

Preached by Rev. JF Hudson at Pilgrim Church: 4/27/08
Scripture: Revelation 18:21-23

“The Jazz of Faith, the Jazz of Life”

From the text: “...the great city will be thrown down, and will be found no more; and the sound of harpists and minstrels and of flutists and trumpeters will be heard in you no more.”

We don't usually hear much about the Book of Revelation, the text we heard from this morning. The last book of the Bible, Revelation is kind of like the Stephen King of biblical literature, a sprawling narrative that imagines the end of the world. Now I'm not going to crack open the apocalypse too much this morning but it is telling to note that the very first thing that marks the demise of Creation is the silencing of music, music: played by harpists and minstrels and flutists and trumpeters. We know the world is threatened because no one sings and no one plays. As one commentator noted, “The absence of music signals absolute desolation.”

No music—no life. A silent city--devoid of any music. I cannot imagine my life without song, without rhythm, without a joyful tapping of the feet or the enthusiastic singing of a hymn, the joyful notes of the Pilgrim Band, the soaring swell of the organ.

Music is like a heartbeat for life. When I went to New Orleans, the city that birthed jazz, to help rebuild after Katrina I fell in love with that musical genre. Folks died that awful August week almost four years ago; hundreds of thousands fled; levees busted open and a city was brought to its knees, an apocalypse if there ever was one and yet: one thing never stopped in the Crescent City and that is jazz. Clubs stayed open and played away, as a kind of faith, a denial of death.

Jazz, born in New Orleans around 1895, with deep roots in the black experience of slavery and gospel music and the blues. Jazz—America's most distinct contribution to world music. Jazz—so this day as we revel in the sacred music and jazz and elements of gospel and blues, I'm taking a bit of step out and drawing some parallels between jazz and faith and jazz and life, riffing if you will with the Pilgrim Band. Because music never dies.

Riff and life lesson #1: “One thing I like about jazz, kid, is that I don't know what's going to happen next. Do you?” --Bix Bierdebecke, jazz pianist

One of the first things I noticed about jazz as I got deeper into it, is the truth that when some jazz pieces are played the musician may never quite know just where the tune is going to end up. A song begins, a riff is offered and then each of the players picks up on a melody and takes off with it into directions unknown. They key then is to enjoy the musical ride, to trust that the song will hold together and that the band will arrive at its final musical destination even if that journey is a mystery of sorts.

A couple years back there was a great movie called “Parenthood” starring Steve Martin. It spoke to the total unpredictability of raising kids. In one scene a couple is at home in bed relaxing after a long day when one of the kids comes into their bedroom, announces that she feels sick, and then proceeds to throw up all over the room: on the floor, in the bathroom, in the bed. What’s telling is the response of the Mom and Dad. Mom is unfazed, gets up, takes a warm washcloth, comforts and cleans up the child and just keeps rolling. But Dad freaks out. His plan for a romantic evening with Mom is shot as he confronts the vomit all over the place. He feels overwhelmed by the sudden dislocation of his best laid plans. For the Mom, parenting is not about the end point, the plan; life is about the journey, about rolling with a very sick child and doing one’s best and then just cleaning up. For the Dad, parenting isn’t an unpredictable adventure to be embraced; instead it is far too often a scary and mysterious story that he tries to control but just cannot, like an ill child in the middle of the night.

In jazz, in life, in faith, I believe the key is to not hold on so tight, if you will, to a given outcome or destination. To enjoy the song while it plays and not worry about where it all ends up. Jazz has taught me that though God gives each of us the wonderful gift of life, none of us finally knows just where we will end up, do we? We zig, life zags. We plan, life interrupts. We’ve got the sheet music all laid out then God and life crashes in and tells us we may be headed in a wholly different direction, for the good sometimes, for the worse, but for sure. So perhaps one spiritual step in enjoying the life we have and not the life we planned is to not hold on so darn tight, not be so married to a specific end game or outcome, to let the song of our lives unfold as it is played, trusting that with God as the lead musician, we’ll get to where we need to. So Riff#1—we never quite know where we will end up. Can we thank God for this mystery?

Riff#2: “Music is your own experience, your thoughts, your wisdom. If you don’t live it, it won’t come out of your horn.” --Charlie Parker, jazz saxophonist

No one piece of music sounds exactly the same when it is played by different musicians. Each brings to a piece her certain style, his unique color and tone, a one of a kind melody. The song remains the same but the playing is all in the player, the artist, the interpreter. When I was in seminary the pastor at my home church was a disciple of an early 20th century theologian named Karl Bart, who in the course of his life as a scholar wrote a thirteen volume, six million word systematic theology. Now for Pastor Dick, Bart’s formulaic outline about God was the way to see God, the only way. I remember how impatient he’d get with me, this annoying and curious student who often debated with him about God. I thought Bart was right somewhat and yet I had to find my own song, my own path, my own interpretation of God. Dick could not do that for me nor Bart. I had to play that song myself.

In jazz, in life, in faith each of us learns of the story of God and Jesus but: each of us then must also, as artist, interpret that truth, that music. As I’ve gotten deeper into my faith I’ve come to believe that to be a believer is more akin to appreciating art than embracing a specific formula about God that everyone’s got to believe, a monolithic system that insists upon uniformity in faith. To me faith is jazz not math. Faith is a personal riff, a

special note, not just one song we've all got sing exactly the same. It's why I love the United Church of Christ which is more akin to a theological jazz band than say Roman Catholicism or Lutheranism or being a Baptist.

Jazz and music have taught me that when it comes to a system of beliefs, we've each got to play our own instruments, blaze our own paths, find our own God music. We all play in the same church band, if you will, but: we each play in our own way. We each hear God's song uniquely and I know I cannot sum up or contain God in just one way. So Riff#2—God writes the song of life but as the players we've got to find and interpret our own melody. Can we thank God for this faith diversity?

Riff#3—"Life is a lot like jazz...it's best when you improvise." --George Gershwin, jazz pianist and composer

A final lesson I've learned about jazz is that as music, it often starts with the sheet music and then—well it kind of takes off, moves away from the printed page and into the unknown, playing as it goes along, even making up music as the song unfolds. It improvises. Improvisation: the art of being in the moment, making a judgment, and doing what we have to do, often without a specific plan or formula or answer.

In jazz, in life, in faith, we've all got to learn how to improvise, how to think on our feet, respond quickly, maybe not even think so much as just act, just do, just be and trust that beneath all of our movements and thoughts there is a power supporting us, teaching us, and playing with us: God. Jazz has taught me that much of the time, most of the time in this life we do in fact improvise, we do the best we can where we are with what God has given us. We learn to trust our instincts, to grow from experience, to make mistakes sometimes but to know it I all a part of a wonderful song called human life.

Some folks look at the life of Jesus and see it as all pre-planned, all laid out by God, a song that was written even before he landed on this earth and was birthed by Mary. I've come to believe instead, that Jesus was a master spiritual improviser, who knew love was the answer but then let his life unfold as God moved him along. He saw the hungry and fed them; the sad and comforted them; the violent and calmed them; the lost and found them. He was free to choose, to improvise and so in freedom he chose to give his life as a song to love and today that song still plays along, often improvised but always rolling along, riffing with God.

Thank God: for music, for jazz, for songs, for life. The melody plays and God asks us to jump right in and play along. Let all God's musicians say, "Amen!"