

PLAYLIST

▶ Gospel on the Radio

*Bruce
Springsteen*

JULY 28 | 9:30AM

Sunday, July 28, 2024

Playlist: Gospel on the Radio – Bruce Springsteen

“Are You Glad You’re Alive?” | Ephesians 2:8-10 | Charlie Berthoud

“Born to Run” by Bruce Springsteen was one of the first albums I owned. Anybody else have this album?

I gave away most of my albums several years ago, but I kept this, along with two U2 albums, which I forgot to bring a few Sundays ago.



I’ve listened to this and other Springsteen albums many times over the years, and in the past few months, in preparation for today, I’ve realized that Bruce Springsteen songs make me feel **alive**.

His songs make me more grateful for the gift of life, and more intentional about living with purpose.

We have three scriptures for us today to help us reflect on this theme of being alive and more purposeful.

The first comes from Ephesians 2 where Paul is explaining what the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus are about, using his phrase that we are justified by grace through faith. The Common English Bible puts it well:

You are saved by God’s grace because of your faith. This salvation is God’s gift. It’s not something you possessed. It’s not something you did that you can be proud of. Instead, we are God’s accomplishment, created in Christ Jesus to do good things. God planned for these good things to be the way that we live our lives.

So, followers of Jesus are called to be fully alive, and do good things.

Our second reading about life and purpose comes from the book of Genesis (12.1-2), where Abam and Sarai went sent on a journey by God, with a mandate.

“Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.”

They were “blessed to be a blessing.” They were given the gift of life in order to make life better for others.

Our third reading comes from John’s gospel (10.10) and you already heard it in our prayer of confession. Jesus is talking about being the good shepherd, and of his flock he says:

I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.

Another translation (NCV) has Jesus saying:

I came to give life—life in all its fullness.

Springsteen’s music is full of passion, energy, hope, and **LIFE**. I hear that loud and clear on the “Born to Run” album, where he sings about cars and romance and hoping for a better future, trying to live life to the fullest.

The title track of the “Born to Run” is about two young people hoping for something more, ready to go places. He sings about a “highway jammed with broken heroes” and how “there’s no place left to hide.” He acknowledges sadness and professes his love and then sings the lines that Springsteen fans know well:

*Oh, someday, girl, I don’t know when
We’re gonna get to that place
Where we really wanna go and we’ll walk in the sun
But ‘til then, tramps like us
Baby, we were born to run*

“Thunder Road” (on the YouTube playlist) is another song about passion, energy, romance, and hope. He’s singing to a girl, inviting her to join him on the journey. He sings about rolling down the window and letting the window blow back her hair,

and affirming, with hope, that the two lanes could take them anywhere.

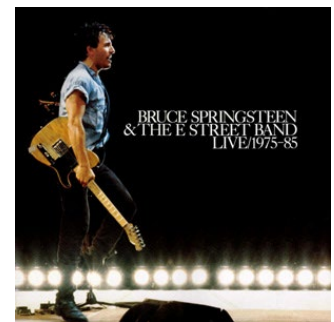
*We got one last chance to make it real
To trade in these wings on some wheels
Climb in back, heaven's waiting on down the tracks
Oh come take my hand
We're riding out tonight to case the promised land.
O Thunder road...*

And then the song concludes with a sense of wanting to get somewhere better, somewhere new...

*So Mary climb in
It's a town full of losers
And I'm pulling out of here to win.*

Along with “Born to Run,” my other favorite Springsteen album is a live album, with 40 songs performed live. It’s simply called Live 1975-85.

It was five (!) vinyl albums, or three CDs.



Fortunately, it’s now available on all major streaming services. Next time you have a long drive or a few hours to spare, sit down and enjoy the music, the passion, the energy.

On that live album, there are

- tear-jerking stories,
- songs of love and heartbreak,
- songs that make you want to get up and dance or drive really fast if you’re listening in the car.

But also included are a few dark songs about job loss, broken relationships, poverty, corruption, injustice, violence, and even murder.

Several of those dark songs come from the album “Nebraska” recorded in 1982 with mostly just guitar, harmonica, and vocals.

I’ve listened to “Nebraska” several times over the past few months. It’s not a happy toe tapping album. It’s more like an exploration of human nature, and to my ears, it’s the Christian gospel.



It’s one of those albums that should be listened to in its original sequence, as it generally moves from sin toward redemption.

Like a good worship service that acknowledges the reality of sin and proclaims the good news. Hints of that good news come in several songs:

On “Atlantic City” he sings

*Everything dies baby that’s a fact
But maybe everything that dies maybe someday comes back.*

The second to last song is “My Father’s House” where he sings about going through a dark forest, with ghostly voices, and the devil whipping at his heels.

Then he sees light from a house, which he calls “My Father’s House,” and he runs toward it. The song ends with:

*My father’s house shines hard and bright
it stands like a beacon calling me in the night
Calling and calling, so cold and alone
Shining ‘cross this dark highway where our sins lie unatoned*

The final song on “Nebraska” is “Reason to Believe” which takes us through sadness of broken relationships and even a dead dog but makes the affirmation that somehow people keep going with the encouraging chorus:

*At the end of every hard earned day
People find a reason to believe.*

So, I appreciate these lyrics, as they get me thinking.

But we have to be careful with simplistic appropriation of words. Every year at 4th of July, people play “Born in the USA” as if it’s a patriotic song. But the verses are a lament of the Vietnam War and the struggles of working-class people.

I realize I tend to be more of a word person. In church we can have a beautiful tune, but for it to be really meaningful to me, the words need to be good. I need substance. When lyrics and music come together, you get a great song.

The song “Jungleland” is a story of hope, struggle, and despair. It’s hard to say exactly what it’s about but it’s one of his most popular and most emotional songs. For some people what holds the song together isn’t the words, but the piano, the violin, and especially the saxophone solo by Clarence Clemons.



The song really came to my attention after I read a column by writer Anna Quindlen. As a columnist and novelist she obviously loves words, but she also recognizes that words have limits, and sometimes the music becomes transcendent.

In that column from decades ago, at a time when some elected officials were concerned about song lyrics she wrote how some people over-analyze song lyrics, and she wrote:

all I need to know about Bruce Springsteen is that the saxophone bridge on ‘Jungleland’ makes the back of my neck feel exactly the same way I felt the first time a boy kissed me, only over and over and over again.”

-from *Living Out Loud*, by Anna Quindlen

Listen to Jungleland here, with sax solo starting at the 4:20 mark:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IW1RAYs8RI>

When beautiful music and inspiring lyrics come together it’s pure joy. And in that intersection of beautiful music and inspiring lyrics, we hear God speaking to us. Bruce Springsteen is not an explicitly religious person, but I hear the gospel in his songs. In a recent interview with David Brooks he said:

“I reference my Catholic upbringing very regularly in my songs. I have a lot of biblical imagery, and at the end of the day, if somebody asked me what kind of a songwriter I was, I wouldn’t say I was a political songwriter. I would probably say a spiritual songwriter. I really believe that if you look at my body of work, that is the subject that I’m addressing. I’ve addressed social issues. I’ve addressed real-life issues here on Earth. I always say my verses are the blues and my choruses are the gospel. And I lean a little heavier on the gospel than the blues. So, I would categorize myself as ultimately a spiritual songwriter.”

<https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/06/bruce-springsteens-playlist/613378/>

I want to share one more song. But before that I want to thank my colleagues Jess and Megan for going along with this crazy idea of this PLAYLIST series and doing some out of the box sermon. I want to thank so many of you in the congregation for sharing your music experiences and your favorite songs and times that God has comforted, challenged, and called you in music.

And I need to acknowledge that there is a ton of song material on the proverbial cutting room floor. Many of you suggested songs to include, and we simply just couldn’t fit them all.

But isn’t that a good thing...? It means there’s a lot more good music through we can tap our toes, listen for God, and be inspired for faithful living.

Another benefit is that the sermon won’t last for three hours...!

As Christians, we follow Jesus, who is God incarnate, God born in the flesh, promising to be with us always. God became human to dwell among us.

So, it makes sense that God can speak to us in ordinary things like rock & roll, and all kinds of music.

The final song to consider is one that is new to me. Over the past few months, I’ve listened to a lot of U2, blues, and Bruce—most of it admittedly is older music that I’ve heard before.

Last week I shared that a large study showed that most people stop listening to new music around age 30, and we just stick with the familiar. I fit that description well, being fond of 90s rock albums from Pearl Jam, Rage Against the Machine, REM, and

such.

But I tried listening to new music in these past few months, and I'm glad I did. One of many great songs I discovered was a 2012 Springsteen song (I know it's 12 years old, but that's new by my standards), called "We Are Alive." It's on the YouTube playlist, in your weekly email and on the website.

The somber song opens referencing Calvary and a cross, along with a graveyard on a star-lit night, then we're invited to put our ears to the tombstones and hear the song:

*We are alive
And though our bodies lie alone here in the dark
Our spirits rise
To carry the fire and light the spark
To stand shoulder to shoulder and heart to heart*

When I hear that, I think about the Christian hope of resurrection, of the scriptural promise that neither life nor death nor anything else can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

And I think of the promise of the cloud of witnesses, the saints who've gone before us, who cheer us on.

The song continues, with its own cloud of witnesses, referencing a variety of people who died because of injustice:

*striking railroad workers
four Black girls at a Birmingham church
migrants crossing the border*

The chorus invites us to know that somehow, someday, they are still alive.

*A voice cried I was killed in Maryland in 1877
When the railroad workers made their stand
I was killed in 1963
One Sunday morning in Birmingham*

I died last year crossing the southern desert

*My children left behind in San Pablo
Well they've left our bodies here to rot
Oh please let them know, We are alive*

Friends, we are alive now, and I firmly believe that because of the life death and resurrection of Jesus and the steadfast and generous love of God, somehow, someway, we'll be alive forever, joined with the saints who've gone before us.

The challenge and invitation for us now is to realize that we really are alive, that today is a gift, that Jesus came to bring abundant life, that we've been blessed with life to be a blessing to others.

Isn't it good to be alive?

In an interview with Bill Moyers, Joseph Campbell put it well:

"People say that what we're all seeking is a meaning for life. I don't think that's what we're really seeking. I think that what we're seeking is an experience of being alive, so that our life experiences on the purely physical plane will have resonances with our own innermost being and reality, so that we actually feel the rapture of being alive."

Bruce Springsteen music helps me feel alive.

If Springsteen isn't your thing, I hope you find and treasure some music—or art, or nature, or justice work, or ice cream or whatever else—something that makes you feel alive and

helps you to live a life of purpose, a life of faith, hope, and love.

Let us pray.

Thank you, God, for the gift of life, the gift of today, the gift of right now. We thank you that Jesus came to proclaim your love and to invite us into abundant life, now and forever. Help us stay on the path, help us hear the music, help us to sing the song of your love. Amen.