

SPIRIT IN THE SKY



Crossovers in television are fascinating. They almost always catch us off

guard and say, “Oooooo” because it’s intriguing and can fill us with so

much promise about what could possibly happen. There’s an episode of Alf where all the actors from Gilligan’s Island reprise their role as Alf has a dream about what would have happened if Gilligan and company hadn’t been rescued. For those of my generation watching TGIF on a Friday night on ABC, we’ll never forget when Salem, the cat from Sabrina The Teenage Witch wandered onto the set of Boy Meets World and sent Cory,



Shawn, and Topanga into the time-space continuum. Or who could forget

when a few years ago, you couldn’t turn on CBS without seeing one of the

CSI shows being advertised, which led to a 2009 series where all three cities were linked in one storyline and aired a week-long television special.



Well, today, our song of the day is one that can only be described as a

crossover; it’s been called, “a rock-and-roll song written by a Jewish man

about Christianity so good that an Atheist could love it.” Today, we’re talking about

Norman Greenbaum’s hit from 1969: “Spirit in the Sky.” The iconic guitar riff at the

start of the song, Norman’s vocals, the Stovall Sisters back-up vocals matching the

gospel flair, And I have to admit that in picking this song, I gave myself a bit of a

homiletical challenge because some of the theology in this song is...problematic. It’s part

of the problem of having someone who admittedly has very little knowledge of

Christianity and Jesus writing a song about Jesus. Norman Greenbaum said in a 2006

interview with the New York Times, Greenbaum told a reporter he was inspired to write

the song after watching Porter Wagoner singing a gospel song on TV. Greenbaum said:

“I thought, ‘Yeah, I could do that,’ knowing nothing about gospel music, so I sat down

and wrote my own gospel song. It came easy. I wrote the words in 15 minutes.” Basically, it feels like to me, Norman Greenbaum looked at Porter Wagoner getting attention singing a gospel song on television and said, “Yeah, I can do that, too.” I talked to a buddy of mine this week about this song and its background, and he took it a different way: he said, “Wow, how awesome is it that a song about our faith moved him to write a song of his own.” And I so badly want to believe that he’s right, but I kind of don’t think so: not because I want to be right but I read some other interviews with Greenbaum. He loves God as a Jewish man but chose to write his song about Jesus because it would be more marketable. Regardless, Greenbaum pulled together some musicians he knew from being in the industry and, boom: a classic was born.



But Greenbaum’s lack of understanding about Jesus gives us the lyric,

“Never been a sinner, I never sinned.” I love this song but sort of cringe each time I hear it, sing it. This lyric goes against everything that Jesus says and everything that is written about Jesus. We are sinners. I hope that does not come as shocking information to you. You are a sinner, I am a sinner, and no matter what Norman Greenbaum tries to tell us in his song, he’s a sinner, too. Paul points out in our scripture today that we are all sinners and fall short of the glory of God. When the now-defunct Christian band dc Talk recorded their version of this song, they reflected Paul’s words by singing: “we are all sinners; we all sin.” It’s the truth. One of my oddly favorite prayers in all of Christendom comes from our Episcopal brothers and sisters, and it’s their prayer of confession. Each week as they follow the *Book of Common Prayer*, they pray together in part, “Most merciful God, we confess that we have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done and what we have left undone.” There

are things that we do every day in thought, word, and deed that are sinful. There are things that we leave undone that reflect that we've fallen short of God's glory.

The good news is that the story does not end there. Yes, we are sinners. Yes, there are things that we do and leave undone that leave us separated from God. However, that's not where Paul leaves the Romans and it's not where God leaves you and me.



Despite some iffy theology, Norman Greenbaum makes a point: "Prepare

yourself; you know it's a must: Gotta have a friend in Jesus so you know that when you die, He's gonna recommend you to the spirit in the sky." In an interview in 2011, Greenbaum referred to his song as timeless and said, "Most everyone else sees it that way. It appeals to one's inner self and the need for redemption." It is universal that we are in need of redemption and seeking to be made right with God.



Paul's answer to that would be that we need to actually stop seeking and

simply look to Jesus. This is the heart of Paul's entire letter. You may remember hearing this before but Paul's letter to the Romans is his introduction to the church in Rome, and so he's proving his worth as an apostle to them by pouring out his heart for the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ. So here, in our scripture, Paul is pouring out this point, this marvelous declaration: it is Jesus who makes us right with God (so, ya know, we gotta have a friend in Jesus"). Paul puts it this way: "But now, God's righteousness has been revealed apart from the law, which is confirmed by the law and the prophets. God's righteousness comes through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ for all who have faith in him."

And this is like that crossover moment for Paul. His former life in Judaism brought him to this place. In Judaism, one is made right with God by meticulously

keeping the law of God and making sacrifice to atone for the sins one commits. Then Jesus shows up in the midst of all of it and changes everything. There's new possibilities and potentials for where we may end up. We'll end up in the place that's the best. Even though we are all sinners and miss the mark of God's glory, we are still dear to God. And through Jesus' life, ministry, death, and resurrection, we are made right with God. Our righteousness, our right standing with God, comes from Jesus' faithfulness, from Jesus submitting himself and being obedient to death even death on a cross.

To stand under this righteousness is to become righteous. Having a friend in Jesus, as Greenbaum proclaims, is so important (because it is), and it changes us... We are made new by this righteousness. Our outlook on life is changed because of this righteousness. In his commentary on Romans, Robert Jewett says that Paul is talking about "more than being made right with God; it's more than being accepted." These are important things, no doubt, but it's more: "it's a matter of submitting to God's righteousness, seeking it first as Jesus says, and changing the direction of toward the service of God in everyday affairs."

This is how we know we've got a friend in Jesus and know that he's gonna set us up with the Spirit in the Sky.