

Genesis 1: 1-5; Luke 2:1-7; Matthew 4:18-22;
Mark 15:22-25; John 20:1, 11-18
Favorite Hymn: "I Danced in the Morning"
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Ellen Crawford True

Sacred Soundtrack

Watching snippets of two high-profile funerals in the past week, I was struck not only by the words offered but by the songs that were played and sung. Aretha Franklin's service included several of her well-known hits, of course, but it also included "Amazing Grace" and "What a Friend We Have in Jesus." John McCain's service at the Washington National Cathedral included beautiful hymns and anthems, including "Amazing Grace," as well as the "Battle Hymn of the Republic, the "Navy Hymn," "How Great Thou Art," and a solo rendition of "Danny Boy." These songs lifted up certain aspects of Franklin's and McCain's lives, poignant and powerful soundtracks of personal struggles, beliefs, and triumphs for two very public people. If you were to craft a soundtrack for your life, what songs would you include? "Hard Knock Life" and "Tomorrow" from *Annie* were beloved favorites when I was a tween longing to be much older. I knew all the words to Whitney Houston's "I Want to Dance with Somebody," as a teenager. George Michael, Prince, Guns & Roses, Garth Brooks, REM, U2, and Madonna sang the soundtrack to my college years. "A Kiss to Build a Dream On" was one of the songs that played at our wedding reception. And I've been known to hum "You Can't Always Get What You Want" by the Rolling Stones as a parent. But if I were to pick one song that has lingered with me throughout most of my adult life, it would be "I Danced in the Morning."

As I have mentioned before, I grew up dancing. I started taking ballet in 4th grade and continued through high school and a bit in college. So when the blue hymnal was new, I fell in love with this hymn. The tune was originally written in 1848 by a man named Joseph Brackett, Jr., a Shaker who lived in Maine. An American religious sect, the Shakers were founded by Mother Ann Lee. They are most often remembered for their determination to lead lives of celibacy and for their devotion to simplicity in their furniture, their buildings, and in their dress. But they believed that men and women were equal. And they were persecuted for their ecstatic ways of worship. The trembling and shaking, for which they were named "were caused [they believed] by sin

being purged from the body by the power of the Holy Spirit, purifying the worshiper.”¹ Before leaving England for America, Mother Ann was often persecuted and imprisoned “for breaking the Sabbath by dancing and shouting, and for blasphemy.”² This hymn, whose tune was written well after Mother Ann’s life points to a central practice in the life of this community: the combination of worship and movement. At one point, hymnals were getting in the way of full-bodied worship; it’s hard to dance or spin or shake with a book in your hand:

For this reason, [in one Shaker community], hymnals were not carried into worship in the early days.

The hymn or hymns to be sung on Sunday would be announced earlier in the week, so that the Brothers and the Sisters could look them over and sing from memory in worship.³

Don’t worry; I’m not suggesting we lose the hymnals. I don’t expect us to memorize hymns. However, I do wonder about the songs we know by heart, the ones we can sing from memory. I wonder what they say about us and what we believe and hold dear.

When Abby was born, I could not for the life of me remember any lullabies. We somehow received a free CD from Land’s End, I think that had some, and that helped a bit, but what my new-mommy brain could remember was a few hymns. And the one hymn I could remember all the verses to was the one we sang at the end of our wedding, the one we sang at my ordination to the ministry, the one we sang at my mother’s memorial service: “I Danced in the Morning.” And now, about 15 years later, I am struck by what it means to know these words, this song by heart. And what it means to sing it to an infant and to keep singing it within the faith community. This song narrates much of the life of Jesus Christ and describes him as the Lord, the leader of a grand and glorious dance. It does not cover every event in his life, but it does give us a sense of much of what his life, death, and resurrection mean for you and me. It celebrates the Christ’s presence with God in creation; it sings about the call of the disciples and the scribes and the Pharisees who saw this Sabbath-breaking Savior as a threat to all they held dear. It recalls that dark Friday where despair and death seem to have won the day. It reminds us of Mary’s sadness and joy in the garden on that first Easter morning. And it emphasizes that the life of Jesus Christ and the life of faith are not something we simply observe from a safe distance, but a song we are

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ann_Lee

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ann_Lee

³ *A Shaker Hymnal*, (Woodstock, NY: Overlook, 1990), v.

invited to sing, a dance that does not end on that first Easter but continues on today with us, the Body of Christ in and for the world. There are worse things to sing to a baby; there are worse things to sing to ourselves.

Because we live in an age that wants to tell us other stories, different stories—some true, some not so true, some that offer some hope, and some that offer no hope at all. We live in a time in which any number of voices want to write a soundtrack for our lives, a soundtrack that sings anthems of fear or scarcity or despair played for a dance of doom and gloom, including drumbeats for hostile and hate-filled marches. It is not simply a question of what songs we want sung or played at our funerals; it is a matter of what songs, what anthems and hymns inform our lives here and now. As Christ's beloved children, we are called to sing a different tune, not one that leads us naively to cover our ears and drown out the noise, but one that lifts up the song that has named us and claimed us, the song that tells the true story of who and whose we are. Our story, our song is centered in THE story, THE song, THIS dance led by THE Savior.

We do not dance ordinarily in worship, but we do learn to follow certain steps, a holy choreography of sorts each and every time we gather at this table. In the words we pray, we rehearse the story of God's saving work in history from the dawn of creation, through the call to Abraham and Sarah and the liberation of the slaves in Egypt. We recall Jesus' birth, his ministry with every kind of person, and how he made an ordinary meal extraordinary by breaking bread and sharing a cup at table with his friends. And when we, a small band of his disciples here and now share the bread and drink from the cup, we rehearse once again the promise of his saving ways until he comes to dance with us again. We do not carry a book in our hands. We are not required to know our lines ahead of time. Instead we come as we are and gather around the table, cherished guests one and all. And over time this practice, this dance is woven into our very lives, like a lullaby we have hummed since childhood, a story we know by heart. And wherever we may be, if we listen closely we will hear that song playing in the background here and now, the most exquisite of soundtracks, promising hope and love in the name of the One who calls us to fish for people, the One who gives his life to save ours, the One who meets us in the garden, and the One who still, even now invites us to dance and follow his lead.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.