

FROSTY THE SNOWMAN

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As entrée to our material this weekend, I asked Kristin to put together an ensemble to perform a song from Phil Spector's Christmas Album. Phil Spector's "Wall of Sound" defined pop radio in the early-60s, most famously, his "Girl Groups": The Crystals, Darlene Love, The Ronettes.

Back then, pretty much every pop act produced a Christmas album, heavy on secular songs of the season. Most were fairly lamentable--none more so than the Beach Boys Christmas entry, featuring perhaps the single worst song of the season ever recorded, "Little Saint Nick." (Here's a flash: "Christmas comes this time each year.")

In the autumn of 1963. Phil Spector gathered the stars of his label to produce "A Christmas Gift For You." The Crystals did a Spectorized "Santa Claus Is Coming To Town," the arrangement regularly performed to this day by Bruce Springsteen & The E-Street Band in their winter shows. Darlene Love pleaded, "Baby Please Come Home" for Christmas. The second track of side 1, "Frosty The Snowman," as performed by the Ronettes.

If I might digress. Sound guy Bob Tjarks wounded me, however inadvertently, in conversation last year. I was talking about having seen the Beatles live and in concert at Busch Stadium in St. Louis, year of our Lord 1966. I think the Fab Four played a grand total of twenty minutes, but it was cool to say I'd been there. And I could celebrate this: The bill included The Ronettes, so named for the lead singer, Veronica "Ronnie" Spector. I was pleased and proud to say I had heard Ronnie Spector sing "Be My Baby." It made me glow just to think of it...

Only to have Brother Bob inform me Ronnie had been on the outs with her producer/husband in the summer of '66, banished from the tour. Of course, it could have been worse. In 2003, Phil

Spector would be found guilty of murdering an actress/lover. Phil Spector is a prime exhibit as to the thin line between genius and insanity.

Having initially reacted with denial--surely Bob must be misinformed!—I did an internet search and lo and behold, Ronnie Spector had not been at Busch Stadium on August 21, 1966. All these years, I'd been deceived... I want my \$4.50 back!

It tells you all you need to know of my regard for Bob Tjarks that even as he burst that bubble and persists on wearing a Cubs hat, I continue to value his friendship and the gifts and graces he brings to this ministry. Who says I don't have a forgiving nature?

Before he was a children's book, before he was a cartoon character, before his first television special, "Frosty the Snowman" was the creation of songwriters Jack Rollins and Steve Nelson, whose previous collaborations had included "Here Comes Peter Cottontail....."

In the winter of 1949, America's original singing cowboy, Gene Autry, released a Christmas collection featuring a brand new song of the season: "Rudolph The Red Nosed Reindeer." 'Twas a musical sensation! "Rudolph" having flown all the way to #1, Rollins and Nelson thought Autry might be interested in their song, and so it was that in December of 1950, America heard Gene Autry and the Cass County Boys crooning...

*Frosty the snowman was a jolly happy soul
With a corncob pipe and a button nose
And two eyes made out of coal.... STOP*

This is the Phil Spector arrangement, as performed by St. Andrew's own Fabulous Frost-ettes!

*Frosty the snowman
Was a jolly happy soul,
With a corncob pipe and a button nose
And two eyes made out of coal.*

*Frosty the snowman is a fairy tale, they say,
He was made of snow
But the children know
How he came to life one day.*

*There must have been some magic in that
Old silk hat they found.
For when they placed it on his head
He began to dance around.*

*O, Frosty the snowman
Was alive as he could be,
And the children say he could laugh
And play just the same as you and me.*

*He led them down the streets of town
Right to the traffic cop.
And he only paused a moment when
They heard him holler "Stop!"*

*Frosty the snow man
Had to hurry on his way,
But he waved goodbye saying,
"Don't you cry, I'll be back again some day."*

Isn't that the saddest song? Our frozen friends is having a fine old time, laughing and playing with the children, well aware it can't last. The sun is going to come out, the temperature is going to warm up. Which will be fine with his playmates. The children will have other games to play. Not so, Frosty: He'll be reduced to a puddle, washed away by an early spring rain. And that will be the end of him.

I've been promoting this message with the sub-title, "How Can You Be A Happy, Jolly Soul, When You Know You're Going To Melt?" The question has long been pondered on by more profound minds than *moi*.

The teacher in Ecclesiastes, often identified with King Solomon himself, was tormented by thoughts of his own mortality. It hardly seemed fair. He had built a life of distinction and accomplishment. He had tasted every pleasure, accumulated vast wealth, was renowned as the wisest man of his generation, only to be brought low by this realization: He was going to die just like anyone else. Here's how it reads in the book, Ecclesiastes 2:15-17:

Then I said to myself, 'What happens to the fool will happen to me also; why then have I been so very wise?' And I said to myself that this also is vanity. For there is no enduring remembrance of the wise or of fools, seeing that in the days to come all will have been forgotten. How can the wise die just like the fool? So I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me; for all is vanity and chasing after the wind.

Add this cruel twist: the fool may not think about it much, living in denial as to his or her fate. Whereas the more philosophical mind can't help but dwell on it.

Sayeth another of my favorite philosophers, Hank Williams: "No matter how I struggle and strive, I'll never get out of this world alive." If the wise and fool share the same end, what's the point of the struggling and striving in the first place? Pass the opioids!

Last weekend, talking about Chuck Berry, I shared this grade school photograph, arrow pointing to Roger Troy, remembering him as the first person of color I ever laid eyes on.

In that same class picture: Russell Martin. I suppose this would have been Russell's last class picture. I am quite certain Russell was the first person I knew who died. Not counting old people, of course. But when you're in 4th grade, old age barely computes. But Russell; Russell was a friend of mine.

I remember, we showed up for class one day and Russell's desk was unoccupied. Principal came in, as I recall, took the teacher out into the hall. The teacher came back in, and I forget if it was her or the principal broke the news: Russell had been riding with his father in a pickup truck, Russell fell out of the truck, somehow, and got run over, and Russell was dead. Oh.

I kept waiting for Russell to come back to school. I mean, people on the television were all the time getting killed, then reappearing in another series or maybe a rerun. But time passed. No sign of Russell. I suppose someone else was eventually parked at his desk, and the reading, writing and arithmetic went on. Didn't seem right.... Still doesn't.

Pause here for some Skeeter Davis

*I wake up in the morning and I wonder
Why everything's the way that it was
I can't understand, no I can't understand
Why life goes on the way it does...*

This is the easy listening edition of a homiletical elegy I've been working with off and on for decades. In a former iteration, it was set to the hard-edged Jim Carroll Band:

*Teddy sniffing glue he was 12 years old,
Fell from the roof on east two-nine
Cathy was 11 when she pulled the plug
On 26 reds and a bottle of wine
Bobby got leukemia, 14 years old
He looked sixty five when he died
He was a friend of mine*

*These are people who died, died
These are people who died, died
These are people who died, died
These are people who died, died
They were all friends of mine
And they died.*

“People Who Died”—the sermon, featured a litany of friends of mine who’d passed. It was, as I recall, really quite effective. But I haven’t done “People Who Died” for twenty years, I suppose, and by now, the list of friends who’ve died has become so long as to make the project prohibitive. Guys in my bands, guys I went to school with, fellow clergy, old girl friends, and God only knows by now how many parishioners who I counted as friends of mine. The accumulated loss is kind of staggering when I stop and think about it, so I try not to think about it.

This is something I’ve considered in trying to understand my own ministry arc, including where I am at the present moment. Think on it, folks: Jesus’ public ministry only lasted three years, the time it took me to get through seminary. I’ve wondered, sometimes, if that’s all he could take.

There’s no suggestion Jesus was himself a “happy, jolly soul.” “A man of sorrows, acquainted with grief,” is more like it. I’m just telling you what’s in the book. Though I’m thinking it wasn’t his own sorrows that got to him so much, as the sorrows of others.

Nancy and I have been doing a lot of sorting through at the house. Came across this softball, autographed by Tim Reynolds and the St. Joseph, Missouri, national championship caliber Men’s Fast Pitch All-Stars. If I don’t go through the entire “People Who Died” litany, got to tell you about Tim Reynolds.

Once upon a time, not so long ago, Men’s fast-pitch softball was a big deal in these United States, St. Joseph, Missouri, being a hotbed of the sport. King of the Diamond in our town: Tim Reynolds.

Folks, if you’ve never tried to hit a quality fast-pitch softball hurler, it’s difficult to describe. At my first stop in ministry, Pattonsburg, Missouri, I’d been recruited to play on the local town team. I’d never played fast pitch before, but I could hit a baseball, so how hard could this be? Answer: Darn near impossible.

I remember my first game, stepping into the batter's box in McFall, Missouri, this old guy on the mound, my young self quite certain I was going to take him. He winds, whips, releases, and my teammates are saying, "Good eye!"-- from which I deduced the ball had been out of the strike zone, though, truth be told, it had come in so fast, I hadn't even seen it. Then, about the time I thought I might have my timing down (Bring it!), the pitcher would throw a change up, me lunging at the ball, falling to the ground. Mine was a skills set suitable to slow pitch.

On a regulation baseball diamond, the distance from the mound to home plate is sixty feet, six inches. In fast-pitch softball, it's 43 feet. Tim Reynolds stood 6' 6" tall. By time he pushed off the rubber, striding straight toward the hitter, left arm whipping through the motion, he was on top of the batter before the ball left his hand. There was no time to "swing." Best bet: Push the bat toward the ball and hope for the best. At the elite level, where Tim Reynolds played, the first team to score usually won. 2-1 was a high scoring affair.

One of the more memorable evenings of my ministry was the eve of the national tournament coming to St Joe. Teams from coast to coast were converging on our town. And I remember Tim Reynolds coming by the parsonage, him and me standing out front, leaning on his car, as he talked about everything but the big game...

Tim and I played basketball together in the winter. In our league, having Tim Reynolds in the lineup was like Gulliver against the Lilliputans. 'Twas a shooter's dream. Teams would collapse their defense on Tim, trying to keep the ball out of his hands, leaving me wide open to shoot uncontested fifteen footers.

I remember, one game, he had the ball above his head, all five defenders swarming around him. They're hacking at him; the referee having swallowed his whistle, Tim took the ball and bopped one of the Lilliputans on the top of the head. Even the Lilliputs seemed to think it was funny.

Then one winter, he missed a game, then another, some kind of undefined illness. Then it was defined. Cancer. Colon cancer. Doctors tried to cut it out, fitted him with one of these catheters. Here's the thing. In the course of whipping his fastball, Tim would clip the left side of his torso with his throwing arm. He explained the aerodynamics, but that's been a long time ago now. What I remember is this: His pitching motion went through the exact place the catheter was located.

Still, he persisted, taking the field, toeing the rubber. But every pitch was a struggle now. I think of it these thirty years later, and it was like I could almost see him melt before my eyes, shrinking physically. Still couldn't imagine he was actually going to die. Not Tim Reynolds. Not this good Christian man, blessed with a beautiful wife and terrific family. But he did.

And here's the thing people won't tell you about this job. Somewhere, deep in the recesses of the pastoral soul, is the throbbing notion that as God's man of the scene, I ought to be able to do something about it. Cancer cells, come out! Or something. I don't know...

Back to our song: Frosty, well aware of his own demise, tells the children not to cry. This isn't the end. Cheer up kiddies. I'll be back. I'm remembering Jesus said much the same thing...

In the 14th chapter of John's gospel, we read of his last supper with the varsity. It wasn't a happy, jolly occasion to begin with, the gloom increasing when Jesus forecasts, "One of you will betray me." Judas having left the room, Jesus says to those who remain:

"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and take you to myself so that where I am, there you may be also."

And while the guys around the table are bummed now, and what's about to happen is going to be really hard...

"I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you."

Fun fact: There's controversy as to when Frosty is coming back. In the original lyric, he'll "be back again someday." When Frosty made his television debut in 1954, the lyric was tweaked to "I'll be back on Christmas Day." I suppose advertisers thought it would be good for seasonal sales. That said, having Frosty born again on Christmas Day sounds like heresy to me, so we'll sing it as originally written.

Jesus was pretty non-specific about when to expect his return, speaking in terms of "a little while":

"A little while, and you will no longer see me, and again a little while, you will see me."

Turn now to Paul's first letter to the Church in Corinth. Paul planted the congregation on a missionary tour through Asia Minor and Greece. Having Shared the Gospel of Jesus Christ in Corinth, he gathered believers, formed them into a community of faith, appointed local leadership, then moved on to repeat the process in other places. The bulk of the New Testament is made up of letters of Paul to these congregations, offering encouragement and instruction.

Paul's first letter to the Corinthians begins with him saying he was hearing troubling reports of congregational dysfunction. (Holding congregations together is harder than it looks.) Paul was hearing talk of division within the fellowship, the church splintering along lines of personality, class, ideology. Paul himself had come under attack from would-be leaders who were trying to build themselves up by tearing Paul down. Paul felt the need to address some of this...

Now I would remind you, brothers and sisters (we're in chapter 15, now, starting at verse one) of the good news that I proclaimed to you, which you in turn received, in which also you stand, through which you are being saved, if you hold firm to the message that I proclaimed to you—unless you have come to believe in vain.

I'd be lying if I said I was entirely sure about that last part: "Unless you have come to believe in vain." There seems to be little unanimity in the commentaries. Again, I find "Frosty" helpful: "Frosty The Snowman is a fairy tale, they say."

There were people in Paul's generation, including some it seems at 1st Church Corinth, who were saying this whole resurrection business was a "fairy tale." Paul's message sounded as far-fetched in his generation as it does to many in ours.

Paul wasn't an idiot. He was a highly educated man who, to the astonishment of his former friends, had thrown in with the rabble who insisted Jesus was raised from the dead, and those who believe shall be raised with him. Of course, that could be "in vain." It might be a fairy tale. Paul had wagered his entire existence that it wasn't. Far from a fairy tale, the message he was proclaiming was ultimate truth, a matter of eternal life and death...

For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas (*Simon Peter*), then to the twelve.

Remember, Jesus had said "in a little while you will see me." In Peter's case, it was three days.

Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he appeared to James (*that's Jesus'*

brother, currently serving as chairman of the board), then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. (We first meet Paul in the Book of Acts, an up and comer in the same religious establishment that had wanted Jesus dead.)

But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them—though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. Whether then it was I or they, so we proclaim and so you have come to believe.

Bottom line, Paul had no interest in playing the game of “I’m a better apostle than you are.” What was of first importance was not the preacher; what mattered was what was being preached. And what was preached mattered.... The next verse takes us to the nub of what was really bumming Paul”

Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead?

Oh dear. Paul was hardly an ideological bigot. In this same letter, chapter 13, he confesses that on his best day, he sees through a glass dimly. Paul never claims to have all the answers. That said, there were a few non-negotiable ideas, the resurrection being the least negotiable of them all:

If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain. We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified of God that he raised Christ—whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised.

For if the dead are not raised then Christ has not been raised. If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and

you are still in your sins. Then those also have died in Christ have perished. If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.

One of the concerns I have about the mainline Protestant Church of our generation is what I sense as a waffling on the raising of the dead. Of course, it sounds like a fairy tale to some. But was I lying to Tim Reynolds—and the many hundreds of others over these 43-plus years--when I shared the assurance of Holy Scripture, “Whether we live, or whether we die, we are the Lord’s”?

That said, it must be admitted, the 21st century theological task is a little easier without resurrection. We don’t have to get fussy as to whether Muslims or well-meaning atheists, or whoever, can be saved. Jesus as good man who loved everybody and died young isn’t going to offend anybody—and, Lord knows, we don’t want to offend anybody.

And we really do, so very much, want to be “relevant.”

That said, I’ve never been sure why anyone would want to buy into secular-friendly Jesus. Seems to me you could just tune into Oprah.

Give me a drum roll, Bill....

Friends, Jesus did not go to the cross with the promise he’ll come back and show us how to start a soup kitchen. Not dissing soup kitchens or other good works. But such are not the main event. Here is the main event....

But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of the people who have died

Will you sing with me...

**Some glad morning when this life is o'er,
I'll fly away.**

To that home on God's celestial shore,
I'll fly away.

I'll fly away, oh glory, I'll fly away.
When I die, Hallelujah, by and by,
I'll fly away.

Having stated the resurrection of Christ as FACT, Paul proceeds:

But someone will ask, 'How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?' FOOLISH QUESTION!

For what it's worth, I don't think the question is foolish, at all. More like "unanswerable." Paul continues:

What I am saying, brothers and sisters, is this: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable put inherit the imperishable. Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality. When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled: 'Death has been swallowed up in victory.' 'Where, O death, is your victory? Where O death is your sting?' The sting of death is sin and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.

When the shadows of this life have gone
I'll fly away

**Like a bird from these prison walls I'll fly
I'll fly away**

**I'll fly away, oh glory, I'll fly away.
When I die, Hallelujah, by and by,
I'll fly away.**

Truth be told, I've been feeling pretty perishable myself. This has been interesting: When I first took my burdens to my regular physician, Monday, two weeks ago, I weighed in at 209. At the neurosurgeons on Wednesday, I was at 205. Seen by a pain specialist on Friday, I was 201. That was more than a week ago. I was showing Nancy my new physique; her comment: "Wear a belt." I'm melting!

The old gospel thumpers imaged the hour of death as a "glad morning." Not me. Give me Frosty's song, "There must have been some magic in that old silk hat they found." I've been alive 67 years and still find magic in existence. It's a remarkable thing to "be."

You know what's even sadder than Frosty's song? The lament of the teacher in Ecclesiastes, who has so much but still hates his life, because he knows he must die. I want to slap the whiner around. Don't you know how good you've got it?

I'd be lying if I said I have a clear vision of what happens next. My imagery often turns whimsical. Maybe Russell Martin and I can build a snowman together? Or maybe I can play ball with Tim Reynolds and by amazing grace, even hit his fastball? But there's nothing whimsical about this: If we can't believe God can raise the dead and save our souls, what can we believe about God? And, oh friends, I do want to believe... How about you?

Oh how glad and happy when we meet

**I'll fly away
No more cold iron shackles on my feet
I'll fly away**

**I'll fly away, oh glory, I'll fly away.
When I die, Hallelujah, by and by,
I'll fly away.**

**I'll fly away, oh glory, I'll fly away.
When I die, Hallelujah, by and by,
I'll fly away.**

BRD