

Psalm 137:1-4
Hebrews 11:1-3,13-16
September 3, '17

SECULAR SONGS THAT SPEAK TO THE SOUL
“OVER THE RAINBOW”

ONE OF MY FAVORITE CHURCH STORIES IS ONE THAT I FIRST HEARD IN SEMINARY.

IT'S A STORY THAT HIT HOME TO SOMEONE LIVING IN KENTUCKY & LOOKING FORWARD TO WORKING IN THE CHURCH.

A YOUNG PREACHER WAS CALLED TO A MID-SIZE CHURCH JUST OUTSIDE LOUISVILLE.

ON HIS FIRST SUNDAY IN THE PULPIT, HE PREACHED ABOUT THE EVILS OF GAMBLING.

FOLLOWING THE SERVICE, THE CLERK OF SESSION APPROACHED HIM AND TOLD HIM HE'D BEST BE CAREFUL IN HIS SERMONS BECAUSE THERE WERE SEVERAL MEMBERS OF THE CONGREGATION WHO WORKED AT CHURCHILL DOWNS.

THE PASTOR TOLD THE CLERK HE APPRECIATED THE WARNING AND SO THE NEXT SUNDAY, HE PREACHED ABOUT THE EVILS OF ALCOHOL.

AGAIN, AFTER THE SERVICE, THE CLERK TOLD HIM THAT – LIVING IN LOUISVILLE - THERE WERE A LOT OF MEMBERS WHO WORKED AT A LOCAL DISTILLERY & IT WOULDN'T BE A GOOD IDEA TO OFFEND THEM.

THE PASTOR WAS A BIT FRUSTRATED BUT AGAIN EXPRESSED HIS APPRECIATION.

THE THIRD SUNDAY THE PASTOR PREACHED AGAINST THE EVILS OF SMOKING AND, AS YOU MIGHT GUESS, THE CLERK TOLD HIM THERE WERE SEVERAL TOBACCO FARMERS IN THE CHURCH.

THE FOLLOWING SUNDAY, SHOWING THAT HE'D FINALLY LEARNED HIS LESSON, THAT YOUNG PREACHER'S SERMON FOCUSED ON THE EVILS OF FISHING BEYOND UNITED STATES TERRITORIAL WATERS!

I'VE THOUGHT ABOUT THAT STORY SEVERAL TIMES OVER THE PAST MONTH, RECOGNIZING THAT -EVEN THOUGH IT'S BEYOND MY COMPREHENSION - THERE MAY BE FOLKS HERE WHO DON'T REALLY CARE FOR THE MUSIC OF THE BEATLES, STEVIE WONDER OR U2.

SO, LIKE THAT YOUNG PREACHER, I'VE FINALLY LEARNED MY LESSON & TODAY OUR FOCUS IS ON JUDY GARLAND'S "*OVER THE RAINBOW*" FROM "*THE WIZARD OF OZ.*"

SURELY THAT'S A SAFE CHOICE, ISN'T IT?

NO ONE – I MEAN NO ONE – CAN REALLY HAVE A PROBLEM WITH THAT, CAN THEY?

WELL, BELIEVE IT OR NOT, PEOPLE *HAVE* HAD A PROBLEM WITH THAT SONG – AND PERHAPS THOSE YOU WOULD LEAST SUSPECT!

THERE WERE THE STUDIO EXECUTIVES AT MGM, THE FILM'S PRODUCER, THE FILM'S DIRECTOR, THE MUSIC PUBLISHER & EVEN THE LYRICIST WHO WROTE THE WORDS OF THE SONG!

BECAUSE OF ALL THAT DISAPPROVAL, THE SONG WAS VERY CLOSE TO NOT EVEN BEING INCLUDED IN "*THE WIZARD OF OZ.*"

HAROLD ARLEN, THOUGH, HAD WRITTEN A TUNE HE WOULDN'T GIVE UP ON.

EVEN THOUGH HIS LYRICIST, YIP HARBURG, WASN'T FOND OF THE TUNE, ARLEN SIMPLY WOULDN'T LET IT GO.

THEY ARGUED ABOUT IT BACK & FORTH & FINALLY CAME UP WITH A UNIQUE WAY OF DECIDING WHETHER OR NOT TO PROCEED WITH IT.

THEY WENT TO ONE OF HARBURG’S OLDEST & DEAREST FRIENDS TO GET HIS OPINION.

HARBURG HAD MET THIS FRIEND WHEN THEY WERE IN HIGH SCHOOL TOGETHER.

STUDENTS WERE GIVEN SEAT ASSIGNMENTS BY ALPHABET & YIP, WHOSE LAST NAME STARTED WITH AN “H,” WAS SEATED NEXT TO IRA, WHOSE LAST NAME STARTED WITH A “G,” – IRA GERSHWIN.

HAROLD & YIP VISITED IRA IN HIS HOME & HAROLD PLAYED HIS TUNE FOR THE ELDER OF THE FAMED GERSHWIN BROTHERS.

HE PLAYED IT GRANDLY & SYMPHONICALLY, THINKING THAT WOULD WORK BEST.

GERSHWIN WASN’T IMPRESSED.

BUT THEN HE ASKED HAROLD TO SIMPLY PICK IT OUT WITH ONE FINGER ON THE PIANO.

ON HEARING IT THAT WAY, BOTH GERSHWIN & HARBURG WERE SOLD & HARBURG SET TO WORK ON THE LYRICS OF WHAT WOULD BE VOTED “*THE SONG OF THE CENTURY*” BY THE RECORDING INDUSTRY ASSOCIATION – “*OVER THE RAINBOW.*”

THERE’S A LONGING IN THE SONG FOR SOMETHING ELSE – SOMETHING BIGGER, SOMETHING BETTER, SOMETHING BRIGHTER – THAN WHAT IS NOW BEING EXPERIENCED.

IT’S A SONG OF HOPE & ASSURANCE THAT, EVEN IN THE MIDST OF DARK CLOUDS & FRIGHTENING STORMS, THERE’S SOMETHING TO LOOK FORWARD TO ON THE OTHER SIDE.

I THINK BOTH PASSAGES WE’VE READ THIS MORNING SPEAK TO THIS.

FOR THOSE FAMILIAR WITH THE MUSICAL “GODSPELL,” YOU RECOGNIZED THOSE WORDS OF THE 137TH PSALM.

THE BABYLONIANS HAD DESTROYED THE TEMPLE IN JERUSALEM & THE PEOPLE HAD BEEN TAKEN INTO EXILE.

IT WAS A HORRIFYING EXPERIENCE FOR THEM – BEING DISPLACED FROM THEIR HOMELAND & EVERYTHING THEY’D KNOWN & LOVED.

ON THE ONE HAND, THEIR CAPTORS TRIED TO MAKE THEM ADAPT TO A NEW WAY OF LIVING AND ON THE OTHER, THEY TAUNTED THEM & MOCKED THEM.

THEY DEMANDED THEY SING SOME OF THE SONGS THEY USED TO SING BACK HOME – TREATING THE ISRAELITES LIKE CIRCUS ANIMALS WHO WOULD PROVIDE ENTERTAINMENT FOR THE BABYLONIANS DESPITE THE FACT THAT THEY WERE BEING HELD CAPTIVE IN A FOREIGN LAND.

THE ISRAELITES TRIED TO HANG ONTO HOPE AS THEY LOOKED TO THE FUTURE, EVEN IN THE MIDST OF THE DARK CLOUDS & FRIGHTENING STORMS ALL AROUND THEM.

SO, TOO, IN THE PASSAGE WE’VE READ FROM HEBREWS.

HERE WE’RE GIVEN ONE OF THE GREATEST DECLARATIONS OF FAITH EVER UTTERED.

“NOW FAITH IS THE ASSURANCE OF THINGS HOPED FOR, THE CONVICTION OF THINGS NOT SEEN.”

LAST SUNDAY, WE TALKED ABOUT THE WAY *THAT* WEEK’S SONG CONNECTED WITH THE *PREVIOUS* WEEK’S.

I THINK WE CAN DO THE SAME THING AGAIN.

WHEN U2 SINGS *“I STILL HAVEN’T FOUND WHAT I’M LOOKING FOR,”* I THINK THERE’S SENSE OF WHAT *“OVER THE RAINBOW”* IS FOCUSED ON & WHAT THIS PASSAGE FROM HEBREWS ADDRESSES AS WELL.

THERE'S ANOTHER WORLD THAT STANDS IN THE FUTURE – A WORLD THAT U2 IS LOOKING FOR – A WORLD THEY BELIEVE IN & A WORLD THEY HOPE TO EXPERIENCE.

SO, TOO, WITH THOSE OF WHOM WE READ IN HEBREWS.

IN BETWEEN THE VERSES WE READ THIS MORNING, WE HEAR OF ABEL, ENOCH & NOAH – ABRAHAM, ISAAC, JACOB & SARAH.

THE WRITER SAYS *“THEY DIED IN FAITH WITHOUT HAVING RECEIVED THE PROMISES, BUT FROM A DISTANCE THEY SAW AND GREETED THEM.*

THEY CONFESSED THAT THEY WERE STRANGERS AND FOREIGNERS ON THE EARTH, FOR PEOPLE WHO SPEAK IN THIS WAY MAKE IT CLEAR THAT THEY ARE SEEKING A HOMELAND...THEY DESIRED A BETTER COUNTRY, A HEAVENLY ONE.”

THIS IS THE ULTIMATE PROCLAMATION OF FAITH.

IT'S A FAITH THAT FREES US FROM THE FEAR OF WHATEVER DIFFICULTIES STAND BEFORE US.

IT'S A FAITH THAT LIVES IN THE ASSURANCE THAT – AS PAUL SAYS – *“THERE IS NOTHING THAT WILL EVER SEPARATE US FROM THE LOVE OF GOD IN CHRIST JESUS OUR LORD.”*

YES, WE HAVE FAITH THAT IN THIS LIFE A GOOD OUTCOME AWAITS US ON THE OTHER SIDE OF OUR DIFFICULTIES.

WE HAVE FAITH THAT NO MATTER HOW PAINFUL THINGS MIGHT BE FOR US RIGHT NOW, GOD HAS SOMETHING BIGGER, BETTER & BRIGHTER IN STORE FOR OUR FUTURE.

THERE ARE THOUSANDS UPON THOUSANDS IN HOUSTON RIGHT NOW WHO HAVE FAITH THAT THE OVERWHELMING FLOOD WATERS THAT THREATEN THEM WILL EVENTUALLY SUBSIDE & NO MATTER HOW LONG IT TAKES, LIFE CAN BE RE-BUILT.

WE LIVE WITH THAT SAME KIND OF FAITH – FAITH THAT IN THE MIDST OF ALL OF LIFE’S FLOOD OF TROUBLES, THE PROVERBIAL WATERS WILL EVENTUALLY SUBSIDE & LIFE CAN START ANEW.

YES, THAT’S THE KIND OF FAITH THAT LEADS US TO LOOK WITH HOPE INTO THE FUTURE.

BUT THERE’S EVEN MORE.

WE HAVE A FAITH THAT ALSO LOOKS BEYOND THIS LIFE INTO WHAT THE WRITER OF HEBREWS CALLS “*A BETTER COUNTRY – A HEAVENLY ONE.*”

SOMETIMES IT SEEMS OUTRAGEOUS FOR US TO MAINTAIN HOPE IN A BETTER TOMORROW.

SOMETIMES IT SEEMS TOO FAR-FETCHED TO THINK THAT THINGS CAN POSSIBLY TURN AROUND FOR US.

I THINK THAT’S WHERE THE DEEPEST MESSAGE OF “*OVER THE RAINBOW*” COMES ALIVE & IT DOES SO IN A STUNNING & UNFORGETTABLE FASHION.

YIP HARBURG, THE LYRICIST, GREW UP IN AN ORTHODOX JEWISH HOME IN NEW YORK.

HIS PARENTS WERE RUSSIAN-JEWISH IMMIGRANTS.

THE MUSIC COMPOSER, HAROLD ARLEN, WAS FROM A JEWISH FAMILY FROM LITHUANIA.

THIS SONG IS FROM 1939.

REFLECT ON THAT FOR A MOMENT.

A SONG OF HOPE WRITTEN BY TWO YOUNG JEWISH MEN IN 1939.

JEWS IN EUROPE WERE COMING UNDER INCREASING HOSTILITY.

THEIR FREEDOMS WERE BEING RESTRICTED & EVENTUALLY ABOLISHED.

THEIR DIGNITY WAS SYSTEMATICALLY BEING STRIPPED AWAY.

IF YIP HARBURG WAS DIPPING DEEP INTO HIS JEWISH CONSCIOUSNESS, THE SONG TAKES ON AN ENTIRELY DIFFERENT MEANING FOR HIM TO TALK ABOUT A WISH TO “*WAKE UP WHERE THE CLOUDS ARE FAR BEHIND ME – WHERE TROUBLES MELT LIKE LEMON DROPS...*”

AND THOUGH HE WOULDN'T HAVE KNOWN IT AT THE TIME, HOW PAINFULLY PROPHETIC ARE THE WORDS WHICH FOLLOW – “*AWAY ABOVE THE CHIMNEY TOPS...*” WHEN WE CONSIDER THE HORRORS OF THE HOLOCAUST & THE CHIMNEYS OF AUSCHWITZ & ALL THE OTHER CONCENTRATION CAMPS THAT WERE JUST ON THE HORIZON.

IT WAS AS DARK A TIME FOR THE WORLD AS ANY OF US HAS EVER KNOWN.

THERE ARE TIMES – PERHAPS EVEN NOW – WHEN IT FEELS AS THOUGH WE STAND ON THE EDGE OF DARK TIMES AGAIN.

THIS SONG CAN SERVE AS A REMINDER OF THE PROMISE OF BETTER DAYS AHEAD.

WE MAY FIND IT DIFFICULT TO LOOK PAST THE CURRENT STORMS OF LIFE – WHETHER IT BE IN OUR PERSONAL LIFE OR THE LIFE OF OUR NATION OR THE WORLD.

IT MAY SEEM AS THOUGH WE'LL NEVER GET THROUGH TO THE OTHER SIDE.

HERE AGAIN, THIS SONG CAN SERVE AS A REMINDER THAT, NO MATTER HOW IMPROBABLE – NO MATTER HOW UNLIKELY – NO MATTER HOW SEEMINGLY IMPOSSIBLE IT IS TO BELIEVE THAT DREAMS REALLY DO COME TRUE, NOTHING IS OUTSIDE THE REALM OF POSSIBILITY.

REMEMBER THOSE JEWISH EXILES OF THAT PSALM WE READ THIS MORNING – THOSE EXILES WHO WERE CARTED OFF TO BABYLON AFTER WATCHING THEIR HOMELAND DESTROYED.

THEY WERE MOCKED & TAUNTED BY THEIR OPPRESSORS WHO DEMANDED THEY “*SING US ONE OF THOSE SONGS OF ZION.*”

RETURNING TO THEIR HOMELAND WAS LITTLE MORE THAN A DREAM – A SEEMINGLY IMPOSSIBLE DREAM THAT WOULD NEVER COME TRUE.

THE WORDS OF YIP HARBURG ARE WORDS THEY MIGHT HAVE SUNG THEMSELVES WHILE LANGUISHING IN EXILE - “*THERE’S A LAND THAT I’VE HEARD OF ONCE IN A LULLABY?*”

COULD YIP HARBURG HAVE EVER CONCEIVED THAT HIS WORDS WOULD BECOME REALITY?

AND YET THEY DID.

LESS THAN A DECADE LATER – JUST NINE YEARS AFTER HE PENNED THOSE WORDS - THE NATION OF ISRAEL WAS REBORN IN 1948.

NOW THERE’S “*A LAND THAT I HEARD OF ONCE IN A LULLABY!*”

MAY THE FULFILLMENT OF THAT DREAM BE A GUIDE FOR ALL OF US.

NO MATTER HOW DIFFICULT THINGS ARE RIGHT NOW – SOMETHING BRIGHTER AWAITS US.

“*NOW FAITH IS THE ASSURANCE OF THINGS HOPED FOR, THE CONVICTION OF THINGS NOT SEEN*” – “*THE DREAMS THAT YOU DARE TO DREAM REALLY DO COME TRUE.*”

LISTEN – PERHAPS IN A NEW WAY - TO THAT PROMISE. AMEN.

(PLAY SONG – “*OVER THE RAINBOW*”)

*The Reverend Dr. Dennis R. Davenport
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“Over the Rainbow”

**Somewhere over the rainbow
way up high
There's a land that I heard of
once in a lullaby
Somewhere over the rainbow
skies are blue
And the dreams that you dare to
dream really do come true**

**Someday I'll wish upon a star
And wake up where the clouds are far
Behind me
Where troubles melt like lemon drops
Away above the chimney tops
That's where you'll find me**

**Somewhere over the rainbow
bluebirds fly
Birds fly over the rainbow.
Why then, oh, why can't I?**

**If happy little bluebirds fly
Beyond the rainbow.
Why, oh, why can't I?**

E. Harburg, Harold Arlen