

Epiphanies of God's Love: It Can Raise the Dead

Sermon 132 | Greystone Baptist Church | February 20, 2022

Psalm 116:1-9

It is estimated that more than 101 million viewers tuned in last Sunday night to watch the Cincinnati Bengals play the Los Angeles Rams in Super Bowl 56. This is up 6% from last year's game. Nielsen (a leading research agency for things like this) estimates that another 2 million people gathered around their screens for the half-time show. Some of them stayed for the second half, many of them didn't, making this year's half-time show a show in and of itself. It wasn't just part of the bigger Super Bowl experience, it was its own thing with a unique audience. An interesting byproduct of this viewing data is that the most valuable commercial spots ended up being those directly before and after the half-time show, rather than the spots positioned early in the game (those have traditionally been the most desirable spots for marketers).¹

For as long as I can remember, the Super Bowl has featured pop stars who offer their most popular music as a nostalgic refrain for a huge audience looking for something to celebrate. There was the show with Michael Jackson, the one with Prince, the one with Jennifer Lopez and Shakira, the one with the Rolling Stones, the one with the infamous "wardrobe malfunction," and the one with Lady Gaga.² Each performance leaving a fragment of a memory in my mind long after I could remember who played in each of the games. This year's half time show will probably be no different. While I can remember today that the Bengals played the Rams in what turned out to be a very exciting game, I won't remember any of that a year or two from now. What I will remember is that this half-time show was the one when I realized I'd grown old.

The good news is, I'm not alone in this. In fact, my social media feeds were flooded with other Millennials raving about the show and laughing at our children who watched with disappointment and confusion as the stars of *our* youth (who are now probably into their 50s) danced around their stages belting refrains from *our* past.

As the show went on I couldn't help but imagine my parents and grandparents watching from their sofa. I haven't asked, but I am willing to bet money they muted the half time show and used the opportunity to refill their plates with snacks and finger foods. They worked so hard to quiet this music when I was a teenager and just when they thought they'd escaped it, here it was on the TV screen!

Yes, these are the sounds of the bus ride home in the afternoon, the tunes that blasted from discman headphones on the back seat of the bus and groups of teens gathered around to hear and sing and dance along. For some of us, the music of Snoop Dogg and Dr. Dre were forbidden and therefore super exciting to sneak and listen. Yes, these sounds and

¹ https://www.espn.com/nfl/story/_/id/33295986/super-bowl-lvi-estimated-1011-million-tv-viewers-2021

² <https://www.nbcsports.com/bayarea/49ers/ranking-15-best-super-bowl-halftime-shows-history>

songs are the refrain of adolescence... for those of us who are now reaching the dreaded, "middle aged adulthood."

While we know that Millennials like to feel special, the truth is that every generation is special in this way. Each one has a sort of soundtrack of their youth. The Silent Generation (born in the '20s and '30s) have big band and swing. The Baby Boomers (born in the '40s and '50s) have rock and soul. Gen X (born in the '60s and '70s) have grunge and some hip-hop.³ At first the music is just a "hit" or a billboard chart topper. But then, as certain songs last the test of time, they become sort of eternal, in a sense, they become rallying songs for an entire generation. Refrains that bring everyone of a certain age back to that spot on the bus, that Friday night game, that epic prom night, that homecoming dance or graduation party. The music brings us back, like a time machine without a door or seat belt.

These refrains calm our nerves, make us smile, and bring us back to a simpler time when we didn't have to worry about a job, a boss, or the stress of adulting.

We all have them. What is yours? (no really, take a minute, write it down).

Although there are cultural markers – like these songs that mark a generation – to remind us of our past and bring us into a comfortable state of nostalgia, there are also spiritual refrains that offer a more eternal truth than any hit song or pop icon could ever embody.

No, these will never compete with the growing audience for the Super Bowl Half-Time Show, but they do offer a deeper truth that sustains us even in our most difficult moments.

Over the centuries Christians have turned to scripture as a sort of spiritual refrain for our lives. Sometimes we quote words from the prophets, sometimes parables of Jesus, but most often when we need the words to pray, to say, or to hear, nothing soothes like the words of the Psalms.

The early church Reformer, John Calvin, is best known for his book, *The Institutes of Christian Religion*. In it, he lays out his famous theology and doctrine. Because this book has had such a lasting impact on Christianity, especially reformed theology, we can overlook the rest of Calvin's work and writings. The President of Union Theological Seminary in the City of New York, Dr. Serene Jones, writes that in his other, lesser known books, Calvin actually gives us insight into the development of his theology and doctrine. Among the more interesting "behind the scenes glances" offered in these books is his understanding of scripture, and how we are to apply it.

"When he approached the Bible," Jones writes, "he did not see before him a set of simplistic propositional claims from which he could extract doctrinal truths about God. Rather, he called the Bible 'a lens which we put on' and through which we look at the world. For Calvin, sacred Scripture was, in effect, a pair of eyeglasses that Christians wear

³ https://www.npr.org/sections/allsongs/2008/06/the_sound_of_a_generation.html

to view reality. The Scripture focuses our gaze and gives us twenty-twenty vision to see the world for what it really is.”⁴

Calvin believed that “scripture is never just a book we quietly read; it is a dramatic world we are invited to stand within and to inhabit as our own, a world where we encounter the God of Israel and of Jesus Christ, who creates and redeems the world.” This way, scripture comes to life within us as a script unfolds on a theater stage.

In his book, *Commentary on the Psalms*, this connection with scripture as a living text became readily apparent. Having fled his homeland in France due to conflict with the political leaders of the day, Calvin found himself in Germany, living among other French refugees who had been persecuted in their homeland and who were thus afraid to return. He describes their experiences with words like, “maimed, executed, tortured, burned, and assailed on all sides by the wicked.”⁵ In this experience, Calvin finds comfort and solidarity in the words of David – the chief writer of the Psalms – and these words become a refrain for him and for his people.

You see, Calvin was a reformer and an important theologian; but he was also a pastor to his suffering community. As such, he knew and understood the pain that plagued their lives. He understood their experiences of loss and grief, of loneliness and isolation, of worry and anxiety. He knew first hand their displacement, discomfort, and their desire for everything to return to the normal they once knew in their homeland. And from this place of deep, relational knowing, Calvin invited his people into an experience of the Psalms that employed their faithful imagination to offer a way forward, filled with hope and healing.⁶ In this experience, Calvin and his congregation would read the Psalms like a script. They would embody the feelings and give voice to the words, joining in with David and the other early writers to echo their ancient prayers of deliverance, of lament, and of praise.

Like a group of Millennials who sang along with Mary J. Blige, Dr. Dre, Snoop Dogg, and Eminem last Sunday night, this congregation sang, spoke, and prayed the words of scripture to give voice to their feelings (often hidden away in the corners of their souls) and in so doing, they allowed scripture to remind them of God’s persistent presence in their lives.

The best part about scripture, especially the Psalms, is that unlike the sounds of pop stars from one generation or another, these words echo true for all people, in all places, and through all of time because they are infused with the eternal and ever-present love of God.

Today’s Psalm is no different. It is a prayer, a timeless refrain echoed from human lips to God’s ears. A refrain that recalls the presence of God in days long passed, days of trouble,

⁴ Serene Jones. *Trauma and Grace*, 45-46.

⁵ *Ibid.* 46.

⁶ *Ibid.* 49.

struggle, and pain. It is a prayer of resistance and persistence, claiming the story of a God who overcomes death – not once, not twice – but time and time again. Yes, God’s love can raise the dead, and the Psalmist gives us the words to proclaim it.

*The snares of death encompassed me;
the pangs of Sheol laid hold on me;*

There was a day when we were not burdened with the understanding that accompanies these words; but now, having lived through a global pandemic, having suffered losses unimaginable and indescribable, having our eyes awakened to the inequities that fester near and far, having another war on the horizon and seeing no path of healing or reconciliation... We need the persistent, resistant hope that the Psalmist provides.

The reminder that God’s love can raise the dead, *has* raised the dead in Jesus Christ, and *will* raise all that is dead in you and I.

Yes, God’s love *is* that powerful, that resistant, that persistent.

It is, it was, it will forever be.

So when we read the Psalm together, we do not read it as one would read mere words on a page. We read it as a choir singing a refrain.

A refrain of peace in these days of war.
A refrain of love in the presence of hate.
A refrain of hope in the face of despair.
A refrain of life in the shadow of death.

And we can sing this refrain until our hearts are content because as the Psalmist proclaims:

God has delivered our souls from death,
our eyes from tears,
our feet from stumbling.

and we can rest assured that one way or another...

we *will* walk before the Lord, in the land of the living.

[\[Read Psalm 116:1-9 here\]](#)

Amen. And Thanks be to God.