

“Honest to God, Or, The Gospel According to *Linkin Park*”
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>>Put a hand on our shoulder and point us in the right direction. Put *our* hand on someone’s shoulder, and let it matter. Amen.<<

July 20 was the one year anniversary of the death of Chester Bennington. Chester Bennington was the lead singer of the alternative metal band *Linkin Park*. His tragic death was devastating to his bandmates and to *Linkin Park*’s millions of fans around the world; *Linkin Park* has not produced new music since. The passing of Chester Bennington was especially tragic given that *Linkin Park* was one of the most successful bands of the 2000s, selling over 100 million albums worldwide, and ranked 19th on *Billboard*’s list of the best bands of the 2000s. Their album *Hybrid Theory* is eleventh on *Billboard*’s best 200 albums of the decade; and it’s listed among the 1001 albums you must hear before you die. Not everyone here today would appreciate *Linkin Park*’s heavy sound, but I suspect their lyrics could resonate with all of us, especially after the news of the past two weeks.

Chester Bennington was a passionate poet, a heartfelt lyricist, writing words that look to me like modern Psalms. “It’s easier to run,” he once sang, “replacing this pain with something numb. It’s so much easier to go than face all this pain here all alone. . . . Wounds so deep they never show, they never go away. Like moving pictures in my head. For years and years they’ve played.”¹ I read those lyrics - I listen to them this week - and in them I heard the cries of survivors, women and men, who’ve been retraumatized over the past two weeks watching the Supreme Court hearings. In another song, Bennington sang, “I wanna heal I wanna let go of this pain I’ve held so long.”²

Ancient Psalmists in scripture often cried out from places of pain in this way - Psalmists like, say, the poet who penned Psalm 22: “I am poured out like water,” sang that Psalmist - that *ancient* Chester Bennington. “All my bones are out of joint; my heart is melting like wax,” the Psalmist continues. “My strength is dried up.” “I am broken like a shattered bowl,” cried another Psalmist. “I am utterly spent,” sang another. “Spent and crushed.” These words - these song lyrics, like Bennington’s lyrics - are so powerful because they’re so human. I think every person here - even if trauma hasn’t been part of your truth - every one of us could read those ancient lyrics and hear the cries of our own hearts, recalling times of feeling “spent and crushed”; “shattered”; “sapped of strength”; “heart melting within.” And I, like many, most, perhaps all of you - we all might hear our feelings in Bennington’s lyrics about wanting to run away, or wanting to feel numb instead of feeling pain, or that name those deep wounds that leave permanent scars. Deaths in the family; tragedies; health crises; public shame; major life transitions; past trauma: each of these can cause the heart to cry out for relief. “I wanna heal,” sang Bennington, when “the floor” feels “pull[ed] from [under my] feet.”³ Psalmists ancient and modern have the gift of translating such feelings into words.

It’s not at all clear to me, reading Bennington’s lyrics, whether he had God on his mind when he sang of pain and healing. But it is clear that scripture writers often addressed God when speaking their truths. Today we read one verse from Psalm 10. It’s a single example from

¹ <https://genius.com/linkin-park-easier-to-run-lyrics>

² <https://genius.com/linkin-park-somewhere-i-belong-lyrics>

³ I mashed two songs together here: <https://genius.com/linkin-park-one-more-light-lyrics>

this 150 chapter songbook of the honest to God posture of the Psalmists. When putting their pain into words, the Psalmists could often be brutally frank: interrogating God; arguing with God; angry at God. “Why do you stand so far away, O Lord,” demands the lyricist in today’s reading? “Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?” Questions that place God on the stand, like in a courtroom setting; and the Psalmist is like a prosecutor demanding answers. Other Psalmists were also honest to God in this way. The writer of Psalm 4 demanded answers, “Answer me when I call out, O God!” “Listen to my prayers!” The writer of Psalm 13 asked, “How long, O Lord, will you forget me?” “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me,” asks the writer of Psalm 22? “Listen to me, O Lord,” said the writer of Psalm 30, “help me!” “How long, O Lord, will you look on and do nothing,” cried the writer of Psalm 35? “Why have you cast us off,” asks the writer of Psalm 43? “Wake up! Stop sleeping!” demanded the writer of Psalm 44.

These questions and demands - these interrogations arising from places of pain, and from feelings of abandonment, as the walls close in and the light at the tunnel’s end dims - these heartfelt lyrics, like those of that modern Psalmist Chester Bennington, are not, in my view, statements of theological truth. The Psalmists aren’t building theology by saying declaratively that God is distant, or that God doesn’t answer, or that God won’t help in times of trouble. These honest to God questions and demands are expressions of human *feelings*: during times of trouble we can sometimes feel so alone that it *feels* like even God is far away and mute. It’s why Jesus himself quotes Psalm 22 from the cross: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Modern poet Christian Wiman once wrote that pain can make you feel so alone, it’s like being on your own island: “[Pain] islands you,” he said. But here’s the paradox of these accusations and questions on the lips of ancient and modern Psalmists: their mere articulation of such raw emotion, their mere articulation of those dark questions - their honesty to God - is actually evidence of their relationship to God. “The cry of faith,” wrote Christian Wiman, “even if it is a cry against God, moves toward God ... as in the cries of Job.”⁴ Yes, the questions, the emotions, the accusations are evidence of relationship, evidence of *authentic* relationship; for, as any one of us in long term relationships with life partners or with friends or with crazy extended family members or with our children - basically, as any of us who interact with other human beings on a regular basis can attest, relationships are not all balloons and unicorns. Sometimes relationships are brutal, filled with friction and pain and anger and arguments. And, sometimes the more authentic they are the more frank and honest and direct they can be; and this even applies to relationship with God.

Take Moses for example in today’s reading from Numbers. Numbers is one of those obscure ancient biblical books that doesn’t get much attention on the Revised Common Lectionary - those Bible readings on a three-year cycle that we *usually* follow each Sunday along with every other mainline, Catholic, and Orthodox Christian church in the world. Today’s lectionary reading from Numbers is an extraordinary example of being honest to God. The setting of today’s story is post-exodus. The people of Israel have been liberated from slavery in Egypt, and they’re wandering in the wilderness, slowly making their way to the “Promised Land.” They’ve known hunger along the way, and have cried out to God for relief. God provided “manna” to sustain them - a wafer-like substance, like snow, appearing on the earth each morning to fill their bellies as they journey. The Hebrew word “manna” is actually a question that means something like, “What is it?” In today’s story the Israelites had grown

⁴ Christian Wiman, *My Bright Abyss: Meditation of a Modern Believer* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013), 53.

weary of this daily “what is it,” snowflake-like bread, and they craved meat. And, as was often the case during their wilderness-wandering, the Israelites’ complaints reached the ears of Moses. Moses then addresses God in one of scripture’s most extraordinary moments of accusation: “Why have you treated me so badly,” Moses demands of God? “Why have you laid these burdens on me,” he goes on? And then Moses gets more pointed: “Did I conceive all this people? Did I give birth to them?” Moses knows the answer to these questions. He knows that God has claimed motherhood over Israel; that God has “given birth” to this people at the exodus; and so, Moses’ accusatory questions are intended to incite mother-God to do something. And, then, from a place of pain, at the end of his rope, Moses shakes a fist at God and says, “If this is how you’re going to treat me, I’d rather die.” You know, we sometimes think that prayer needs to be polite as in a pleasant letter: “Dear God, please do X, Y, and Z. Sincerely, Me.” This is not how Moses addresses God. His questions - his accusations - are heartfelt, like those Psalmists, like Chester Bennington. His demands are anguished. They’re not polite; they’re authentic - signs of an authentic relationship he has with God, so authentic that he can speak from the heart; he can be honest to God about his pain and his anger.

...The past two weeks in our country have been so hard to process, so filled with emotion, so exhausting: the impassioned testimonies about destroyed lives - what one political commentator called “carnage”; the viral video of two women tearfully sharing their stories with a Senator in an elevator. One of those women later said it was a moment’s decision “in a flash of righteous rage.”⁵ And it altered the course of the week’s events. Cutting through the partisan vitriol, the back-and-forth, said another commentator, has been maddening, like trying to hack through a thick jungle with a butter knife. It reminds me of an anecdote shared by Gil Anidjar, professor of comparative literature at Columbia.⁶ “One late night,” writes Anidjar, “a man is pacing under a streetlight. Another [man] comes along [and asks,] ‘Have you lost something?’ ‘Yes,’ answers the first, ‘[I’ve lost] my keys.’ [The two of them] searched together for a while [under the streetlight]. ‘Are you sure you lost them here?’ [asks the second man]. ‘Oh, no, no. I dropped them over there,’ [replied the first man,] ‘but here is where the light is.’” The Kavanaugh hearings have been, for me, like watching people search for truth in this mind-bending way; and, all the while, survivors are emerging from the shadows of pain to share their heart-wrenching stories, triggered by the testimonies and by the responses to them. And, as a country, we’re witnessing, what another commentator calls, the degradation of another of our revered institutions.⁷ Writer Diana Butler Bass observed that since 2001, one by one, our institutions feel as if they’re crumbling:⁸ the twin towers on 9-11; the clergy abuse stories in the Boston Globe beginning in 2002; the rise of the so-called “new atheists” soon thereafter criticizing the role of religion in our lives; the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan; the financial collapse in 2008; the ongoing gridlock in congress; the demeaning of the press as “fake news”; the changing face of academia with more and more professors on impermanent contracts; mass shootings in schools; the deaths of African Americans at the hands of police; the widening economic divide; the arguments over sexuality in churches; and now the Supreme Court. The satirical website, The Babylon Bee, in an attempt to interject some humor, Tweeted last week: “God check[ed] Twitter, [and then] immediately bump[ed] up date for the apocalypse.” Many of these issues named by Diana Butler Bass have been

⁵ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/28/us/politics/jeff-flake-protesters-kavanaugh.html>

⁶ Gil Anidjar, *Blood: A Critique of Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), xii.

⁷ http://www.lowellsun.com/opinion/ci_32159323/degradation-supreme-court-confirmation-process

⁸ See Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity After Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening* (New York: HarperCollins, 2012), 20.

years in the making, and it's possible, as one preacher pointed out, that all of these are just growing pains as we evolve as a society: we regress and then we progress.

But reflecting on this recent history - reflecting on the past two weeks in our country, the stories, the testimonies, the pain, the emotion - recalls for me the words of preacher Barbara Brown Taylor, who once said that such events "mak[e] theologians of us all." "The questions people ask about God in Sunday School," she goes on, "rarely compare with the questions we ask when we are in [life's] hospital[s] *Why me? Why now? Why this? . . .*"⁹ Life's hospitals are those places where pain is personal and visceral; places where the rawest of emotions are given voice, like when Moses confronts God in today's reading from Numbers; or, in those impassioned lyrics penned by ancient Psalmists and also by modern Psalmists like *Linkin Park's* Chester Bennington: "Why do you stand so far away, O Lord," demands the Psalmist? "Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?" "It's so much easier to go than face all this pain here all alone," sang Bennington.

The good news - the gospel for today - is that such cries don't hit deaf ears. Life's hospitals can be places of healing. God answered Moses in today's story - answered with such grace that I think even Moses was stunned by it. In today's story, God isn't offended in the least by Moses' piercing accusations and questions. God patiently listens, and then graciously answers by gathering a group of people - a community of 70 others - to share the burden, to displace the pain and spread the weight so the load Moses carries feels lighter. And the Psalmists, with their impassioned cries, aren't speaking alone into a void. Their lyrics are meant to be read and sung and prayed in community, alongside others, who can help carry the weight. And today's reading from James translates this honest-to-God gospel into a church setting when the writer urges people to pray with others in the community of faith; to pray together and to confess what needs confessing; to pray and share in a safe place, so the weight of the burden can be displaced, spread onto other shoulders, and not carried alone. There's vulnerability in community; but there's also strength and grace and healing. Amen.

⁹ Quoted in *Celtic Daily Prayer, Book Two: Further Up and Farther In* (The Northumbria Community Trust, 2015), 1296.