
I'll Fly Away! Escapism and Ascension!

A sermon by the Very Rev. Sam Candler
The Seventh Sunday of Easter – The Sunday after the Ascension

So when they had come together, they asked Jesus, 'Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?' Jesus replied, 'It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.' When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. — Acts 1:6-9

Sometimes the only way I can understand something is to sing it. Today, I think of the beautiful musician, James Taylor. Surely we remember his smooth guitar work, with its dazzling chords and sweet harmonies, and his fluid voice. In a lovely autobiographical book, an audiobook called "Break Shot," he speaks about how he was the son of a scientist, and had absolutely no church connection. He says that his parents thought southern evangelicals were snake oil salesmen. But, the boarding school he attended had mandatory chapel, three times a week; and he chose the Episcopal service for that requirement because it was closest to his dorm.

There, in chapel, he was introduced to the Protestant hymnal. He says, "That's bedrock stuff, in terms of harmony and western music. It's our common musical culture. It leads to a lot of southern gospel, both white and black. I would sing a bass harmony, a middle harmony, I would experiment with where in the song to put my voice. It taught me a lot. ... Those hymns were a musical education to me. I learned them on the guitar, and they taught me all I know."

I don't share the talent of James Taylor, but I do share his familiarity with old gospel music. Even as an Episcopalian, I grew up singing it on Saturday nights with all the country music. And sometimes I associate those old songs with some funny things. I associate those songs with things that aren't supposed to be funny!

I will give you an example today. It starts with a confession. I confess that the event we observe this week, across Christendom, baffles me. Forty days after the observance of Easter, the Christian Church observes Ascension Day, and today, the Sunday after Ascension Day. We note, simply, that Jesus was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of sight. Well, that's just weird.

So, in a humorous way, as a joke to maybe help me understand it, I think of a song. The Ascension actually makes me think of an old gospel song that my family used to sing, and still does.

*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.*

I like singing that song, but I have also challenged that song. Does God call us to fly away? When things get tough, and the world needs changing, are we supposed to dream of flying away? So, the song can sound like escapism to me. It can sound like Christians who do not want to meet the challenges of the world. "I want to fly away from here!"

I know that we Christians often explain Ascension of Jesus by saying that it makes way for the descent of the Holy Spirit. We say that as the literal, earthly, body of Jesus has ascended, so then the descent of the Holy Spirit makes us the spiritual Body of Christ; and we are empowered to go out and into the world in the same mission of Jesus. I get that.

But, when Jesus leaves us, are we supposed to want to fly away like he did? Do we say, "Yes, I want to be like

Jesus, and I want especially to be like him in the Ascension! I want to be lifted up. I want to fly myself out of this prison and these challenges. Sometimes, I am just tired of being patient and kind and longsuffering and prayerful and generous. But it's too much. Get me out of here! I'll fly away, oh Glory, I'll fly away. Some glad morning when this life is over, I will fly away."

The stress of this world can tempt us to fly away in unhealthy ways. It is unhealthy escapism that drives us to addictions. We all know of addictions to alcohol and drugs. But there are other addictions which offer misguided fantasies of how to get away from it all: addiction to anger, for instance, and its power to make us believe that if we simply explode in quick anger at the situation, it will be okay.

Or, addiction to control! An addiction that so many of us share. We want to be in control! And, sadly, many of us see our country as a place where we have lost control. Whether in our culture or in our families, however, when we sense we are losing control, human beings are tempted to act rashly.

When we are losing control, we try to seize more of it somewhere. We try to seize control wherever we can seize it, like adding our own brilliant analyses and solutions to these crisis situations, or -worse- by stealing control from others, stealing control from what little the others around us have had. Seizing control is also addictive behavior. We all want to fly away! We want to escape! But none of those ways is the way to escape. None of those is the way out, or the way up.

James Taylor, you may know, is a self-acknowledged recovering addict. Back to his autobiography again. His self-awareness, in my mind, provides a kind of genius for me. He talks about escape. He speaks of drugs as an attempt to escape ourselves.

Listen to what he says: "Any drug is a shortcut to the mechanism that makes a reward in your brain. We all want to escape ourselves. ... The best part of us knows we have to transcend that, if we are going to survive as a family, as a tribe, as a nation, as a species. We have to think as a collective. We have to cooperate. ... Religious faith moves us towards a collective consciousness. So does music. It allows us to give our individuated egos the slip... Music takes us outside the prison of the self, which is an ecstatic thing to have happen. (Minute 58 in "Break Shot.")

Wow. Yes, Taylor reminds us that we are, actually, supposed to be trying to escape something. His words are that we are supposed to be trying "to give our individuated egos the slip." Healthy people are able to transcend our egos. Good music, and good religion, help us to do that. Intoxicants, however, last only a while, and then they turn on us.

So, that's James Taylor's gift to me, and maybe to us, in this Ascension season. Maybe the Ascension represents not simply some old objective historical event. Maybe the Ascension is about being able to give our individuated egos the slip, to rise to a place where we appreciate the collective consciousness.

This collective consciousness is what Jesus prayed for, in John 17, "Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one." So that they may be one, as we are one.

The way towards our spiritual unity is to give up our egos, or at least our false egos, so that we can be part of something greater. I think this is what Jesus had in mind when he said things like, "those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it" (Luke 9:23-24).

Thus, Jesus's ascension is his final act of losing himself, giving himself up, escaping his individuated ego – leaving in place, and exposing, that greater good, the Holy Spirit of God, who makes us one collective body. The true Body of Christ.

Yes, in a way, our yearnings for escape are natural. They are real. They represent the deepest part of ourselves wanting to break up and out. Such addictions as intoxicants, or immediate gratifications, or shopping, may tempt us; but they do not transport us to a blessed transcendence. I'll fly away.

That's what I want to sing to my false ego. That's what I want to sing to my false self, these days.

*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.*

It's an Ascension hymn, to ourselves!

AMEN.

The Very Reverend Samuel G. Candler
Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip

© *The Cathedral of St. Philip. All rights reserved.*