
I'll Fly Away

**An article from the *Cathedral Times*
by Dean Sam Candler**

When I was a child, the old country-bluegrass-whatever song, “I’ll Fly Away” was a regular on our family’s song list. When we gathered with our guitars and banjos, and occasionally with my rather out-of-place piano, we almost always sang it:

Some glad morning, when this life is o’er,
I’ll fly away,
To a home on God’s celestial shore,
I’ll fly away.

Later, when we began to examine the actual religious message of songs, some of us questioned the song’s theological intent. Is it really our goal, in this life, just to get away from it? Is our dream simply to leave this world? Shouldn’t we rather be working to serve the world we live in, rather than wishing to get to heaven? Shouldn’t we want to engage and not escape? Yes, we declared, “thy kingdom come on earth, as it is in heaven!”

But I learned later that the song’s author, Albert E. Brumley, was, indeed, stuck in an occupation that he wanted to flee from. He was picking cotton on his family’s land in Oklahoma. He said he was dreaming one day of an earlier song about getting out of prison. (See “The Prisoner’s Song,” and its line, “If I had the wings of an angel, over these prison walls I would fly.”)

Okay, well, I get that. Yes, there are plights in our human life from which we long to escape. Maybe it is the type of work we are in. (Brumley was not an African-American slave.) Maybe it is some prison that we are bound to, whether through our own fault or not. Or maybe it is just a psychological stuckness, a bondage, that we want to flee from. It certainly does make sense to long to be set free from those types of prisons.

A few days ago, I was listening to the morning prayer lectionary as I took my morning walk. When you see me walking around the Cathedral on early mornings. I am almost always listening to the day’s lectionary readings in my ear pods. That day, a Saturday, Psalm 55 was the lesson:

My heart is in anguish within me,
the terrors of death have fallen upon me.
Fear and trembling come upon me,
and horror overwhelms me.
And I say, “O that I had wings like a dove!
I would fly away and be at rest;
truly, I would flee far away;
I would lodge in the wilderness. (Psalm 55:4-7)

Once again, the psalmist expresses our deepest psychological challenges even as the psalm expresses spiritual truth. There are times when our spirit reminds us that we are not supposed to be in a particular situation. It is not mere escapism that we long for. (One of our society’s most severe illnesses, it seems to me, is that there are so many people who want to be

somewhere different from where they are!)

What we long for is a celestial shore, a place where heaven is! But that place can be here, on earth. That place can even look like a wilderness (Psalm 55:7). Ultimately, it is good to long for that place, both physical and spiritual, where we can know holiness, where we can know God. In God, our spirit can be free to know holiness even in the same physical place we once tried to flee. So, take a break right where you are one day. Say a prayer. Take a walk. Sing a song with your family. Your spirit might indeed fly away, to a celestial shore that has been near you all the time.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sam Candler". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

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