

All Our Love *and* All Our Rage

I recently went to an excellent concert in Indianapolis that involved two folk/Americana singer/songwriters, Carsie Blanton and Nathan Evans Fox, who are singing for the revolution. They are following in a grand tradition of using the music of the people to galvanize the people in solidarity against the powers and systems that crush us all for the sake of consolidating ever more power, whether political or financial or both. Their songwriting is impeccable, and their fierce disdain for the powers that be is edifying and infectious in the best possible way. I found myself wondering about the variety of responses this music would receive from a random selection of people who identify themselves as Christian. As for me, I would say their music is a pretty good expression of the anti-fascist good news of Jesus, based in holy rage, joy, and unstoppable love of neighbor and this beautiful world that is our shared home.

Does the idea of rage being involved in gospel give you pause, or maybe upset you? You're not alone. And, honestly, the way we tend to deal with our anger isn't generally all that great. We are really good at being angry, and encouraging others to be angry with us, but so often it turns into a sort of directionless loop of rage, like a snake eating its own tail. That's not healthy, productive, or holy. But we all know Jesus got plenty angry, and more than once. In the Fall of 2016, I was puzzling over my fury at the election and trying to square it with my faith. I wrote this note for myself:

Love incarnate cracks a whip in righteous fury and drives bankers and merchants from the temple. Love incarnate shouts, over and over, "You hypocrites!" and holds those in authority to account. Love incarnate tells the rich and powerful that their wealth and privilege are not the same thing as being and doing good. Love incarnate stands with and lifts up the marginalized and oppressed and speaks out against those who marginalize and oppress. Love incarnate loves people enough to believe they should be goaded out of their worst selves into their better selves and better relationships with other people and with God.

Don't worry - I don't know how to craft or crack a whip. But I do think that there are times when the only Christ-following emotional response to injustice must include righteous anger – however much we run the risk of not being Midwest Nice™. You can love God and love your neighbors *and* be madder than a wet mother hen at the way the powers and systems structuring society crush and exploit your neighbors and yourself. It's what Jesus would do.

Perhaps anger is a necessary facet of hope, a fire that keeps us from being swallowed by the apathy of grief or nihilism. There were plenty of good examples of this in the songs performed at the concert. In his song *Bottleneck*, Nathan Evans Fox sings:

If the work won't kill you then Tennessee will,
It ain't the way that it is,
It's the way it's been built.

My daughter got her daddy back last spring
From the belly of a whale that swallowed everything,

I returned with a rage at what it stole and what I'd seen,
Maybe rage is the kind of hope that these days need.

Carsie Blanton sang *Down In the Streets*, which is an upbeat bop of a song that includes the following lyrics:

And they say we been stealin
But who's the real villain?
When we can't even make a livin
And they're out there makin a killin
So all my friends in the streets tonight
We go singin
All my friends who're down and out
We're gonna fight
For all our friends in the up above
With all our rage and all our love
Addin fuel to the fire
Down in the streets tonight

Rage tempered by, directed by, fueled by love is something powerful, isn't it? A loving, heart-broken-open fury that sings with friends, that joins with neighbors to fight injustice, that fuels the fires of change – that can't be bad. But it does need direction.

At one point during the concert, Carsie Blanton shared that, in an online seminar regarding an artist's role in social/political change, the instructor said, essentially, you must tell the horrible truth about the injustice of the present circumstance (make way for righteous anger), but that's not enough—you *must* offer a vision of what the better future can be. There's got to be *hope*.

Enter Fox's *Hillbilly Hymn (Okra & Cigarettes)*:

When Kingdom come we'll want for nothing
Just a long table, a mess of beans and honey buns
The trucks are small, the trains are late
The men pick up their dinner plates
Nobody sees that the debts are paid
The guns are all for shooting clays.

When the Lord comes back the rich get scared
Ain't gotta act mean to be treated fair
All the living's honest and dying too
Our bodies return as heirlooms

I'm just going to go ahead and admit I got a little weepy during this song – it even includes a line about leaving tall grass for the critters' rest. It's moving in its simple, beautiful vision of the lives we can live together if we have the guts to give up the devil we know.

One of Blanton's more poetic offerings of the hopeful vision is found in her song *Suddenly the Spring*:

When the smoke has cleared
Birds begin to sing
Though the world has ended
Suddenly the spring
After all is lost
Every little thing
All that you defended
Suddenly the spring
From the winter's dark
Little flowers grow
From a broken heart
Suddenly something comes
From underneath the snow
When the ashes fall
Bells begin to ring
Singing from the rubble
Suddenly the spring
When the smoke has cleared
Birds begin to sing
After all the trouble
Suddenly the spring

The end of what we've always known will be scary, painful, even sad. *And* it is the beginning of new life, flowers grow in a broken heart, songs of joy break through the rubble

All of which is to say, we *can* be angry and faithful. In fact, we *should* be angry about a whole lot that's going on these days. And goodness knows it's all-too easy to be enraged. But we can't *only* be angry, and we can't feed the outrage algorithm until we're starved of hope, joy, and, the source of all that's good—love. We can't trap ourselves and our neighbors under the weight of what is wrong. We've got to offer the vision and assurance that something new and different and *good* is possible, and live like we believe it. And friends, if that's not the work of Jesus, and of us as his followers, then I don't know what is.

With all my rage and all my love,

Pastor January