

## And the Band Played On

<sup>NRS</sup> **Amos 5:18** Alas for you who desire the day of the LORD! Why do you want the day of the LORD? It is darkness, not light;<sup>19</sup> as if someone fled from a lion, and was met by a bear; or went into the house and rested a hand against the wall, and was bitten by a snake.<sup>20</sup> Is not the day of the LORD darkness, not light, and gloom with no brightness in it?<sup>21</sup> I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.<sup>22</sup> Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon.<sup>23</sup> Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps.<sup>24</sup> But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

It's 1912. It's the middle of the night. You awake to shouts in the hallway. You can't quite put your finger on it, but something doesn't feel right. You leave your stateroom and head into the hallway- it's a rush of activity. Men and women, some still in formal wear, some in bathrobes all scurrying like frightened mice.

"Iceberg!" someone shouts. "We've hit an iceberg!"

And with all of the other first class passengers you find yourself heading towards the grand ballroom where everyone seems to be gathering to find out information- to find out what's going on.

The ballroom is mass chaos. People are shouting. Some are screaming. Fear clings to everyone you see. There are a few young men handing out bulky life preservers. One man has a megaphone and is saying something about life boats.

It can't be true- could it? The largest, most technologically advanced ship of her day, the titanic had a hull made with literally feet of steel. They said it was unsinkable. And on her maiden voyage from London to New York, she boasted a veritable who's who- even a tiny cabin going for upwards of 50,000\$ in today's money. This couldn't be happening- and shouting and the wailing- it's too much. It's driving you out of your mind.

And then the strangest, most wonderful thing in the world happens. Little by little a hush falls over that crazy scene. One by one the men, women, and children fall silent. And you can just barely hear it- you can just begin to make out a violin, a single violin singing out a tune so sweet, but so quiet- you lean so you can hear it. And then, the violas join, and then the cellos, and the woodwinds, and you are caught up with that great crowd in the belly of that sinking ship in the most wonderful music. And slowly, with calm restored, activity starts up again. More organized now and more calmly, the sailors prepare the women and the children to head to the few life boats left on board. Tearfully, loved ones embrace and kiss one another one last, beautiful kiss with a beautiful waltz in the background.

It's a famous story this one. And it's absolutely true. As the Titanic sank on April 14<sup>th</sup>, 1912, the Titanic orchestra, led by Wallace Hartley, played in the belly of that ship until they could play no more. In fact Hartley was so committed that when they recovered his body from the water two weeks later, they found him cradling his violin that he strapped against his body, unwilling even in death, to let go.

Now, every time I've heard this story used, I've heard it used negatively- how the musicians and the passengers were like ostriches trying to keep their head in the sand while everything around them was going kaput. I hear this story used as a kind of metaphor for all the ways we deny reality and find ways to distract ourselves from paying attention to what's really important- what's most needful. I remember the first time I heard about this story, I heard it from a colleague of mine back in Austin- ol' Lou Snead. We were at a particular snorer of a Presbytery meeting. At one of the breaks I saw Lou rubbing his eyes and I asked him if he thought he was going to make it. He laughed and

started telling me all of the things he needed to be doing- Hispanic ministry, a ministry for the homeless in South Austin, and the list continued. And then he told me this story about the Titanic and how much it reminded him of what we were doing. I remember him talking about people that really needed help, and he said, “But here we are in the Titanic ballroom, listening to our fine songs and nice words- I just hope my folks aren’t sinking is all.” Since that conversation, every time a Presbytery meeting devolves into pointless minutia, I sometimes fantasize about the church windows turning into giant portholes and wait for Hartley’s music to start up and then for the cold water to come and give us blessed relief.

Well, this way of hearing the Titanic story, this conversation I had with ol’ Lou would have gone over really well with Amos, the author of our text this morning. I know some of you have heard this text before- but it’s new for some of us here this morning. Without a doubt, it’s one of the most surprising texts in all of scripture. Here we’ve got Amos, a prophet, which is basically the ancient Hebrew equivalent to an editorialist, who heads up to the great cities of Northern Israel. And there, a Southern down home boy in the New York of ancient Israel- Amos is blown away by what’s going on. He sees good church people get all dressed up on Sunday in their suits and their hats and pray and say what an awesome God they have. But then, he sticks around after the show, and he sees how they live. He sees these same good church people taking bribes in the court, selling poor people into slavery for the egregious price of a pair of sandals, crushed those who got in their way, banned the prophets from speaking out- and to top it off, they even corrupted the Nazirites plying them with wine. The Nazirites all took vows to let their

hair grow long and never to touch alcohol- all to the glory of their God. (If you're a young guy out there and want to grow your hair long like I did as a kid- go ahead and try this card, I don't know if it'll work for you, but it's worth a try.) Basically, Amos saw folks talk the talk on Sunday and then walk all over people every other day of the week.

And this enraged him. It absolutely enraged him. And this is why we get such strong language from him. Speaking for God, Amos shouts out: I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.<sup>22</sup> Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon.<sup>23</sup> Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps.<sup>24</sup> But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. Amos' message here- it isn't important how often you go to church, or what you say when you in church. What's important is how you treat people when you leave. Do you treat your neighbors with justice, with kindness, with love- do you walk humbly with your God? Is any of this fancy talk about loving your neighbor sinking in in other words- or is this just for show?

See, in Amos' eyes- music and worship, it had all become an enormous distraction, a great big show. People were putting so much time and energy into creating these ostentatious festivals and assemblies, almost to cover up the way they lived their lives the rest of the week.

Now music and worship style is a distraction for us, too, but not in quite the same way as it was for the Israelites in Amos' cross hairs. Now to be sure, we are also capable of putting more time and energy into the style of worship we forget about the substance.

As Jeff Skilling and Ken Lay are FINALLY being prosecuted in the Enron debacle, people of faith can't help but be incensed and embarrassed by Ken Lay- a man so conservatively religious on the outside, so faith based in his language- and then so utterly debased when it came to treating people fairly. And of course he's just for starters isn't he? The besmirched Tom Delay and Jack Abramoff both paraded around with their faith on their sleeves to cover up their misdeeds. Whatever our personal politics, because of these foxes believers have to stand up and claim this text from Amos and remind ourselves and the world around us that our actions out there *have* to match our words in here- or it isn't faith at all. We have to let folks know it doesn't matter how often or how loud you shout out the name Jesus or how often you shout the name Jesus, Jesus, Jesus if when you leave here you act like Judas. So, yeah it's true that sometimes our worship and music are distracting in the same way they were in Amos' day, but honestly, when I think about most of us- most of us are distracted by worship style and music in a way that's different from this.

Most of us are distracted by our music and our worship styles, because there is so little agreement right now about what the right music and right styles of worship are. See, we're living at what some thinkers call a *kairotic* moment in the church. A *kairotic* moment, coming from one of the Greek words for time *kairos*, refers to a moment in which massive change takes place, a time in which an entity, in this case the church, is being shaped and changed in fundamental ways. And most agree that this kairotic moment is felt no where more strongly than in the changes in worship we've seen in the last fifty years.

A former professor at Princeton, Tom Long, tells a story about this. He remembers visiting what he calls an “old downtown first” kind of church. It was a beautiful, old, gothic building, with enormous halls and rooms with darkly stained wood paneling. He was there for a conference, but before they got going, one of the participants asked the head pastor if he would give them a tour. He consented, and Long said everything looked exactly as you would expect- rooms that could double as prestigious law offices and a sanctuary that just took your breath away with this huge nave running down the middle, these long wooden pews with kneelers, and this enormous organ shining behind the pulpit towering up in front. But then, like this artifact delivered by a time machine, was this bizarre thing that was totally out of place- a big, red, sparkling drum set. The pastor noticed everyone staring at it and he looked at them as if he was tasting something nasty, “Yes, I see you’ve noticed it. Our youth pastor has something of a taste for...contemporary music,” about like he would say the youth pastor had a taste for impaling people.

Long writes: Rare also is the congregation that has not felt some stress, some measure of conflict, over all this ferment in worship. No real change comes easily, but changes are especially explosive when they have to do with congregational worship. Worship lies close to the heart, and even a seemingly minor tweak in the order of worship, not to mention a radical shift in style, can set off major congregational fibrillations. Indeed, the pressure to engage in newer forms of worship has generated tension, at least to some degree, in virtually every congregation in America. Often this tension simply hangs in the atmosphere, an uneasy jostling of rival desires. Some people in the congregation wish that worship were more immediately relevant, more exciting, more dramatic, more casual, louder, more spontaneous, and more fun, while others wish it were quieter, more reverent, more traditional, more ordered, and more dignified—and no one is completely satisfied.

You and I live at an amazing time. We’ve been freed up in so many ways when it comes to worship and especially when it comes to music in worship. We’ve been freed

from some of the idolatry that has always gripped the church of thinking one particular way or style is more holy or faithful simply because it's become habit. I don't think there are too many churches left, even the most liturgically conservative, who really think God really speaks in Latin or King James English and can't speak in anything else. We've also been freed from a heck of a lot of ignorance regarding the history of worship as well- in the last forty years we've simply learned much more about how the early church worshipped- we've learned how diverse they were, how they balanced a sense of the community with the individual. But, but...as free as we are to worship God in ways that are both faithful and relevant to our own experience- we aren't quite there yet, are we? No, you and I live in this REALLY confusing time when so much is changing, and you and I don't really know what's critical, what we absolutely have to keep, and what's flexible, what's OK to change.

And you know, I've seen it here. You know, some of the hymns in our Blue Book are so great- they connect us so well with our past and give us such a great foundation. Personally, my favorite hymn in all the world, the one that simply HAS to be at my funeral is Be Thou My Vision. I remember in Austin late into the wee hours of the night, when Will was colicky and Melis was trying to get at least some sleep, I would put Will in his Baby Bjorn and walk out in the warm, humid Austin night, the bare soles of my feet quietly slapping the pavement up and down our street as I would sing Be Thou My Vision to Will in a mainly hopeless attempt to quiet him down. Some of these old hymns are so rich- we just wouldn't be the same without out.

But I think it's safe to say that some of just aren't. I think it's safe to safe that some of them just plain aren't- whether it's our fault for not learning them, or whether

they just weren't good hymns in the first place, I've looked out on you all when I've picked a hymn that goes great with my sermon but is absolutely not connecting with us on just about every level. Oh, I see the looks you give me- I do. Mainly what I see in your eyes, well after, "Ken, why are you doing this to us" is really, "What does this mean?" And, "I want to understand, but I don't."

So some of the great old hymns of our tradition absolutely speak to us, and some might with a little more explanation, but it's also fair to say that some of them just might need to be retired. And you know what- the same is true when it comes to newer, more "contemporary" music and liturgy, too, I think.

I've seen some emerging work, some contemporary work- that is so fresh, and so faithful. One of the reasons I felt so called to TPC is that artists are embraced here- people dreaming new dreams. Honestly, I don't know if I will ever enjoy a Good Friday and Easter service more than I did last year with the shroud and crown of thorns lowered over the cross and then replaced with that circle of doves on Easter morning.

And this is true musically as well. I remember the song Kris and Martha wrote that we sang a few months ago. Absolutely perfect! And then there's some contemporary efforts that fall a little short. I remember surviving a weekend retreat once in which we were constantly afflicted with the most saccharine of contemporary music. I kept imagining what God must have been thinking listening in: "OK, OK, you love me, I get it already. But what else have you got? What are you going to do or think?"

Oh, we're all reeling from the changes that are taking place. Some of us are excited about them- and if everything was changed tomorrow it would be fast enough. Some of us are terrified of these changes- and we resist any innovation and sometimes

even we're not sure. But all of us are reeling from these changes- as Long says, there isn't a church out there that isn't touched in some way by these changes, there isn't a congregational heart, as he puts it, that hasn't experienced some fibrillations over this kairotic moment.

I say all this because this Spring through various small projects and training sessions associated with the Vertical Habits project you've heard a little about from Ellen, we're going to be talking a lot about our worship together- how to include more people in the planning process, how to include people with different gifts and perspectives- young, mature, traditional, and contemporary, and how we might make our worship ever more faithful to God and ever more relevant to our own lives and experience. Change will not happen overnight. And some changes might see us including more ancient elements in our worship and some might see us including language and music more contemporary. Some things we will try will work well- leaving us feeling both faithful and engaged. And some ideas will fall flat. And my hope for us as we become a congregation more knowledgeable about our worship, and more engaged in the creation process- we will be people open to God speaking through both the old and the new. If you're someone who loves all things contemporary- I challenge you this morning to think about traditional elements you really would be sad to lose. And if you're someone who values all that the Reformed and small 'c' catholic tradition has given us for so many centuries, I beg you to remember our God is one who does new things and bids us to sing new songs and to be open to the possibility that liturgy can be new and faithful at the same time.

I also say this because I think there's more than one way to interpret that story about the titanic. You know every time I've heard folks talk about all of those people in the great dining room listening to that wonderful music, folks say it's just the perfect example of how we can stick our heads in the sand and pretend like everything is OK when the world is crashing down around us. And I can see how you might hear it this way- I can. But honestly, that's not how I understand the story at all.

When I think about that story, when I put myself in the shoes of someone on that ship that night- rushing to that great room so full of chaos, and then feeling as if the world absolutely stopped because that one man, Wallace Hartley, had the courage to lift his baton and quiet everything down- I can't help thinking what an act of kindness, what an act of ministry that was. In fact many say that it was only because Hartley and that orchestra that so many were able to be saved- by calming everyone down, Hartley allowed the ship's officers to become better organized and more able to lead the women and children who did manage to escape off that sinking ship.

And do you know how he did it? Do know how Hartley captured those hearts and minds? He played some music they knew, contemporary hits like "Alexander's Rag Time Band" and "In the Shadows". But do you know what the very last song that band played was? Hartley reached back deep into his memory, deep into the souls of everyone gathered there, and they played a song sung by everyone there that night- a sung song by their grandmothers and grandfathers before them. They played "Nearer My God to Thee". That old hymn was later played at Hartley's funeral as well as etched into his tombstone. Did the Spirit touch those hearers on their last night on earth through ragtime and an old hymn- you bet it did. You bet it did.

So as we learn more about worship in the months ahead, as we try to engage it more thoughtfully, more prayerfully, and maybe more creatively in the years to follow- my prayer for us is that we might be open to where the Spirit is blowing, that we might develop ears that can appreciate diversity, and that always, always we might rejoice when something we try works, and that we might shake our heads and laugh when it doesn't- always remembering it is God in the end who gives life to our worship, anyway- never us.

So, as we end, I invite you to put yourself back there on that ship- so many years ago as Wallace Hartley restored calm to souls that needed it. And as you listen to the very words heard back there in 1912- know, too, that the world around stands in just the same need for centering, life giving moments.

Nearer, my God, to Thee, nearer to Thee!  
E'en though it be a cross that raiseth me,  
Still all my song shall be, nearer, my God, to Thee.

There in my Father's home, safe and at rest,  
There in my Savior's love, perfectly blest;  
Age after age to be, nearer my God to Thee.

**Amen.**