

THE SONGS THAT ARE TO COME

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It will be said on that day, Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us. This is the Lord for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation. (Isaiah 25:9)

The Many Saints of Newark is a movie that arrived in theaters only a month ago, and already it seems to be gone. I missed it, so you need not worry about any spoilers from me. All I can tell you is that the film is a prequel to the popular HBO series *The Sopranos*, starring the late James Gandolfini, who portrayed a fictitious New Jersey crime boss named Tony Soprano. Fun fact: Gandolfini grew up in Park Ridge, NJ in the same high school class as my wife, Stacie. They played in the marching band together, and Jimmy Gandolfini – as the young and wiry trumpeter was known in those days – often threw dirt clods into the horn of Stacie's sousaphone. Apparently he was a wise-guy and a trouble-maker from the start.

But I digress. *The Sopranos* ran from 1999-2007, and for all those years viewers were drawn into the complicated, contradictory life of a made mobster. On the one hand Tony Soprano was a murderer, but on the other hand he had panic attacks and sought out the help of a therapist. He was a family man who tried to hide his criminal dealings from his children, just as he tried to hide his many infidelities from his wife. He was no saint of Newark, or anywhere else for that matter. Even sinner seems too charitable a word to describe his character. Sociopath is the diagnosis his therapist finally gives him. Yet Tony Soprano is frequently named one of the most influential characters in the history of television.

What happened to him? Perhaps the most memorable episode of the whole series was the finale (and here I will issue a spoiler alert). Tony arrives at a diner in Bloomfield, NJ, and selects from the small juke box on his table the song, "Don't Stop Believin'," by Journey. Soon his wife joins him, then his son. Outside his daughter is struggling to parallel park her car. Meanwhile, a questionable patron heads to the restroom, evoking a scene from *The Godfather*. The action is building towards something, but suddenly, just as Tony's daughter enters the diner, the music stops and the screen goes black. That's it. The end. What happened? Viewers were left to wonder and speculate, which they did for years. Finally, this week the writer and producer of the show, David Chase, cleared up the mystery. Of course, Tony got whacked. Why else would the music stop and the screen go black?

Today is All Saints' Sunday, a day on the church calendar when our souls and bodies cry out to the living God that the scene can't just go dark. The music can't just stop. Saints and sinners alike would say that human life and history contain too much forward momentum for it all simply to come to a crashing halt. We have a hunger for justice: an expectation that fairness should govern our common life. We have a yearning for love, a capacity for creativity, and an ability to glimpse joy. This is all supposed to be going somewhere. We discern a direction. We divine a purpose. Yet our experience is always one of partial fulfillment, suggesting that the love, justice, and creativity left undone in this life must find completion in a life to come. So today we publish a list of our loved ones who have died, and name it not a necrology, but a roll call of those who belong to Jesus. We light candles on their behalf in the hope that the light of Christ still shines on them and through them. By the time this day is done we'll have baptized four people, marking them as Christ's own forever, and declaring that God will never be finished with them. The scene never goes dark. The music never stops.

How can it be? Death seems to be a dreadfully final thing. A story is told from the days of pre-Christian Britain. King Edward ruled Northumbria in the 7th century, and one day had received some Christian missionaries. He turned to his council and asked if the visitors should be given a hearing. A trusted advisor replied, "*Can this new religion tell us of what happens after death? The life of mortals is like a swallow flying through this lighted hall. It enters in at one door from the darkness outside, and flitting through the light and warmth passes through the farther door into the dark unknown beyond. Can this new religion solve for us the mystery? What comes to mortals in the dark, dim unknown?*" Apparently, the missionaries were able to make a compelling case for Christianity, and Edward agreed to be baptized.¹

Nevertheless, the question has always persisted. What comes to mortals in the dark, dim unknown? The cynics would say that, of course, nothing comes next. The screen goes dark, the music stops, and all should resign themselves to the grim reality that they simply cease to be. As for us, we who claim the faith of Jesus don't stop believing in the promises of God. We turn to the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as our library of God's revelations to humankind. Today's reading from the 25th chapter of Isaiah is a glorious vision of the life to come. What is interesting about chapter 25 is that chapter 24 which precedes it is decidedly grim. According to chapter 24, if history is heading anywhere it is to ruin and destruction. But then, just when you think the screen will go dark, the lights come on and the music plays: *On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear.* Heaven turns out to be a sumptuous dinner party for all people. Apparently, in the new reality that God will create, the only thing to get whacked is death itself. *God will swallow up death forever. Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of the people he will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken.*

Today we've read also from the Gospel of John (11:32-44), hearing a snippet of a larger story about three friends of Jesus who lived in Bethany: the sisters Mary and Martha, and their brother Lazarus. Lazarus had contracted some sort of disease and was growing worse by the day. Mary and Martha called for Jesus, not only because he was their friend but also because of his reputation as a healer. Unfortunately, by the time Jesus arrived in Bethany it was too late. Lazarus had already been dead four days, his body secured in a tomb, which according to Jewish burial customs would have been a small cave carved into a hillside. The scene at the tomb was one of devastation and despair. Everyone was consumed with grief, even Jesus himself. For Lazarus and those who loved him, the life of bright possibility and promise had gone dark. The forward momentum had come to a crashing halt.

What happened next is as dramatic a turn as the difference between Isaiah 24 and 25. Jesus ordered that the stone sealing the entrance to the tomb be taken away. As we heard, Martha protested, fearing the stench of a decaying body. I note with amusement the way the good old KJV renders her words: *Lord, by this time he stinketh, for he hath been dead four days.* John's attention to the potentially moldering corpse of Lazarus is significant. He wants us to take an unflinching look at the starkness of death, and have faith even there. Don't stop believing in the power of God when all seems to be lost. So Jesus pressed on, and called into the tomb "Lazarus, come out." I can imagine people holding their noses as Lazarus came hopping out of the tomb. I mean, wrapped up like a mummy as he was, how could he do anything but hop? The scene went from dark to light, from death to life.

This week as I've thought about the raising of Lazarus I recalled being in seminary. One evening some classmates were going up to the Cathedral of St. John the Divine to hear the poet Wendell Berry recite some of his works. They invited me to join them and I agreed to tag along. I was not then and still cannot claim to be a student of Berry's poetry, but one piece that he read rose above all the rest, and I've never forgotten its lines as they echoed through the vast, reverberate space of the cathedral. The title is "Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front." The poem seems to be a call not to conform in thought to the wisdom of the establishment. He writes:

*So friends, every day do something
that won't compute. Love the Lord.
Love the world. Work for nothing.
Take all that you have and be poor.
Love someone who does not deserve it.*

He goes on with many memorable lines, including *Ask the questions that have no answers*. Then this: *Listen to carrion – put your ear close, and hear the faint chattering of the songs that are to come*. What, I wondered, is carrion? My confession to you is that for years I just assumed it was some sort of little bird. What else in nature would chatter songs that we could hear? It was a sparrow chirping in the trees. It was a swallow flitting through the lighted warmth of a great hall. The heavens declare the glory of God, and even the birds chatter the songs that are to come. Nature herself provides a foretaste of heaven. Thus I reasoned with myself.

It turns out that carrion is not a little chirping bird at all. Correction: maybe it used to be, but it's not any more. Carrion is dead, rotting animal flesh. It is road kill. It stinketh. You would not want to put your ear close without holding your nose. It seems that Wendell Berry, like John the Gospel writer before him, like Jesus himself would want us to take a sober look at the harshness of death. The scene at the tomb of Lazarus has always provoked many questions, not the least of which are: How did Jesus do it? Why did Jesus do it? As to the how, the only answer can be: by the power of God. As to the why, it's likely that Jesus was preparing the people for what was about to occur. Consider that Jesus was only a week or two before his own death, and he knew it. He was on his way to Jerusalem, and fully understood that what he had to do there would bring all the fury of the establishment down on himself. He would be crucified. He would become carrion. Indeed, his life poured out and body broken is what he offers us in this and every Eucharist. "This is my body. This is my blood," he would say to his disciples on the night before he died.

Listen to carrion – put your ear close, and hear the faint chattering of the songs that are to come. Nobody wants to draw near death. Nobody wants to die, but it is only in dying that we are born to eternal life. Every name on the list today represents a person who was known, loved, cherished, and has died. Lazarus died. Jesus died. We will die. Does the screen go dark? Does the music stop? I believe that what Jesus acted out is what St. Paul would write down a short time later: *If we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his (Romans 6:5)*. Indeed, through the grave and gate of death we pass with Jesus to our joyful resurrection. Listen to death – put your ear close and hear the faint sound of the door to eternal life creaking open. This is the promise of God. This is the Christian hope.

In the meantime, we do what Wendell Berry in his poem described as practicing resurrection. Do you want to be a saint? Do you mean to be one too? Then practice resurrection. *Love the Lord. Love the world. Work for nothing. Take all that you have and be poor. Love someone who does not deserve it. Ask the questions that have no answers. Be joyful, though you have considered all the facts*. Berry concludes with these words: *Be like the fox who makes more tracks than necessary, some in the wrong direction. Practice resurrection*.

Practice resurrection even now. Then at our last awakening we will be ready to sing with the saints the songs that are to come: *Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us. This is the Lord for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation*.

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¹ Carroll E. Simcox, *Is Death the End?* Seabury Press, 1959, p. 8.