



# PLAYLIST

▶ Gospel on the Radio

*Metallica*

JULY 14 | 9:30AM

Sunday, July 14, 2024

***Playlist: Gospel on the Radio – Metallica***

“There is Nothing Hidden” | Mark 4:21-23 | Jess Scholten

*Look out my window and see it's gone wrong/  
Court is in session and I slam my gavel down  
I'm judge and I'm jury and I'm executioner too....*  
“Dirty Window,” St. Anger, Metallica 2023

“But God was very angry...” Numbers 22:22

Sometimes the wrath of a metal band and the wrath of God run parallel, especially when thinking about the injustice of the world. Which is why these quotes open Reformed Church pastor John Van Sloten’s book, *The Day Metallica Came to Church: Searching for the Everywhere God in Everything* (p.9). In it, he writes about how he ended up focusing on Metallica for a sermon.

He had just finished preaching a sermon on U2 when a teenage boy on his way out of the worship service asked if John might consider preaching a sermon on his favorite band. “Sure,” [John responded], without really thinking. “What kind of music are you into?” “Heavy metal.”

“I’m really into Metallica,” [the kid] said with a smile. Which is when John responded with the sometimes-canned response of a pastor backed into a corner: I’ll pray about it.

Well, I guess God must have answered his prayer because the next day, John Van Sloten was offered two floor tickets to an upcoming Metallica concert.

And John Van Sloten, ordained in the conservative Christian Reformed denomination... who had thought there was no possible spiritual redemption in Metallica’s lyrics and music... went to church.

Two hours of headbanging later, John realized the band was more alive in those few hours than he had been in a month. If you're not familiar with Metallica, the band's cofounder and drummer Lars Ulrich has big energy – he's basically a small Danish version of Animal from the Muppets.

And then the real magic happened: “The band was wrapping up with an acoustic ballad entitled ‘Nothing Else Matters,’ [John] sensed a change coming over everyone.”

He reflects, “Distinctly quieter than the rest of their repertoire, this song seemed to strike a deep chord with Metallica's fans. Boyfriends put their arms around their girlfriends. Many sang along with lead singer James Hetfield, and the whole place seemed to be swaying back and forth to the music. Suddenly the atmosphere became solemn, beautiful. As I stood there among all those people, I couldn't help but think, ‘This feels like church.’ It felt like a community in lament, like a crowd jointly voicing their despairing, disconnected, all-too-human cry to God.”

*So close, no matter how far  
Couldn't be much more from the heart  
Forever trusting who we are  
And nothing else matters*

*Never opened myself this way  
Life is ours, we live it our way  
All these words I don't just say  
And nothing else matters*

The song, slow and rich, was written by James Hetfield in a moment of homesickness while on tour, thinking of his girlfriend at the time.

Why do we love music so much? It helps us to feel what we feel, to sort through our very human experience. It's why Taylor Swift, U2, Blue October, and yes – even Metallica – can touch us to our very core.

Because these are song writers along with so many artists who pour themselves out and connect with us. As Henri Nouwen reflects in *Bread for the Journey*, “the most personal is the most universal, the most hidden is the most public, and the most solitary is the most communal.”

Back when Netflix still came by mail, Tom added a documentary to our queue: “Metallica: Some Kind of Monster.”

“You bumped the Sopranos for Metallica,” I noted, with accusation.

“Yeah, I heard James Hetfield, the lead singer, on an interview with Terry Gross on NPR the other day, and it’s about the making of St. Anger that came out last summer.”

I grew up with Edie Brickell and George Michael and left all the metal nonsense to the parking lot gangs in high school. You’ve named yourselves, a few weeks ago, fans of the Beach Boys, the Beatles, Traci Chapman, the Carpenters, Glenn Miller, Wilco, and Willy Nelson. Are there any metalheads out there? I knew almost nothing about the band for most of my growing up other than the general vibe that they were somehow Satanic. Spoiler alert, they are not. Most of them grew up in loosely Christian households. Charlie said I should for sure remind you that Mariano Rivera would enter Yankee Stadium to Metallica’s most played on the radio song, “Enter Sandman,” which might prompt a few of you to realize you have heard the band. But like many of you, I had not ever heard more than a few lines of a Metallica song.

And then I married Tom.

He looks very Amy Grant style, but he’s the real metalhead of the Scholten household. I’ve come home occasionally to the whole house rattling to “Master of Puppets.” We can’t play it in church, and I can’t sing it – mostly because the lyrics from “Obey your master” happens to switch very easily to “Obey your pastor”... but if you’ve never heard Metallica on full volume, it is as loud and head-thrashing as you imagine it to be.

When that red and white envelope showed up in the mail in 2004 with the metal band documentary, I wasn’t super keen on watching it beyond a vague show of support for the creative interest of the hubs. But what I am super keen on is a good resurrection story, and “Metallica: Some Kind of Monster” is full of them.

Twenty years after starting the band, they had some figuring out to do. They had already gone through several iterations. Their first lead guitarist, Dave Mustaine, left the band after just a few years and formed another Titan of thrash metal, Megadeth. Cliff Burton, their bass player, died in a bus accident while on tour a few years later – devastating for them all. The guy who replaced him, Jason Newsted, was with the band for 15 years from 1986 – 2001. Fun fact about Jason Newsted, a member of

Covenant from whom I did not get permission to name, grew up with him and has some fun stories from their time as friends in Michigan.

So, this documentary is about a 2-decade-old band with middle aged dads trying to write a new album after losing a significant member. They sat down with Phil Towle, a Performance Enhancement Coach who Metallica's producers hired to get the band back on track. And literally you spend two hours watching the lyrics get written, seeing the band members interact and grow, and the development of St. Anger, their 2003 album.

In the middle of it all, co-founder James Hetfield ends up in rehab. "This is a total rebirth for me," he reflects when he returns several months later. Understanding the psychology of the lyrics, I would dare say, even the spirituality of the words, drew me into Metallica fandom in a way I did not expect.

Which brings us to this morning, and our Gospel lesson from Mark chapter 4. This is Jesus speaking about light, only it's not his usual reflections about being the light or shining light. Instead, he gives the brunt truth of light. Hear the words of Jesus in Mark 4:21-23:

"Is a lamp brought in to be put under the bushel basket, or under the bed, and not on the lampstand? 22For there is nothing hidden, except to be disclosed; nor is anything secret, except to come to light. 23Let anyone with ears to hear listen!"

There is nothing hidden, except to be disclosed; nor is anything secret, except to come to light.

The angst of Metallica is all about shining the light on the truth that is hidden. Like each of us, the band has all sorts of stories of pain. Each band member has complicated dynamics with their parents – James' dad left when he was 14 and then his mom died when he was 16, essentially because of the financial stress and her religious beliefs that caused her to not seeking medical help for a treatable cancer. They lost their dear friend Cliff in a bus accident while on tour. Wild drummer Lars' dad is basically his harshest critic.

It's no wonder their albums are full of unmitigated teenage angst. Van Sloten suggests pairing lyrics with Jeremiah 20:14-18:

“Cursed be the day on which I was born! The day when my mother bore me, let it not be blessed!.... Why did I come forth from the womb to see toil and sorrow, and spend my days in shame?”

Death metal is full of lament and anger and sheer angst at the injustices of the world.

Maybe we could all use a little more headbanging as we seek to dismantle systemic racism and eradicate systemic poverty, two of our three main focuses of what we do in ministry to live out the Gospel of Jesus Christ – two ways we seek to bring good news in a broken culture and the ways we seek to usher in God’s kingdom here on earth as it is in heaven: right here, right now. We have our conversations in polite chat rooms when those who suffer might much more likely want to scream along than continue to have to get alone.

There is nothing hidden, except to be disclosed; nor is anything secret, except to come to light.

Metallica’s most recent album was released just last year, “72 Seasons,” from which one of our playlist songs comes: “Lux Aeterna.” It’s a short and sweet headbang that shares a name with part of the Latin Mass for communion – in English, may everlasting light (lux aeterna) shine on us. In the making of “St. Anger” and future albums, Lars Ulrich reflects, “We’ve proven we can make aggressive music without negative energy.”

Metallica’s grown up in the second half of being a band, been reborn, transformed, redeemed. They recognize that what they put out comes back to them, echoing Jesus’ call to be love and light in the world. Once, that might have been pure teenage rage and angst against injustices with a good dose of violence, but now when they do their pre-show “meet and greets,” they get a few “Rock on, dudes,” but they also get people who pour out about loss and rehab and coming back from the edge of hopelessness or addiction. Even thrash metal headbangers can bear fruit in the world.

Just prior to our passage this morning in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus is teaching the crowd, and he tells this story about a crazy farmer. Instead of planting on nicely prepared ground, this farmer just starts throwing seed everywhere. You know the story – some falls on the hardpacked paths where the birds can eat it up; some on the shallow soil with bedrock too close to the surface so that it quickly takes up root but shallowly, withering quickly under the sun; some among the thorns where it gets

choked out, and lastly, some on good soil and it yields a good harvest.

The disciples don't understand the story – why would a farmer just throw seed willy nilly, they ask Jesus later that evening when it's just the small group. And Jesus explains that it's not really about the farmer or the seeds – it's about the soil – the way we till our hearts. Do we just have shallow soil that lets our faith fade with any kind of trouble or persecution? Do let the weedy desires of the world strangle us? Or do we prepare ourselves for growth and to bear fruit?

Spiritual teacher, Father Richard Rohr reflected this past week on the transformation that is necessary as we seek to be followers of Jesus in the world:

“If we do not have a lot of people showing up in the suffering trenches of the world, it's probably because those of us in the world of religion have allowed them to stop with merely cleaning up, growing up, or waking up.” (<https://cac.org/daily-meditations/showing-up-to-serve/#:~:text=If%20we%20do%20not%20have,their%20personal%20or%20cultural%20shadow>)

Our faith calls for more than that – for the transformation that bears fruit – for the growing up and waking up that in turn reaches out and helps others as well. As part of the writing process in *Some Kind of Monster*, after Hetfield returns to the group sober... and others talk about their own shifts and changes and transformations, the performance enhancement coach Phil puts into words – like a mission statement – some of the band's purpose:

"We come now to create our album of life. Throughout our individual and collective journeys, sometimes through pain and conflict, we've discovered the true meaning of family. As we accomplish ultimate togetherness, we become healers of ourselves and the countless who embrace us and our message. We have learned and we understand. Now we must share." (the "Mission Statement" for heavy metal group Metallica's new album, drafted by their "performance-enhancement coach.")

“For there is nothing hidden, except to be disclosed; nor is anything secret, except to come to light. Let anyone with ears to hear listen!” Or in the words of Metallica, “Lux Aeterna” – may the eternal light surround us:

Full speed or nothin,' Full speed or nothin'  
Lux æterna, Lux æterna, yeah. Light it!