

Today's song isn't one that's ever been on a Billboard chart. It's never been played on the radio. But it's considered one of the most important songs of the 20th Century. It made its debut at Woodstock in 1952, nearly 20 years before Woodstock became *the* Woodstock everyone's heard of. 4'33" was written by composer John Cage, and performed by piano virtuoso David Tudor.

We don't have a video of the original performance, but we have a video of an orchestral rendition of that piece that will play after we pass peace to one another.

[\[video\]](#)

I'm going to go ahead and assume most of us have never heard that song before. How many of you were already familiar with "4'33"?" Anyone in here this is your favorite song of all time and you can't even believe we finally did it at Catalyst?

No?

[1 Song?] No. Of course not. In fact, I'm betting most of us are wondering whether 4'33" actually counts as a song. After all, there's no music. It's just... silence.

And yet, 4'33" is regarded by many to be one of the most important songs of the 20th century. Musicians like John Lennon and Frank Zappa hailed it as pure genius.

Which is pretty impressive for a song without any music.

How many of us, if we're being honest, will admit when we saw all those people applauding at the end, *laughed* or thought, "How foolish!"?

What's the deal with 4'33"?" That's the question I want to ask today - how can a song of silence be regarded as important music? If we can answer that question well, we can discover a powerful truth about our spirituality too - good news that points us toward freedom and life.

[2 John Cage] To understand 4'33", we need to understand that for composer John Cage, music isn't the notes and rests that comprise individual songs. For John Cage, music is the *frame* we put around sounds that gives them meaning.

Similarly, when it comes to spirituality, I want to suggest that faith isn't a few specific practices and habits that make us holy. Rather, faith is a life framed by participating in God's provision.

The frame determines the meaning.

What does that mean? Well John Cage is a man who loved music. He dedicated his life to experimenting with music - he became famous for the "prepared piano" [3 Prepared Piano

[image](#)], in which he put coins, screws, erasers, anything to make strange noises (not unlike how Rage Against the Machine's Tom Morello plays his guitar with pliers or a screwdriver).

Cage was convinced that any sound could be music. Noise wasn't just noise - it was potential.

But Cage was working in post-WWII America. The late 40s saw the rise of the suburbs, of the metropolis. The rise of recorded music available everywhere.

Cage felt increasingly restricted by the loss of natural noise in the world - the countryside was disappearing in favor of suburbs, the stars and sounds of nature lost to the lights and sounds of cities that never sleep.

[4 Timeline of freedom/wilderness/campfires being lost to cities, lights, records, ipods] And musically, Cage saw the record as the inevitable conclusion of the musical revolution that began during the Enlightenment.

[5 TL - improv music] Before the Enlightenment, music had been heavily improvisational. Composers wrote music, but it was understood that the music was little more than a guide - every conductor, instrumentalist and singer gave the music their own interpretation. Folk songs differed from town to town. Every musician had their own version of the popular classics. There were no "right" ways and "wrong ways" to play the songs, just various interpretations.

[6 continue TL - composer] But in the wake of the Enlightenment, the composer became more prominent, exercised more control. We began to get names like Handel. Bach. Brahms. Mozart. Beethoven. Increasingly, these composers had specific ways they intended their songs to sound.

Performances became professionalized. And conductors, instrumentalists and vocalists were *discouraged* from improvising. Live performances became less about enjoying the unique interpretations of the individual artists than measuring how well the performers executed the composer's original wishes.

It quit being about creativity and innovation and started being about performance. It quit being about art and became about perfection.

[7 TL - phonograph] Then, we got the phonograph. Which became the record. Now composers could put their music down in pre-recorded perfection. Everyone knew exactly what every song was supposed to sound like.

And John Cage felt trapped by this. He felt constricted by the lack of freedom, the lack of innovation. The lack of art.

[8 Muzak] Then came Muzak.

Everyone knows Muzak, right? We mostly call it "elevator music" today, but the original Muzak company was founded by an Army general and sold as background music designed to make employees more productive. Muzak was just ordered enough to keep you working, but not interesting enough to distract you from your work.

By the late 40s, Muzak was *everywhere*. Canned, generic music in offices, public spaces, subways.

Cage revolted. He wanted to create a piece that broke through the generic wall of sound that was putting the whole country to sleep. He wanted to take music back for the artists, to reclaim the beauty and power of music to wake people up.

So he composed a song that was completely silent. 4'33" of... nothing.

Cage knew he wasn't writing the next great symphony. He knew his song would never get radio play. He wrote it to be a disruption. A shock to the system of Music itself.

Art always requires that kind of disruption. You can see it over and over again in music history. [9 [john cage / kurt cobain / blink 182](#)] Even relatively recently, we can look at movements like punk rock and grunge as strong reactions against the established music industry.

The beauty and fluidity of art always crystallizes. At first, the new thing is terrible, then it's interesting, then it's the thing everyone's doing and suddenly 13-year-old girls are going to Blink 182 concerts and you wonder if perhaps punk rock isn't quite so punk rock anymore.

We need pieces like 4'33" to shock us awake, to remind us not to get complacent, not to let art suffer under the weight of conformity because when it does, it ceases to be art. It puts us to sleep instead of waking us up.

Which brings us to religion

[10 [Map: people gathered around Spirit](#)] Many people who have come to Jesus know what I'm talking about. There's an initial joy, a spark of freedom, a deep sense of love unlike anything you've experienced before. Everything seems new. The world seems fresher.

Then religion sets in. Somewhere along the way, you start to feel locked down. There're all these rules - do this, don't do that. Go here, don't listen to that. You feel religion crystallizing around you, and after a while, all the freedom and beauty that attracted you in the first place seems... distant.

[11 [Map: Zoom out, Spirit here, Not There](#)] We convinced ourselves we had the monopoly on God, that if you wanted to encounter the Spirit, you had to come *here*, because the Spirit wasn't

out there anywhere. Enter the religious professionals, who told you exactly what your faith had to look like if you wanted it to count.

And what that actually ends up looking like for most people is a religion that's isolated from reality. People in these kinds of religious contexts can't figure out what that kind of faith has to do with everyday life. You're too busy raising kids and holding down jobs and trying to juggle life to read your bible or pray or make it to Church every week. When you do make it, the religion they offer doesn't actually help you to be a better parent or spouse or employee or friend... it pretty much just makes you feel guilty all the time.

And it's hard to muster much enthusiasm for something that feels irrelevant *and* makes you feel guilty.

The good news is that Jesus wasn't a fan of that kind of religion *either*. And he proved it by disrupting the whole system. [Scripture Slide] The crystallized state of our churches is a close parallel to the religion Jesus encountered in his day. If you have a bible, turn with me to John 3. The center of faith for Jesus' day was the Temple in Jerusalem. It was meant to be a bridge between Heaven and Earth, the site from which God's love flowed through God's people to the whole world. But by Jesus' day, it had become a source of injustice, where those in power used their control of the Temple to take advantage of everyone else.

[12 Cleanse the Temple or just Temple] So in John's gospel, one of the first things Jesus does is cleanse the Temple. During Passover, their biggest religious festival, Jesus walks into the Temple and begins driving out the animals and people selling them. He causes a huge scene.

And the people in charge get it. They understand Jesus sees himself as a messenger from God. That he's causing a disruption, announcing God's judgment on the way they're doing things. At least some of them think Jesus might have a point. They don't freak out. Instead, they send a messenger of their own, a guy named Nicodemus. John 3 is the story of how he approaches Jesus to feel him out.

Listen as Nicodemus questions Jesus, trying to determine what Jesus wants from him:

Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him."

Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again."

"How can someone be born when they are old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born!"

Jesus answered, "Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit." -- John 3:1-8

We understand why Nicodemus would be confused by Jesus' words. First, he implies that Nicodemus, a powerful, religious man, isn't ready to see God's kingdom. Because he hasn't been born of Spirit.

And when Nicodemus asks a fairly straightforward question, "How does that work?", Jesus confuses the issue. He says, "The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."

Jesus is making a play on words here - in both Greek (the language John was writing in) and Aramaic (the language Nicodemus and Jesus would've been speaking), the same word meant both "wind" and "Spirit".

Look again at what Jesus tells him, with that in mind:

The Spirit blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.

In reminding Nicodemus that the Spirit of God is like a wind - that when the waters of creation were mere chaos, the Spirit of God blew across them, that when the waters of the Red Sea kept the people trapped in slavery, the Spirit of God blew across them, that when the nation of Israel had become religious worshippers of idols, the Spirit of God was breathed out of the mouths of prophets - in reminding Nicodemus that no one knows where the wind comes from or where it goes, Jesus is challenging the staleness of the current Jewish religion.

Just like John Cage, Jesus knew the only hope men like Nicodemus had was to be disrupted, to be shocked out of a religion that had put them to sleep, to wake back into a life of faith.

The same is true with any facet of our faith. The Bible shows us who God is, but it can also become a weapon that wounds us. Prayer teaches us to listen for God, but can become a routine, a box to be checked. Church buildings offer us space to gather to worship, launching pads for service in our community, but they can become a symbol of burden, of legalism, sources of shame or guilt.

Jesus reminds us that the forms of our faith are not the faith itself. [13 God as conductor?] That God is not a dictatorial conductor who insists on a rigid, homogenizing faith. God cannot be contained in a building or a book or a habit. Jesus reminds us that our tendency is to crystallize, to assume God only works in this place, in these practices. Jesus reminds us that the Spirit is a sacred wind, blowing wherever she wants, without asking our permission.

If we are to be faithful, we must remain open to the Spirit. We must allow God to disrupt us, to break us out of our crystallized faith.

Now, a fair question to ask is, "How do we listen for the Spirit?" Surely there is a difference between good and bad, between helpful and harmful. Of course there is.

But here again, John Cage help us. By writing and performing 4'33", Cage wasn't claiming that everything is music. Rather, he claimed that everything *could* be music. Cage saw a world brimming with possibility, where every noise had the potential to be beautiful if only we knew to look for it.

[14 frame] What Cage offers us with 4'33" is a *frame*, a way to make meaning out of the chaos of noise. What makes something art is whether or not people are looking for art. [15 do a side-by-side infographic] In January 2007, the Washington Post decided to put this to the test. Only a few days before, violin virtuoso Joshua Bell had played a 45 minute concert in Boston's Symphony Hall, with a capacity of over 2,600 persons. He performed 6 classical pieces on his \$3.5 million Stradivarius violin. A decent seat to his show cost \$100. One seat. [16 \$260,000, 2,600 people, everyone watching and applauding, everyone there to see him]

On this day, Bell stood outside the entrance to the L'Enfant Plaza subway station in Washington, DC. He again played for 45 minutes. This time, he raised only \$32.17, given to him by a total of 27 persons of the more than 1,000 who passed him in that time. Of the 27, only 7 stopped, and of those 7, only 1 recognized him as a world-famous violinist. [17 On the same slide: \$32.17, 1,000+ people, 27 paid, 7 stopped, 1 knew him]

What's the difference? The performances were identical, or nearly enough so that most of us wouldn't note a difference.

[14 frame] The difference is the *frame*. When we attend a symphony, we expect that what we hear will be music. When we're walking to work, we expect to hear noise. And so some sounds are notes and crescendos and rhythms and others are traffic and horns and pounding and annoyances.

Cage saw that the "frame" for music was getting smaller and smaller and smaller. It was robbing us all of our creativity, our artistry. Instead of *making* music, we were just playing it, relying on the professionals. For Cage, that was a loss.

So he wrote a piece of music. He built a frame. Into which the performers would put no notes. They would sit, silent and ready, and let those gathered to hear experience *everything* as music. Every cough. Every sneeze. Every crying baby. Every whispered question.

Friends, this is what Jesus does for us. In disrupting our crystallized religion, he's offering us a frame, empty of rules and priests and professionals who do faith for us.

[17 earth or cosmos in frame] Instead, Jesus is inviting us to see *everything* is spiritual. Sunday isn't a holy day... *every day* is a holy day. Yes reading the Bible and prayer and fasting and giving are spiritual practices. But so are parenting. And chores around the house. And doing your best at work. And staying when you want to leave. And speaking up for people who have less privilege than you do.

Jesus is offering us a frame that makes sense of all the bits of our lives, not just the "churchy" bits. Paul pointed this out to the people of Athens when he told them the good news about Jesus - that God sent him to rescue the world. Paul said,

God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us. 'For in him we live and move and have our being.' -- Acts 17:27-28

In God we live and move and have our being. Paul quotes Greek popular culture - a philosopher named Posidonius - to tell the Athenians that God gives them their bodies, minds and souls. Our whole selves are grounded in God. In another book, the author puts it like this:

The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. -- Colossians 1:15-18

All things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things and in him all things hold together.

Jesus is the frame in which our lives make sense. When we see our lives through the frame of Jesus, we can see that *everything* is spiritual. There's no part of our day that isn't an opportunity to love God better, to love those around us better.

Friends, Jesus offers to disrupt our lives. He says, STOP! LOOK! I am playing by the subway entrance. I am in your homes. I am in your offices, among your coworkers. I am at the bars and restaurants and movie theaters and playgrounds. everything is music. It's all spiritual.

Song Examen

This week, what if you stopped? What if you spent 4'33" in silence every day, as a reminder to listen for the unpredictable blowing of the wind, to feel the Spirit's breeze wherever you are.

What kind of people might we be if we see God everywhere, even on the street corners? [5 seconds of silence]

In God, we live and move and have our being. (insert 10 seconds of silence)

Jesus is before all things and in him all things hold together. (insert 15 seconds of silence)

The Spirit is blowing even now. Where will you find her? (20 seconds of silence)

Prayer