
Jazz and Jesus

A sermon preached by the Reverend Stephanie Nagley on February 7, 2016 at St. Luke's Bethesda

In the early morning of January 12, 1819 Henry Latrobe disembarked a ship, anchored off the levee, in New Orleans. He was fresh from rebuilding the U.S. Capitol in Washington D.C. and eager to see the South's largest city. The fog was so thick, he wrote, he couldn't see anything but hear the noises of the city, a cacophony of incessant, rapid fire of tongues.

Latrobe approached the center of the noise to find an open air market. He estimated there were at least five hundred shops, seller and buyers of every kind, people of all colors, round pale Yankees and grizzled Spaniards, men and women, "all hues of brown and all classes of faces", black slaves and the white slave owners, each shouting louder than the next to be heard.

Everything in New Orleans, wrote Latrobe, had an odd look. The largest and most cosmopolitan city in the U.S., New Orleans was established by France in 1718, in the middle of a mosquito infest swamp, briefly ruled by Spain, reclaimed by France, it's port attracting visitors from all over the world, invaded by American flatboat men and finally sold to the U.S. in 1803 Louisiana Purchase.

New Orleans the home of the French, French Canadians, French Haitians, the Americans and those of mixed race. The landing place for people from the Balkans, from Germany, China, Malaysia, and Greece in the land that originally belonged to the Choctaw and Natchez Indians.

New Orleans was also center of the southern slave trade with two dozen slave auction houses. Twice a year the grand ballrooms of the two largest hotels became showrooms for human merchandise. It also was home for the most prosperous free people of color in the South, the Creoles, descendants of the French, African and Native Americans.

From this cauldron of humanity would come America's most distinctive music. Jazz.

<https://youtu.be/l5VDMbeBsDQ?list=RDS7iBtY0FIY>

I think Jesus would like Jazz.

The music that came out of the cacophony and colors of humanity.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jrOHqEKEBXs>

I think he would have liked the drum beat of the slaves dancing in Congo Square. I think he would have like the way those polyrhythms eventually married with the music from the European instruments, the fiddles and Jews harp, the tambourines and triangles alongside rattles and drums and banjos.

I think he would like jazz, a music created out of the complexity of our human condition. By the 1890's three kinds of music filtered into the city and gave birth to jazz.

From the black musicians in the Midwest came the practice of ragging or ragtime music.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OkDb_lxgono

The black refugees from the Mississippi Delta brought their unique blend of Baptist Church music and the blues. The church music praying to God and the blues praying to what's human or as one musician put it: 'One was saying, 'O God, let me go' and the other was saying 'oh, mister, let me be.'"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TPA77O-18h4&list=PLprivafWGU3HpLQg0teGAOgUUbfUk6G1>

"There was, as yet, no name for the music black and Creole musicians began to play together at the dawn of the new 20th century. Some older musicians would call what they played "ragtime" to the end. But the eventual result would be a brand new music — not spirituals or the blues or ragtime or any of the other kinds of music heard in the streets of New Orleans, one musician remembered, 'but everything all at once, each one putting something over on the other.' Like the city that gave it birth, like the country that would soon embrace it, this new music would always be more than the sum of its parts."

(this overview of New Orleans and Jazz from Ken Burns

<http://www.pbs.org/jazz/>)

Jesus would like jazz. I'm sure he would like Bach, Beethoven, Mozart, and Mendelson, too, but jazz is his ministry.

The moan and the bounce, the improvisation, the rattle and rag and syncopation is the meeting place of heaven and earth. The trumpet, saxophone and trombone sound the yearn, and pain, the cries of the broken hearted and riffs of hope and possibility of God's dream.

On this last Sunday of the Epiphany, on this Mardi Gras Sunday, Jesus in on the mountain with Peter, James and John. This is the final push in his ministry. He's about to go back to Jerusalem where all hell will break loose. They went to the mountain on the eight days after he had told his followers of the troubles that were to come, of his suffering and that was to come. It was eight days ago that he asked them what the rumor was about him. He said, who do the people say that I am. One disciple spoke and said some think you are the return from the dead of John the Baptist. Someone else chimed in and said that some people think you're Elijah. Jesus asked them point blank, "Who do you say that I am?"

Peter, took a deep breath and swallowed. He knew what he was about to say would cast his lot forever. From that moment on he couldn't hide from Herod and all the powerful people who didn't want the world to change. From the moment his response left his mouth his lot was cast

with the lost and the lonely, people yearning to be free, people wanting the world to change. "Who do you say that I am?", Jesus asked. Peter said, "You are the Messiah of God".

It is the same question we asked in baptism and when we reaffirm those promises. Who do you say that I am? Given that assertion what are you willing to do in response? And we reply: I will say my prayers, break bread, continue to search and probe and question and doubt and wonder about my faith. I will stand with and for every human being. I will let the world know by what I say, and how live that love is the currency of my life.

Eight days, eight measures, eight beats. Eight is the number of a new creation, the eighth day is Easter, the baptismal font has eight sides, the cupola of the church has eight sides. Eight days is the birth, eight days is ragtime, church music and the blues rolled into one.

Eight days after he tells them what will happen in Jerusalem he goes to the mountain with Peter, James and John.

He may have been just trying to get his thoughts together, trying to find that last bit of courage to finish what he started.

I imagine that his prayers were somewhat like ours. Not the prayers that are said with closed eyes and head bowed but prayers said with eyes wide open looking on the country below spread out beneath that mountain and the memories of what he's seen and where he has been to now.

Prayers with eyes wide open remembering how a few weeks before a man named Jarius came running to him out of the crowd asking Jesus to heal his twelve-year-old daughter who was dying.

On the way to Jarius' house wading through the crowd, Jesus felt someone touch him. It was a woman who had suffered for years and Jesus said to her, "your faith has made you well".

Prayers with eyes wide open remembering a hungry crowd of 5,000 and the five loaves of bread and two fish it took to feed them.

Prayers with eyes wide open remembering the disciples he sent out to do the work he soon would not be able to do. He sent them out with nothing more than the shirts on their backs, as if to teach them that all we will need for this work of God's kingdom is the love and courage to be the love and courage of God in the world. To sing God's song and sway to God's beat.

As he was praying heaven came down to earth and earth touched heaven as it did when he was born and when he was baptized. And the glory of God shined and dazzled. Peter, James and John were sleepy but not too sleepy to see the change in Jesus and to see two people standing with Jesus and talking to him. It was Moses and Elijah, the ones brought the law and the prophetic vision of God to the earth. Talking with Jesus sharing that he was the one that was called to bring to completion the dream of God.

Moses gave us the law, the guideposts to living a good and loving life. Elijah was the wonder worker and the one who spoke out for God's dream. Moses went up the mountain to receive

the law. Elijah went back to that same mountain to hide from the wrath of Jezebel but God called him out of the cave and told him to get busy.

So now the three stand together: Jesus, Moses and Elijah composing the next movement of God, the jazz of God's kingdom.

Peter's reaction was to memorialize the moment, build a house and contain the magic. Then a cloud surrounded them. Heaven touched earth and they were terrified. From that cloud a voice saying once again, Listen to him.

And just as quickly as the dazzling and cloud appeared it disappeared. Jesus set his heart and path for Jerusalem where the worst will happen. There he will be arrested, tried and killed. But like the making of jazz, a music that came from different places and styles, the result would be more than the sum of its parts. Jesus' trial and death would result in a form the world had never known. After his death there is an eighth day, the eighth measure, the eighth note and the sounds of a new creation.

So this is our Mardi Gras celebration. This is our mountain top day. This is the music we make in the woof and warp of the human condition, the moans of the broken and the lost combining with the glad sounds of hope and trust that God's dream will one day be reality.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EbH3HJvh2N0>