

Left Behind for Good  
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How many of you remember the musical Camelot? Or have heard the songs? The title song, Camelot, is sung early in the musical by King Arthur and his bride Guinevere as they contemplate a fabulous future. It is reprised at the end of the play, when a broken, grieving Arthur is expecting the end of his life and his way of life. He sings to a young boy, asking him to remember:

*Each evening, from December to December,  
Before you drift to sleep upon your cot,  
Think back on all the tales that you remember  
Of Camelot.  
Ask ev'ry person if he's heard the story,  
And tell it strong and clear if he has not,  
That once there was a fleeting wisp of glory  
Called Camelot.*

King Arthur begs that the story be kept going, passed on generation to generation, like a dream to be kept alive. The rose-colored past can never be replicated, but the feelings of nostalgia are almost enjoyable. At least, they sell theater tickets.

Some might hear overtones of this song in Jesus' words as he gathers with his friends on the last night of his life. He is sad: soon to be betrayed by one of his closest disciples, then arrested, tortured and killed. This was supposed to be a joyful Passover feast, when an ancient victory was remembered. We can imagine that the memories instead are more recent, as Jesus hopes that they will recall his teachings and the wonderful, though fleeting, wisp of glory they had shared. The light had come and shone out in the darkness – what a memory for them!

But Jesus did not sing Camelot. He was sorrowing, but not nostalgic. He saw even greater things coming: things he could never accomplish himself. He did not ask his disciples to enshrine him in memory but to experience him as present, and caring and powerful in new ways. He sang instead, “I will not leave you orphaned” and “I am coming to you” and “you will see and receive the Spirit of Truth.”

Of course, to the disciples, these were very puzzling songs. How could Jesus be both leaving and coming back? How could Jesus be revealed to his followers and not to the world? Jesus seemed to be calling the disciples into an impossible future...or the kind of future that **would** be impossible without the Holy Spirit. The same Spirit that breathed like a wind over the chaos of creation, the same Spirit that called the Hebrew slaves into freedom, the same Spirit that infused Jesus with the wisdom to teach and the humility to wash feet – this was the promise. It was hard to grasp: only possible to experience.

Luke, in the Book of Acts, expresses this in a slightly different way. In this scene, the crucified and resurrected Christ speaks to his disciples on the outskirts of Jerusalem, just before he

is removed from their physical sight. He promises a “baptism of the Holy Spirit” – presumably the second half or completion of the baptism with water they had experienced earlier. Once again, the disciples are puzzled and want to focus on something else: this time, the restoration of the kingdom to Israel. They want him to sing a marching song, a soldier’s hymn of victory. And they want it now, not later.

But Jesus does not do this: no horns, no drums no fanfare. He promises them power, all right, but it is only the power to be his witnesses, and the power to journey away from their beloved kingdom of Israel. Not what they were asking for. At all. All this, as he abandons them on Mount Olivet.

Both John’s Gospel and the book of Acts name the necessity of this departure, which we sometimes call the Ascension. To the rational mind, this does not make much sense. The Holy Teacher abandoned by God on the cross, only to be resurrected in brief and obscure appearances, only to then disappear into an actual cloud of obscurity forever. This is a spirituality based on absence, if not on failure and abandonment. And we can think of all too many songs that bewail absence and failure and leave-taking. Who likes to be left behind?

Where can we find Good News in these farewells? It is this: by virtue of his absence, Jesus is no longer present in that particular time and that particular place. For the same reason, the Spirit that animated him is now more abundantly present and active than it had ever been before. The early Christians did not understand Jesus to hang around as some ghostly sort of presence, without form. Instead, the Spirit enabled the material community of Christian believers (sometimes called the Body of Christ) to live and work and serve as a real and tangible presence in the world, multiplied immeasurably through space and time.

Neither the scene presented in John’s Gospel nor the scene in Acts is about nostalgia – in fact they are the antithesis of nostalgia. We, with the disciples, hear that we are not only sustained by memory. We will be sustained by a powerful, active, living love, expressing itself as comfort, as truth, and as peace.

Speaking of nostalgia, there is another song that comes to my mind as I read this passage from the Gospel of John. Do you know the old spiritual, ‘Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child’? Jesus told his disciples that he would not leave them orphaned, but I am sure that each one **felt** orphaned, **felt** like a motherless child, at some point. Richie Havens did an improvised version of this spiritual at the 1969 Woodstock Festival. (I got to hear him do it in White River Junction about 15 years ago). It was an amazing performance, starting with that driving, rhythmic guitar, then a chant of “Freedom, freedom,” then “Sometimes I feel like a motherless child,” then “Freedom” again, then “Sometimes I feel like I’m almost gone,” then the improvised, “I got a telephone in my bosom And I can call him up from my heart.” As with so many spirituals, it starts out as a lament and morphs into a kind of hope and even defiance.

In some ways, these two songs from popular culture - Camelot and Sometimes I Feel... - give us two ways of understanding the work of the church and our calling as Christians. Rosemary Radford Reuther, a feminist theologian, says that there are two tasks for the church. One is to pass the tradition on from one generation to the other. In other words, ask every person if they have heard the story, and tell it loud and clear if they have not. Relate the Gospel to the next generation.

But there is a second task: the church must be open to the winds of the Spirit., “blowing where it listeth,” the means by which the tradition will come alive in each generation. Not Camelot, but the raw and raucous call for freedom from the one who feels like a motherless child.

At the root of Jesus’ farewell teachings in the Gospel of John is love – as the choir sang earlier in their anthem, “If ye love me.” “If you love me” is not a conditional statement, meaning that we have to prove we love Jesus somehow. It is more like a statement of fact: “When you love me, that will become evident in the ways that you follow my commandment to love one another.” That early love of the disciples for their teacher, charged with the power of the Holy Spirit, gave the disciples a sense of comfort, peace, joy, and mission. An amazing farewell gift, that still flows around us today in new forms and new expressions.

And so I will close with some words on love by Anne Morrow Lindbergh. She wrote: “Love is...not a result; it is a cause.... People talk about love as though it were something you could give, like an armful of flowers.... Love is a force in you that enables you to give other things.... It is a power, like ... steam or electricity. It is valueless unless you can give something else by means of it.”