Only to be with you.

I have run, I have crawled
I have scaled these city walls
These city walls
Only to be with you.

But I still haven't found
What I'm looking for.
But I still haven't found
What I'm looking for.

I have kissed honey lips
Felt the healing in her finger tips
It burned like fire
This burning desire.

I have spoke with the tongue of angels
I have held the hand of a devil

It was warm in the night
I was cold as a stone.

But I still haven't found
What I'm looking for.
But I still haven't found
What I'm looking for.

I believe in the Kingdom Come
Then all the colours will bleed into one
Bleed into one.
But yes, I'm still running.

You broke the bonds
And you loosed the chains
Carried the cross of my shame
Oh my shame, you know I believe it.

But I still haven't found
What I'm looking for.
But I still haven't found
What I'm looking for. ...

Lenten longing opens up to Lenten finding in unexpected places. In a series of concerts and albums in the 1990s, U2 explored – like the wisdom seeker of Ecclesiastes in the Old Testament – the vanity ("all is vanity") of consumer culture, and the ultimate poverty of media hype, including the hype that surrounded U2 itself. Yet as one song of that artistic era put it, they still held out hope that even amid the spiritual desert of modern culture, they might find "the baby Jesus under the garbage."

God's grace works like this, after all. Jaded by the cultural garbage of our own making, we're still God's beloved. However scarred, our manufactured, manhandled world, is still God's good creation

As I play one more song, then, look for the stanza or line that you can make into your own Lenten prayer.

“Yahweh”
How to Dismantle an Atomic Bomb, 2004

Take these shoes	
Click clacking down some dead end street	Yahweh, Yahweh
Take these shoes	Always pain before a child is born
And make them fit	Yahweh, Yahweh
Take this shirt	Still I'm waiting for the dawn
Polyester white trash made in nowhere	
Take this shirt	Still waiting for the dawn, the sun is coming up
And make it clean, clean	The sun is coming up on the ocean
Take this soul	This love is like a drop in the ocean
Stranded in some skin and bones	This love is like a drop in the ocean
Take this soul	
And make it sing	Yahweh, Yahweh
	Always pain before a child is born
Yahweh, Yahweh	Yahweh, tell me now
Always pain before a child is born	Why the dark before the dawn?
Yahweh, Yahweh	
Still I'm waiting for the dawn	Take this city
	A city should be shining on a hill
Take these hands	Take this city
Teach them what to carry	If it be your will
Take these hands	What no man can own, no man can take
Don't make a fist	Take this heart
Take this mouth	Take this heart
So quick to criticize	Take this heart
Take this mouth	And make it break
Give it a kiss	

If this were my classroom, I would now ask: what line did you find especially insightful or intriguing? Perhaps you'll want to bring that thought to our time of congregational sharing in a few minutes. For now I would invite you to join your own prayerful reflection with the community of faith whose journey stretches from the ancient Psalmist to the contemporary musician, and on to our own motley band of believers, somewhere in the middle of Lent.

Hymn: "From the depths" #136 HWB
or
Psalm 130

Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord.
Lord, hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications!
If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand?
But there is forgiveness with you, so that you may be revered.
I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I hope;
my soul waits for the Lord more than those who watch for the morning, more than those who
watch for the morning.
O Israel, hope in the Lord! For with the Lord there is steadfast love, and with him is great power
to redeem.
It is [the Lord] who will redeem [God's people] from all [their] iniquities.