

Steve Jungkeit
The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme
Texts: Matthew 17: 1-9
February 23, 2025

Up Above My Head, I Hear Music in the Air

Here's a song made famous by Sister Rosetta Tharpe in 1947, a song that went on to become an anthem of the civil rights era:

*Up above my head, I hear music in the air.
Up above my head, I hear music in the air.
Up above my head, I hear music in the air.
And I do believe, yes I do believe,
There's a heaven somewhere.*

The song originated as a spiritual, sung by enslaved people in the 19th century. But it's come to be received as a gift offered to struggling people everywhere. For some, it suggests a better world to come, when our troubles in this life are over. But for others, the song has more to do with this world, where a higher vision or purpose, sensed just above our heads, can help us to face into the troubles that can so often beset us. Indeed, far from being a song about the sweet bye and bye, I believe it articulates an essential dimension of what it is to be a human being in search of hope and vision, when those qualities seem rare. It's a dynamic I'd like to explore with you this morning.

Based on the conversations I've been having, hope and vision seem to be in short supply right about now. I feel it too. The writer of the book of Hebrews speaks of faith as being "evidence of things not seen." For many of us, I think, it has become harder to recall, to say nothing of trusting in, these "things not seen" - things like faith, things like hope, things like love, and decency and care. That's because the things we do see have left us feeling demoralized and dispirited.

I scarcely need to number the assaults on basic norms that have taken place this past month, but allow me to name but a few: place names arbitrarily changed; reality upended by reframing Ukraine as an aggressor with an authoritarian leader, with Russia now standing as the aggrieved party in the conflict; alliances reversed by embracing far right parties in Europe while traditional allies are spurned; the hollowing out of the civil service and the elimination of aid agencies like USAID; the stoppage of all gender affirming care for those in the trans community and the increase in deportations among the undocumented. Suffice to say that there is a stunning realignment of values taking place around us, and it remains to be seen what the long term effects will be. Meanwhile, many of us are left to wonder where, if anywhere, we might place our confidence and trust in such a moment.

I don't pretend to easy answers. To propose anything at all is to risk falling prey to the banal, or the pollyanish. Nevertheless, using Scripture as a guide, I'd like to suggest two very unlikely and disparate sources for our consideration. One is inspired by our celebration of Black History Month: the musician John Coltrane. The other, Dante, is inspired by our ongoing exploration of *The Divine Comedy*, and our preparation for reading the *Paradiso* during Holy Week. (Tomorrow night, those who wish are invited to join me in exploring parts of the *Paradiso* together, which we'll continue on Monday nights for the next several weeks.)

On the face of it, John Coltrane and Dante Alighieri are worlds apart. One was a medieval Italian, and the other was a mid twentieth century Black American. One was oriented toward Mediterranean classicism, while the other was oriented toward what we can think of as a Black, or African classicism. One worked in the realm of words, while the other worked in the realm of sound. But they both lived in turbulent, roiling times. Dante was faced with civil war and exile, while the society around him collapsed. Coltrane lived in the era of lynchings, Jim Crow terror, and the urban revolts of the

1960's. Both of them were nurtured by Christian faith, which they extended in creative new directions. And they both created what we can call cosmic, theological art, in which they imagined a kind of music up above their heads - Dante in his *Paradiso* and Coltrane in a series of visionary albums with names like *Ascension*, *Cosmic Music*, and *Interstellar Space*. Both imagined an ascension into the heavens, where they receive a vision of God. And both imagine a descent, in which that vision is put to use in the service of others. Both discerned a kind of music up above their heads, and they strained to listen.

Up above our heads, we hear music in the air...

Dante and Coltrane found the pattern for their respective ascents in Scripture. Throughout the Bible, it is, as often as not, on the heights that one encounters God. It is on a mountain that Moses hears the voice of God emanating from a flaming bush, and later, it is on another mountain that he receives the Law. The Psalms collect the songs of ascent, one of which we used as our call to worship - "I lift up my eyes to the hills" - words that would have been sung as pilgrims ascended to Jerusalem. Jerusalem itself is located on what was called "God's holy mountain," and it is there, on the heights, that the first and second Jewish Temples were built. When Jesus delivers his own rendering of the law, he does so on another mountain, now called the Mount of Beatitudes. And so it is no accident that in Matthew's Gospel, prior to his own journey toward Jerusalem, Jesus ascends another mountain. It is there that God speaks to him directly. It is there that Moses and Elijah, holy mountaineers both, join him in conversation. It is there that Jesus is transfigured, becoming radiant, filled with a holy light. It is as though, having ascended to the heights, Jesus and the disciples have entered a sphere of glorious music. It is a glory within them and around them. The three disciples who accompanied Jesus wish to remain on the heights, but note the precedent that Jesus establishes: you go up, you ascend into the heights, in order to go back down again. You go up, in order to go down. It's a precedent followed by Dante and Coltrane both.

Let me speak first about John Coltrane's art of ascent. Coltrane grew up in a family of ministers - both his father and his grandfather were Baptist preachers. And so he was infused from an early age not only with a deep and abiding sense of spirituality, but with visions of a heavenly realm. He brought that spirituality into his music - *A Love Supreme*, his most famous album is a kind of liturgy, a ceremony or maybe even a church service, in which he attempted to give expression to the Divine love that he sensed pervading all things. But then Coltrane made a radical and bold move. He attempted to make a music that would float, a music that would allow for a kind of levitation. He did so by freeing himself from conventional, metered rhythm, and by deconstructing tonality itself.

That's where the image on the cover of your bulletins comes in. This is Coltrane's "Tone Circle," and it represents Coltrane's understanding of a cosmic music of the spheres. I'm not a music theorist, and so I don't pretend to comprehend everything that Coltrane was doing with this image, but you'll see that the circle has all the notes of a scale around the outer rim, extending for five octaves. The various lines connecting the notes across the octaves then represent a series of tone relationships that Coltrane tried to work out in his performances. This sounds really abstract, I know, but in essence, Coltrane was trying to achieve a kind of spiritual ascension through music, a levitation, not unlike Jesus being transfigured on the mountaintop. He wanted to immerse his listeners in a kind of mystical experience of transfiguration. But for Coltrane, that ascension occurred in order to create social and political possibilities for Black people in America, yes, but really for all people. It was an elevation from the everyday into a higher realm, one governed by love, self-giving, generosity, and care, qualities that could then be applied within lived communities.

The primary place to access Coltrane's art of ascension is on his album of that name: *Ascension*. I must warn you that it's not an easily accessible listening experience. At first listen, it sounds like little more than noise, much the way that Jackson Pollack's paintings, at first glance, looked like random splotches of paint. It requires patience, and a kind of trust. I commend it to you as an example of

transfiguration, where an artist found a way, amidst a difficult and terrifying present, to sense the music somewhere up above our heads.

Up above our heads, we hear music in the air...

Now Dante. I first learned about Coltrane's heavenly orientation a few years ago, when I attended a lecture offered by a professor down at Yale, Michael Veal. I was reading the *Paradiso* at the time, and I felt a shock of recognition - my God, this is exactly what Dante articulated by way of poetry. You know the basic movement of the *Divine Comedy* by now. Midway through the journey of his life, the poet becomes lost in a dark wood. Virgil arrives to guide him through the nether regions of hell, and then up along the terraces of Mount Purgatory. At the top, Dante the poet is cleansed and rebaptized. Virgil disappears, and Beatrice, Dante's beloved, takes his place.

And then the *Paradiso* begins, a journey through the cosmos. Like lightning which rises instead of falling, Dante and Beatrice ascend first to the moon, and then to each of the planets - Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, all the way up to the Empyrean, where God dwells. Each of the planets is a separate sphere, like a series of glass orbs each contained within the other. And each sphere has a musical tone - like bells, where one tone is added to the next, until the whole cosmos vibrates and rings with sound. Like the *Inferno* and the *Paradiso*, Dante pauses to have conversations along the way, only now he's meeting those whose actions helped to strengthen and preserve the world, rather than tearing it apart. He encounters those whose presence served to bless the world rather than curse it, whose labors instilled stability and whose being increased the joy in those around them. I admire the *Inferno*, and I love the *Purgatorio*. But I positively adore the *Paradiso*, because through its ascent, it dares to imagine what a world governed by grace and beauty might be like.

Dante wrote his poem as a result of undergoing a catastrophe - he was exiled from his home and lived as a refugee for the last twenty years of his life. And he wrote for those who were themselves undergoing catastrophe, dealing with the same political and spiritual earthquakes he himself had to face. But the poem itself has a fascinating circularity to its structure. It purports to be a spiritual journey into the heavens that takes place just before everything fell apart in Dante's life. He ascends into the heights and has a supreme vision of God at the end of the *Paradiso*, at which point the poem concludes and the real world struggle begins.

In essence, the journey mimics the one that Jesus and the disciples make in the Gospel of Matthew - they ascend to the heights, but then are forced to return for the very real showdown that will occur during Holy Week. But Jesus and the disciples, like Dante the pilgrim, and then like Coltrane much later, receive a transformative vision they need in order to confront their respective realities, and to exist well within that struggle. They have been transfigured by a holy vision of love, one that reveals itself as the deepest and truest word that can be said about human life, about the world, and indeed about the cosmos itself. No matter how deeply it can be disfigured or debased, they affirm that there is within the world, and within us, a kind of music that holds and sustains us even when all else seems to drain away.

Up above our heads, we hear music in the air...

What earthly difference might the story of the transfiguration, or John Coltrane's music of ascension, or Dante's poetry of the heavens make for you and me? Faced as we are with the barrage of alarming and disturbing reports coming to us daily, what good can come of an immersion into this poetic and musical realm? Let me offer several ways such an ascent might help.

First, I believe the humanities can help us right now. Indeed, I believe we're in the predicament we're in, in part, because we have neglected the humanities as a society. But I further believe that theology, broadly conceived, has a role to play. Great works of art and literature help to remind us that if things feel terrible now, we are not the first to undergo such convulsions. Arguably, the catastrophes

faced by both Coltrane and Dante were far worse than what we are undergoing. That's true of much of the best art, music, and literature. Whether we are talking about John Coltrane or Dante, Cervantes or Garcia Marquez, Toni Morrison or Louis Armstrong or Beyonce, such art is a way of pushing back against the night, of surrounding oneself with visionary beauty, with experiential clarity, and of reminding ourselves that humans have been before where we are now - or at least someplace analogous. They have, in effect, ascended, and then have come back to deliver their works to us for moments such as this. Each of us has different aesthetic tastes, but now is the time to seek out such works, and to situate ourselves within them.

Second, the Bible, Coltrane, and Dante keep alive for us the possibility - indeed, the faith - that beyond the ugliness and deformity of spirit that threatens to overwhelm us, there is a realm of things not seen, up above our heads if you will. To discover such a realm is to understand that the world itself is supported and sustained by a grace and a love that we cannot always see, cannot always feel, but is there nonetheless. Those of us who inhabit the Christian faith choose to call this hidden, unseen realm - a realm in which we live and move and have our being - God. But it can just as easily be named otherwise. What sources like Coltrane and Dante suggest, at least to me, is that whether we know it or not, we are held by God. Whether we recognize it or not, the world is suffused with grace. Whether we feel it or not, there is that within the world that wishes us to be, and to be well. There is a benevolent Presence that calls to us, that assures us, and that strengthens us for the work we are given to do. Such grace, such a Presence, such ascension, is available to us all, the way it has been to generations who have come before us.

But third and finally, the ascent strengthens and orients us for the inevitable descent, into the realm of our ordinary days. It checks our despair. It sends us out into the world to protest with signs and with chants. It encourages us to mobilize to protect what we value, as we did recently with the vigil for IRIS. But perhaps more than that, the ascent fuels our everyday interactions, suffusing them with kindness and compassion. It allows us to withstand the sting of criticism, and to treat with dignity those with whom we disagree. And it affords us the courage to live out our convictions proudly, even if hell itself is unleashed, as it has so often been unleashed throughout history. Somehow in the midst of it, God provides us the assurance that we can stand firm and true within the fiery blasts.

And so I would have us read Dante. I would have us listen to John Coltrane. I would have us immerse ourselves in the very best art that the world has produced, not as a means of escape, nor as a means of avoidance. I would have us do so that we might become the individuals, and the church, we are most deeply called to be, transfigured by the holiness of what is.

If we listen, we might hear once again those mystic chords of harmony sounding. And something within us might well respond in kind:

*Up above our heads, we hear music in the air,
Up above our heads, we hear music in the air,
Up above our heads, we hear music in the air,
And we do believe, yes we do believe,
There's a heaven somewhere.*