

## The Flutist

Preached FCCW, August 18, 2019

Isaiah 5:1-7 and Hebrews 11:29 - 12:2

Near the beginning of the Boynton Canyon Trail—before the desert terrain gives way to the forest of the upper canyon—stand a pair of rock formations named Kachina Woman and Warrior Man.

It is said that together they represent natural manifestations of male and female divine energies.

But the most memorable experience of the place might not be the sights or the sensations, but the sounds.

Because it is there that you are likely to hear the haunting music of a flute playing local celebrity.

In the interludes between his playing, the Flutist is known to share with those who make the climb up Warrior to join him, his thoughts on spirituality and the power of unconditional love to transform negative energies into powerful life-forces.

Sometimes, those who have met him leave with the gift of a piece of red rock cut into the shape of a heart.

The fifth chapter of the prophet Isaiah begins with its own song of unconditional love.

“Let me sing for my beloved my love song...” the prophet croons.

As love songs go, this one sounds like one of those classic Country Western ballads where the smitten cowboy is spurned by his sweetheart, who is drawn to an undomesticated life of “dim lights, thick smoke, and loud, loud music” as the Dwight Yoakum song goes.

The “song” of Isaiah is really a parable about a landowner whose labor of love is the creation of a vineyard.

After clearing the land and fencing it in to protect it from predators and weeds, he plants the grapevines that he hopes will produce good fruit.

In spite of all the tender care and attention he showers upon his vineyard, it only produces wild grapes; the kind that leave a bitter taste in your mouth.

Unlike the songs of the Sedona Flutist, which tend to produce feelings of peace and harmony; Isaiah's song of the vineyard ignites feelings of anger and indignation.

After the telling of the vineyard owner's unrequited love, he speaks directly to those who have been listening and asks the heartbreaking question, "What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it? When I expected it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes?"

By the time the song got to the part about giving up on the vineyard he loved, and how it would soon be overgrown with weeds and briars, the audience would be shaking their heads in disapproval at the vineyard's stubborn refusal to produce good fruit, convinced beyond the shadow of a doubt that he had already gone above and beyond what could be expected.

Whatever this unfruitful vineyard got, it deserved.

But then comes the final verse of this song, where it is revealed that the vineyard is actually God's people, and the one who planted and cared for the vineyard, is God.

"For the vineyard of the **Lord of hosts** *is the house of Israel*, and the *people of Judah* are his pleasant planting; he expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry!"

And, since the audience to whom the song was sung *was* the people of Judah, it meant that they had just passed judgment on themselves for not being a vineyard that produced the fruit of peace and justice.

It was *they* who were responsible for breaking God's heart.

It was *they* who had rejected God, not God who had rejected them.

This song sought to open their eyes to the suffering caused by the injustices they tolerated, and open their ears to the cries of those who were oppressed that was like the taste of sour grapes upon God's tongue.

Even though by their own unwitting admission, God would have been justified in turning his back on them, this song had never been about punishment, rejection and abandonment, but of God's sorrow for them, and God's wishes for them to still produce good fruit.

This song then, like the songs and speeches of the Sedona Flutist, were about the potential for unconditional love to transform hearts so that the Universe might, one heart at a time, be restored to the intentions for which it was created.

Which is what Christians pray for when they pray, “Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”

It is the song that Jesus sang when he proclaimed that the Kingdom of God was coming near, and so people should repent, or turn around, so that they could be part of its coming to fruition.

In the Epistle to the Hebrews, we are given an impressive list of those who throughout Jewish history had responded faithfully to God’s love song to humanity.

The list includes some big names, like Gideon, Samson and King David.

For all their heroics though, none of these were without flaws.

David’s legacy as Israel’s greatest king is forever tarnished by his shameful mistreatment of Bathsheba.

The name of the strongman Samson will always go hand in hand with Delilah, whose charms rendered him as harmless as a puppy dog.

And Gideon’s reputation as a warrior for God will never escape the shadow of his trying every angle he could think of to avoid God’s call to lead the Israelites in battle.

And let's not forget Rahab, who had three strikes against her chances of landing on this list.

She was a Canaanite—who were the Israelites enemies.

She was a woman. Not only that, she was a prostitute.

But in spite of all that, her role as an ally in the Israelites' victory over Jericho earned her recognition as a model of faithfulness.

None of them were any more perfect than you or I.

But by faithfully responding to God's love song, God was able to accomplish great things through them.

The list is much longer of those whose names are forgotten but whose faith is remembered.

Some of them also had great accomplishments to their credit.

However, the longest part of this list is made up of men and women whose faith was not rewarded right away with fame, or with accomplishments, but with great sacrifices and losses.

Yet, even they, by their faithful response to the love sonnet of God, were indispensable in making the vineyard of God's planting, fruitful.

The author of Hebrews calls them a great cloud of witnesses that surround us.

Through their faith, they have themselves become notes in the love song of God that plays on and on.

And we are invited to join their ranks.

Warrior Rock was the first place that Sue and I heard the Flutist playing his songs. But it wasn't the last.

As we put distance between us and Warrior Rock the sound of his playing grew fainter until at last it was no longer audible.

On the way back down the canyon later that day, we could hear the Flutists music again.

This time though, it wasn't coming from somewhere high above us on Warrior Rock.

It was right behind us on the trail.

When we looked around to find its source, all we saw was the back of another hiker in the distance.

The Flutist was someone we had passed on the trail, without a second look.

We never saw his face, but we knew by the song he played that it was him.

That's how it is to be surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses.

God's love song to us can come in the most mundane events of our lives, in the most unremarkable of places and the most ordinary of people.

By that same token, we can all become notes in the song, too.

When ours are the ears that hear the cries of those who are oppressed and make the faithful choice of speaking for them, our voices ring with the compassion that God feels for those who suffer.

When our eyes witness the bloodshed of targeted hate crimes and random mass shootings, our cries for justice echo the beat of God's own breaking heart.

And, when we seek to walk in rhythm with the song of the Great Flutist, God's Kingdom is bearing fruit in each of us.



Listen for that song, as you walk where the trails of your life lead you, be they heights or be they canyons.

It is there. Calling us. Awakening us.

Drawing us to join the chorus of the great cloud of faithful witnesses that went before us, that walk beside us, and that will come after us.

The energy of God's love song is all around us.

May it also be within us.