



THE  
PLYMOUTH  
PULPIT

watch the sermons | [plymouthchurch.org](http://plymouthchurch.org)

# “The Worship of God and the Music of Bruce Springsteen”

**Brett Younger**  
**Senior Minister**

April 14, 2024

## “Worship as Praise” / The Rising

The days we most need to worship are the days when we do not feel like coming to worship. When something horrible has happened and we would rather hide from everyone and everything. When we are feeling twenty years older than we are. We are tired and think we may be tired from now on. When we have decided that despair is the reasonable choice. That is when we need to worship.

We worship to make sense out of a tragic world. We worship to find a way to keep going. We worship to see hope when we are feeling desperation.

In late September 2001, Bruce Springsteen was pulling out of a parking space at the beach in Sea Bright, New Jersey. He had been looking at the distant, empty skyline where the Twin Towers stood just a few weeks earlier.

A man drove by and shouted through a rolled-down window: “We need you, man!”

In *The Rising*, Bruce addressed the pain we were feeling. He does not sing about why 9/11 happened, how we could get revenge, or even what will come next. He sings about how we can live meaningfully when life seems meaningless. He pleads for us to “rise up,” not in anger, but with prayer, faith, and love. The song helped many who were wondering what that horrible day said about how horrible the world had become. When Bruce sang about a sky of love, a sky of fullness, and a sky of blessed life, we started feeling that maybe we could move forward, that we could rise up, and that we could be better and stronger.

The song tells the story of a firefighter climbing one of the towers:

“Can’t see nothin’ in front of me,  
Can’t see nothin’ coming up behind  
I make my way through this darkness,  
I can’t feel nothing  
but this chain that binds me.  
Lost track of how far I’ve gone  
how high I’ve climbed  
On my back’s a 60-pound stone  
On my shoulder a half mile of line.”

Then he sings about Mary Magdalene meeting the risen Christ on Easter morning: “I see Mary in the garden.” The song becomes an Easter anthem arising out of the darkness of death. The verses are bleak—fire engines, crosses, and the cemetery-like “garden of a thousand sighs,” but the “li, li, lis” of the chorus sound like Hallelujahs.

In worship, we pray about life’s bleakness, even as we give ourselves to hope. We understand the problems of the world, but we also understand God’s love. God invites us to move through the worst life can bring and rise.

“Worship as Confession” / Rocky Ground

Bruce released the Born to Run album in 1975. For me, it was the Born to Run 8-track. The player in my ’69 Chevy Impala eventually required a Popsicle stick to adjust the tracking, because I wore it out listening to those eight songs over and over. If you understand the popsicle reference, you are old.

I sang duets with the Boss in the car, but not in the

house, because I knew that the requisite volume as well as the lyrics would not go over well. My father was not going to sing along with:

“Someday girl I don’t know when  
we’re gonna’ get to that place  
where we really want to go  
and we’ll walk in the sun,  
but till then tramps like us  
baby we were born to run.”

When Bruce and the E Street Band came to town a friend said, “A bunch of us are going to Springsteen. Do you want to go?”

Most aficionados would have immediately said, “Yes!” but most aficionados are not fundamentalist Southern Baptists. I said “No,” because I was afraid of the people who would be there. The friend who invited me was not one of my church friends. I pictured a crowd in a haze smoking dope. My religious upbringing made it clear that I should not be part of a crowd of criminals, reprobates, and good for nothings. But I kept listening and singing along. The lullaby to which I put my children to sleep began, “In the day we sweat it out on the streets of a runaway American dream.”

Decades later, when Bruce came to an arena near me, I finally joined the congregation. We danced. We clapped. We sang like it was a tent revival. We sang about sin, pain, work, hope, joy, and community. The choir included drinkers, teetotalers, the promiscuous, the chaste, smokers and preachers. The Boss thinks we are in this together—criminals, reprobates, and church people.

Rocky Ground is about how we are all trying to get by. The title is from Jesus' parable about the seeds that fell along the path, among thorns, in good soil, and on rocky ground, those for whom life is hard. Rocky Ground would be listed in about ten places in a hymnal's topical index. The song mentions downtrodden shepherds, judgment day, angels shouting hallelujah, 40 days and 40 nights, and Jesus clearing out the money changers from the temple.

The song is about the challenges that do not go away, the past that does not let us go, and the past that is always present. We have to deal with the past, it will get us, and get us bad.

We are on an Exodus-like journey to a better place,  
"Find your flock,  
get them to higher ground  
The floodwaters' rising,  
we're Canaan bound."

Life is a cycle of losing and finding ourselves again. We name our failings in worship and then we reclaim our place as God's children.

"Worship as Community" / Land of Hope and Dreams

When I first heard Land of Hope and Dreams—Bruce's song about the train—I did not live in New York. When people who do not live around subways think of trains, they think of Amtrak. Amtrak is reliable schedules, comfortable seats, sunlight streaming through the window, the dining car, sleeping children, and bathrooms.

The A train is people jumping turnstiles, delays, hanging on for dear life during rush hour, screaming babies, the smell of sweat and other smells, and someone on the train who is a little unreliable. The train to the land of hope and dreams is, in some ways, more A train than Amtrak.

Tired people are trying to get through the day:

“Well darlin’ if you’re weary,  
lay your head upon my chest.  
We’ll take what we can carry,  
and we’ll leave the rest.”

When we feel left out, we remember that everyone is welcome on this train, not just the righteous and holy,” but:

“This train carries saints and sinners  
This train carries losers and winners  
This train carries whores and gamblers  
This train carries lost souls.  
This train carries the broken-hearted.  
This train thieves  
and sweet souls departed.”

In one live performance, Springsteen added, “This train carries immigrants.”

We are not God’s church if we are telling anyone that they do not belong on the train, whether they are believers— “Faith will be rewarded,” persons of good will— “sweet-souls departed,”—or those who’ve been wounded by communities, “the brokenhearted.” We are all together, so it really does not matter who we are or what we do, because we are God’s people. This train is the promise of a happy ending for people trying to navigate a morally, financially, and emotionally uncertain world.



We are trying to figure out how to keep going, but:  
“Tomorrow there’ll be sunshine  
and all this darkness past.  
This train will not be thwarted,  
this faith will be rewarded.”

The singer knows he is on his last leg and wants those close to him to be assured that he is on his way to heaven and that, in time, the pain of his passing will be eased by the truth that he is in the land of hope and dreams. We get ready by doing our best to build community. We get ready by living with God’s unconditional love for everyone. We get ready to be community by living as community.

God gives grace and we give thanks. Our gratitude towards God becomes gratitude towards one another. God’s love guides us towards God’s people.

God somehow uses both the good and the bad to create a land of hope and dreams. God makes us a family here and now and fills whatever is lacking in the world to come. We worship by seeing the community we are and dreaming of the community God is creating.

“Worship as Commitment” / Promised Land

She thinks she is saying something nice, but it is a big swing and a miss. She shakes her minister’s hand and says, “I love coming to church because I need a break from the real world. I’m so busy. I’m always in a hurry. My job is frustrating. My family is complicated. I’ve had two friends die recently. I come to worship to escape. I’m here to get away from reality. I come to this peaceful place and act like everything’s fine. I want to forget my troubles. When

I'm here, I don't think about the hard stuff. I know I'll have to go back to the real world, but I like pretending things are okay."

The minister is not sure how to tell her how backwards that is. He tries to be kind: "I'm glad you love coming here. You have an interesting perspective. I'm sure you know there are other ways to think about worship. In most ways, coming to church isn't an escape from the real world, but is the real world. Hiding from the real world is the opposite of worship. We're here to open our eyes to our own brokenness and to the brokenness of those around us. We look directly at our own hearts. We want to stop pretending and stop believing everything that isn't true. We worship, because we need to let go of the misplaced hopes for our life, while holding on to the hope of a life that matters."

In August 1977, just after Elvis died, Bruce and two friends went to Utah. They rented a red 1965 Ford Galaxie to ride around in the desert, including rattlesnake speedway. The song Bruce writes from that experience is about the real world. Life is hard. Families are complicated. Jobs are difficult. People die. We can't escape from our problems. We can't pretend everything is okay. We can't forget our troubles.

The singer is trapped in a meaningless job in his father's garage, but he is not running from his problems:

"I've done my best to live the right way,  
I get up every morning  
and go to work each day.  
But your eyes go blind



and your blood runs cold,  
Sometimes I feel so weak,  
I just want to explode.”

Doing your best does not mean you won't have problems. He wants to get rid of anything “that ain't got the faith to stand its ground.”

The song does not sugar-coat life's pressures, but it celebrates the strength of faith. He believes in a promised land, a new Exodus, and a new Canaan.

Genuine belief will:

“Blow away the dreams that tear you apart,  
blow away the dreams that break your heart.  
blow away the lies that leave you nothing,  
but lost and brokenhearted.”

When we come to worship, we are always at a crossroads. One road leads to destroyed dreams and weariness. The other road is the path to something better. There is a “dark cloud rising from the desert floor,” but we can have the confidence to go into it “I packed my bags and I'm heading straight into the storm.”

We worship to lose our illusions about a life without problems while holding on to a life of possibilities. We know about despair, but we also know about hope. We know where we are, but we do not let it keep us from remembering where we are going.

*sermon © Brett Younger*