

Sound of Music: Mountains, Music, and Ultimate Allegiance

Psalm 121, Romans 13:1-10 (selected verses)

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I lift my eyes to the hill and mountains— from where will my help come?

My help comes from the Holy One, who made heaven and earth!

God won't let our footsteps slip: our Guardian never sleeps.

The Holy One of the Hebrew people will never slumber, never sleep!

The Beloved Is our Guardian and our shade:

with God by our side, The sun cannot overpower us by day, nor the moon at night

The Holy One guards us from harm, guards our lives.

The Divine guards our leaving and our coming back, now and forever.

Psalm 121 Inclusive Bible

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. Romans 13:1 NRSV

Be a good citizen. Governments are under God. Insofar as there is peace and order, it's God's order. So live responsibly as a citizen....³ Duly constituted authorities are only a threat if you're trying to get by with something. Decent citizens should have nothing to fear.

9 The law code - don't sleep with another person's spouse, don't take someone's life, don't take what isn't yours, don't always be wanting what you don't have, and any other "don't" you can think of - finally adds up to this: Love other people as well as you do yourself. 10 You can't go wrong when you love others. When you add up everything in the law code, the sum total is love.

Romans 13: 1,3, 9-10

The Sound of Music has been delighting audiences since its Broadway premiere 65 years ago. And the beloved movie 59 years ago. The beauty of its cinematography, the feel-good music and lyrics, and Julie Andrews' luminous presence are memories many of us have had for decades. In the midst of all of this, there are some spiritual lessons and theology that are worth exploring.

The screenplay makes few Biblical references. The Mother Abbess quotes Psalm 121 in encouraging Maria and her new family in their escape over the Alps, saying:

"Remember: 'I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills from whence cometh my help.'"

The real theological lessons come in the narrative arc of Maria's story. In the movie's opening scenes Maria feels that she can only show her deep devotion to God through her commitment to a nun's life. She believes firmly in her monastic calling, no matter how challenging it might prove. It's the Mother Abbess who sees that Maria may have gifts that could serve God

outside of the convent. She insists that Maria make a trial return to the outside world. At the end of her first day as governess to the Von Trapps, Maria prays,

“Dear Father, now I know why You sent me here. To help these children prepare for a new mother.”

Little does she know that she will be that mother. It’s love that finally opens her eyes — and shakes her confidence. When she realizes the depth of her feelings for the Captain, she flees back to the safe confines of the cloister.

It’s easy to forget that Maria suffers a “dark night of the soul,” entering a period of deep solitude and only emerging from her cell at the insistence of the Mother Abbess. It’s through the guidance of this wise, older woman that Maria finally leaves the path of the member of a convent and embraces her calling as teacher, as parent, and as partner.

As the Mother Abbess says, *“You have to live the life you were born to live.”*

In essence, Paul says the same in First Corinthians 12:4-5

“Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services but the same God; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone.”

He goes on to list a range of gifts. This is the lesson that Maria learns in the course of the story. Unlike the Mother Abbess, her gifts can’t be expressed behind stone walls. She lives her faith best in the world, sustaining her new family with unconditional love and, as the Captain notes, bringing music back into their lives.

There’s something about Maria’s journey, about those Alpine mountains and meadows and knowing nuns, that can inspire us in a way that sacred texts alone cannot. It takes courage, discernment and listening to be open to new paths, new chapters of life and spiritual life, relationships and serving.

Another theme in the story is the reality of grief and loss and struggle to move on. Christopher Plummer plays Captain von Trap in the movie. He is struggling to father his 7 children after their mother's death. His approach of dealing with grief is to control everything he can as a father. He resorts to military precision - children lining up, responding to a whistle. His struggle is compounded by his plans to marry a wealthy countess who plans to send the children off to boarding school.

How do we cope when someone we love dies? Do we try to control everything we can since we know so much is out of control? Do we become bitter? Or do we begin to allow God's healing and grace slowly comfort us, offering us peace, and allowing our hearts to be open again?

Maria von Trapp does not love the von Trapp children or the Captain because they are immediately loving to her. She offers love, comfort, joy, out of who she is. Accompanying them where they are.

There is a scene after Maria confronts the Captain outside. There is singing inside the house. When the captain hears his children singing, he is touched. The captain's face changes. He joins his children singing. At that moment each person are being transformed. Hugs are seen for the first time between the father and the children. God has used music and Maria to bring joy and healing in the life of the family.

This kind of love and in the movie along with music makes this possible. The Book of Psalms and many other biblical passages are filled with hymns, songs and poetry. How can the music help us to connect our hearts with the heart of God?

"Sound of Music" contains several serious themes including citizenship, patriotism and the moral response to evil. Captain VonTrapp is shown as a loyal Austrian. However, there is conflict over Austrian loyalty after the Nazi ascendancy, with the Captain refusing to collaborate, while his far less principled friend and counselor urges compromise. He has shown a fierce loyalty to Austria, as an aristocrat and former naval officer of the old empire. There is that powerful scene when patriotism and love are shown in the final concert in which the masses of townspeople join by singing an Austrian anthem "Edelweiss" as the Nazis uncomfortably watch.

There is the quandary of how the Captain should respond to a summons from Berlin to serve in Hitler's navy. There is the dilemma to what extent others should assist the von Trapp family escape from Austria, including the nuns, at their own peril. The Captain, who is stubborn is also courageous and morally consistent, is shown as despising and refusing to acknowledge the new Nazi overlords. In one scene, he rips a Nazi flag that had been hung at his home to protect the family from suspicions of subversive sentiment. The Captain not only will risk suspicion, he invites it, despite all he has to lose.

The fictional story concludes with the von Trapps scaling the Alps for refuge in neighboring Switzerland.

"Sound of Music" dramatizes the temporal and spiritual attachments to which Christians are called. The passage from Romans 13 is too often used as way to reinforce nationalism and patriotism to the government. It has been used in our country and in others in ways that reflect uncritical patriotism and excessive nationalism. It is taken out of context when the chapters and verses were added later to the biblical text. Paul, under the Roman Empire and Nero, was preaching a higher loyalty – a loyalty to Christ's love for all people, a love that embodies justice.

Love of family, love of church or spiritual community, love of country, love of God. All these loves command resistance to corrupting evil. *Sound of Music* reflects a rejection of Austria's accession into the Nazi orbit under an ideology demanding subordination or eradication of all loves under its own monstrous control.

Love of God, of the Reign of God's justice compels the von Trapps to abandon the land they love ultimately for a new home. The real von Trapps settled in Vermont and later recounted they liked their new Vermont home because it was filled with mountains and church steeples, similar to their old home. But their permanent exile from Austria symbolized that followers of Christ ultimately belong to a higher and more permanent kin-dom.

In this time in our own country, we are compelled to consider our loyalties and allegiance. We are called to both value our democracy and to offer critiques when we see how misinformation, corruption and lies erode what is central. We are called to reflect on our words and actions. What does it mean to follow the ways of Jesus? How do we hold this larger vision of God's kin-dom for all people, the Beloved Community and be citizens of the United States, an experiment that all people are created equal before the law?

May the *Sound of Music* encourage us to be people of hope, of courage, of love. The good news about the God we serve is that the signs and wonders of God are about life and justice, not about violence and domination or hate.

Do we want to live in fear or build a better world? Do we want to dominate others or be kind to others and offering a different vision and a path to transformation? If we continue to look to God for guidance, we will see our power differently and will grant authority to people who will lead with kindness, justice, mercy, and love.

Thanks be to God for those who have showed us the way of peace, welcome, and love. Amen.

This sermon includes concepts from the following two articles:

Norman Allen, "Sound of Music Theology," OnBeing, 3/21/15

<https://onbeing.org/blog/a-sound-of-music-theology/>

Mark Tooley, "Sound of Music as Christian Allegory," 3/19/15

<https://www.christianpost.com/news/sound-of-music-as-christian-allegory.html>

Trailer for movie

<https://youtu.be/aMMgcAqOYbl?si=ktxMs0B546WU7VZQ>