

Sermon: *Bye, Bye, Miss American Pie*
Sunday, August 11, 2019
Psalm 79

Did you remember most of the words?

I remember it being 8 ½ minutes long – long enough to go down the hall and get a Coke before cuing up the next record!

Released in the fall of 1971, *American Pie* is the longest song ever to top the Billboard Hot 100! A shorter radio version was released, but fans demanded the entire song, so United Artists put out a new single – with half on each side. The single sold more than 3 million, and the album 5 million records.¹

Maybe this song is new to you....

If it is, think about how very important your phone is to you. Can you do without it?

The 1940s and '50s were the first time in history that teens actually had a distinct, different kind of music than their parents. It was the **music** that connected American teenagers and defined their generation. It was rock and roll!

The day the music died refers to February 3, 1959, when a plane crash took 3 of music's big stars: Buddy Holly, Ritchie Valens who sang *La Bamba*, and J.P. Richardson, the Big Bopper. Paperboy Don McLean snipped the string on his stack of newspapers and deeply felt the loss.

McLean was born on Oct. 2, 1945, in New Rochelle, NY, a popular commuter suburb for actors, artists and authors. His mother was an Italian Catholic, and his father a Scottish protestant. His sister Bette Ann was 15 years older, so he pretty much grew up as an only child.

Kids in the fifties grew up playing outdoors. **All the time**. But, McLean had asthma, so he was often isolated indoors – and he spent that time with the music from a record player, radio, and TV-with **music**. As an adult he even wrote an ode to his childhood hero, Hop-along Cassidy. Singing lessons and the swimming team helped develop his stamina, and by the time he was 12, McLean knew hundreds of pop songs.² He sang Frank Sinatra, Nat King Cole, and Elvis, working on breath control.

A few years later, he discovered the Weavers, who combined folk music and politics. Pete Seeger was one of the Weavers. Do you know their hits? *On Top of Old Smoky*, *Goodnight Irene*, *Kisses Sweeter than Wine*, and *Wimoweh* (you know - awimoweh, awimoweh, awimoweh)– yea – that wemoweh!

¹ www.superseventies.com/mcleandon.html

² Alan Howard, *The Don McLean Story: Killing Us Softly*, Lulu Press, 2007, p. 37.

When Don McLean was 14, his father died of a heart attack.³ This split up his family and altered his life tremendously, even causing him years later, to leave college in '64 after President Kennedy was shot because it brought back memories. Kennedy's inauguration was the same time as his father's funeral.⁴

McLean continued to play small venues, won a trophy at the 1964 World's Fair, and earned a graduate degree at Columbia University.⁵ He toured with the Sloop Singers during the summer of '69, and was part of the last Newport Folk Festival the same weekend as the moon landing.⁶ The concert was taped for PBS and earned McLean national attention.

American Pie was the title song of his second album. For decades many tried to decipher the meaning of the lyrics.... but McLean would only say "it meant he never had to work again."⁷

If you grew up in Chicago land back then, you might remember WCFL disc jockey Bob Dearborn inviting listeners to write for a copy of *his* interpretation. WCFL's nighttime signal reached more than 37 states and some of Canada - because AM frequencies bounce off the ionosphere at night – so they had to hire 5 people to handle the mail about the song!⁸

In an interview McLean said this: "'American Pie' is about my life, what I've lived through and what I've experienced as a participant and witness to American music and politics. It is an American dream – an allegory. And it has become an anthem."⁹

"To many of my generation, brought up on Normal Rockwell and Christmas and Hopalong Cassidy and the Lone Ranger, America must always occupy the high moral ground. We are heroes. As Roosevelt would say, 'we face the future with confidence. We are Americans.'"¹⁰

American Pie changed the music business – creating oldies stations whose entire format was devoted to '50s music.¹¹ You might say that the original oldies are the songs in our Book of Psalms. In *American Pie* McLean laments the passing of the golden world of the '50s as the '60s become more turbulent. Psalm 79 is a lament psalm, and there are more lament psalms than any other type of psalm.¹² Lament psalms are prayers – cries to God for help, comfort and hope. They express sorrow and grief.

³ Ibid., p. 54.

⁴ Ibid., 68.

⁵ Howard, p. 74.

⁶ Howard, p. 102.

⁷ Ray Connolly, Revealed last secret of American Pie, *the Daily Mail*, April 8, 2015.

⁸ Howard, p. 143.

⁹ Howard, p. 145.

¹⁰ Howard, p. 127.

¹¹ Howard, p. 148.

¹² Howard, p. 308

Today's scripture, Psalm 79, is one of 12 psalms from the Asaph collection. (50, 73-83) First Chronicles says Asaph was a worship leader appointed by David. (1 Chron 6:39, 25:1-2)

Most scholars believe Psalm 79 was composed during a period of mourning after the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians in 587 BCE, when the temple was destroyed.¹³ Today's scripture is the crying out of a community, which has experienced a disaster they never thought would happen.

The psalm begins with a series of laments describing their distress. Verses 6, 7, and 8 follow with petitions asking God to turn his anger to those nations that have attacked them, and to deal with this iniquity in compassion. They seek God's forgiveness and salvation. And notice that the psalm ends with hope.

We may not often use the word "lament," but we **do** it all the time – sometimes even in song! You know how singing or listening to a song that goes with your mood can make you feel better?

Today, we thank Music Director Scott Stevenson and the band, Dennis O'Brien, Tom Leddy, and Jim Cerceo for providing our lament music. The postlude, which will be played later, is called *Babylon*. It's an 18th century round, adapted by the Weavers and Don McLean – and it's on the *American Pie* album. It's a setting of the first verse of Psalm 137, a communal lament about being in exile after the Babylonian captivity.

The offertory, *Wish You Were Here*, was written by Roger Waters of the English rock group Pink Floyd. It a personal lament for former band mate Syd Barret.

Lament is something we all do.

We lament big things like national politics and wars; poverty and violence.

- We lament that things aren't the way they used to be.
- We even lament little things like not being able to find plain old curling ribbon anymore because nobody wraps packages – they use bags!
- We lament that our grandparent's old farmhouse has been torn down,
- That schools don't teach cursive writing anymore,
- That we will miss our kids when they start preschool, kindergarten, or college.

And then there are all those personal laments...

- for loss of our health, or conditions affecting people we love
- for limitations and losses we experience because of aging
- for the loss of our friends and family members.

¹³ James L. Mays, *Psalms: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press 2011, loc 4878.

Scripture tells us this is nothing new.

It's ok to lament what we lose and feel anger about what is not right in the world.

It's a normal reaction, and a part of life. Life and time mean change. But, through faith, we can adjust and get through these challenges.

I encourage you to hold on to the words of Philippians 4:13, which is probably best translated by the Common English Bible (CEB): "I can **endure** all these things through the power of the one who gives me strength." Not I can **do**, but I can **endure**. With Christ **we can endure**. Even if we don't know the answers. This assurance is in our biblical lament model: complaint, asking God for help, and expressing trust and hope.

Here's our take-away: We can use this biblical model of lament when we are struggling.... either by praying the words of the psalms, or following the format in our prayers: biblical laments contain a complaint, a request for help from God, and an expression of trust and hope.¹⁴ Most of the Lament Psalms end with hope.

American Pie originally had a hopeful, positive ending, too. We know this because one of the 4 copies of the hand-written manuscript was sold in 2015.¹⁵

That original ending was never recorded. It went like this:

And there I stood alone and afraid
I knelt to my knees and there I prayed
and I promised to give all I had to give, if only He would make it live again.

He promised it would live once more
but this time one would equal four
and in five years the four were one
and the music lived again.

Here's what it means: Laments are part of life. Just remember to hold on to hope in God. Amen.

Benediction

As we prepare to go forth, hear now these words of blessing:

May God the Father bless you,

God the Son heal you,

God the Holy Spirit give you strength.

May God the holy Trinity protect you, sustain you, and give you hope.

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹⁴ Rolf A. Jacobson and Karl N. Jacobson, *Invitation to the Psalms*, Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, pp. 42-43.

¹⁵ Angie Martoccio, "Flashback: Don McLean plays a stirring 'American Pie' in 1972," *Rolling Stone*, February 3, 2019.