Baby Shark

Blake Mathews

“Why do people in church seem like cheerful, brainless tourists on a packaged tour of the Absolute? Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we blithely invoke? … We should all be wearing crash helmets.”

This quote from Annie Dillard sauntered through my mind last Sunday evening as I stood, one among the singing hundreds at Downtown Church of Christ, and read the words proclaimed by the giant Powerpoint slides encircling the room.

“DO NOT FEAR.”

It’s a line from a modern hymn that has thankfully gained a lot of popularity in the Church of Christ. “When you pass through the water/I will be with you.” I say “thankfully” because it’s one of the few a capella songs that doesn’t sound like it was written for a full praise band, only to have our brotherhood strip it for parts and try to pretend it doesn’t sound empty. But that debate aside, I was bothered by the presentation that, no matter where I looked in that big room, I could not avert my eyes from ten giant screens, all demanding that I “DO NOT FEAR.”

I imagine the worship leaders set that line apart for the dramatic value, to really drive home the importance of NOT BEING AFRAID. If this tactic moved even one person, I’m afraid it’ll spread next to those older, cherished hymns. Soon I will look up and read on giant scrolls, “THE DEAD SHALL RISE,” or “MILLIONS WILL MEET THEIR DOOM.”

That night’s service ended with a song I had never heard before, but I knew exactly where it came from: church camp. Some songs encourage clapping, others bring peoples’ hands into the air, but some songs are designed to amuse a small army of 7-year-old campers. They rely on goofiness, on juvenile aggression, on the release of serotonin that must come from yelling and gesticulating wildly. If you think I’m being unrealistic, put yourself in the shoes of a non-believer who walks into a worship service for the first time in many years. You are greeted by hundreds of adult men and women screaming “SATAN WAS DEFEATED” and pumping their arms like bloodsport fans. How would you react to the children of God? I would try to sneak away before anyone in there recognized my face.

Lets get it straight, guys: Satan was defeated by Jesus when he overcame the tomb. You know, the tomb he went into because of mankind’s sin, the tomb we put him in. Looking at it that way, it’s almost sacrilegious to yell “SATAN WAS DEFEATED” as if we were the ones that overcame him. It makes more sense for me to be on my knees, trembling, my breath heavy with the realization that I have aided the Accuser by sinning. “Satan is defeated … thank God.”

The song is called “I Belong To Jesus,” though if our Master is as powerful as the stories say, perhaps we should be more mindful of our own attitudes when we approach him in worship. Maybe the Gospel exhortation to “be like little children” doesn’t translate directly into “act like an 8-year-old.” Remember, through worship we are declaring our fealty to the Supreme Power of Existence. Don’t overdramatize it, don’t make it ridiculous. Let’s try to take it seriously.

(Author’s note: I had just completed the video game adaptation of “Dante’s Inferno” before I left for Downtown that night. So with the first shouting of “SATAN WAS DEFEATED” I thought, “Yeah, that final boss was hard. Took like an hour to beat.”)