

In you, O Lord, have we taken refuge; for the sake of your name, lead us and guide us.¹ *Amen.*

32 years ago this month, Missy and I arrived in fair Shreveport, Louisiana, for winter break. Through what must have been impressive negotiations, her parents granted uncharacteristic permission for me to drive the two of us to and from a Dallas radio station's concert event² at a former warehouse known as "The Bomb Factory." We left around lunchtime for the three-hour expedition from the Queen City on the Red, and we arrived back home just after 3AM – a return trip that remains among the most exhausted and scariest of my hard-driving road adventures.

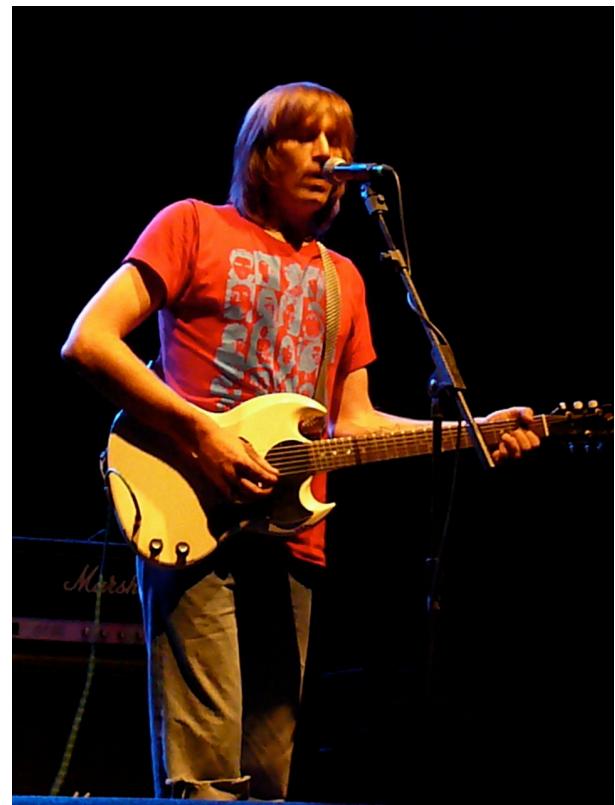
The Ax and the Marshall Stack

The Rev. Morgan A. Allen

Sunday, December 7, 2025

See, for most of nine hours, we had stood: first outside the venue waiting for the doors to open, and then inside, on "the floor." In those days, rock-n-roll shows remained as God intended: entirely general admission. Ergo, if one got there first, and if one were willing to forego comforts, then one could occupy the best spot in the hall. Missy and I were so willing, and so we did accomplish; we stood at mark center with our hands on the stage, without much more than an inch to move in any direction.

The highly-90s bill included British alt-rockers the Catherine Wheel,³ the great Matthew Sweet,⁴ and an unlikely penultimate act, Tony Bennett.⁵ Finally, the headliners – for whom we had devotedly undertaken this journey – made their disheveled appearance: the Lemonheads, fronted by Bostonian Evan Dando.⁶



For those of us who grew up somewhere other than LA, New York, or Boston, bands provided a taxonomic shorthand for identity that could counter the happenstance of our geography, the cut of our cheek bones, and the financial circumstances of our homes ...



During the new liturgical year we began last week, we turned over the three-year cycle of lectionary readings, that schedule appointing the biblical texts we hear in worship each Sunday. In this “Year A,” we will hear often from Matthew’s Gospel. Though Matthew appears first in the Christian Testament, it was likely written second or third among the four canonical Gospels – in 80ish CE, as many as 20 years – a full generation – after Mark.

Matthew emphasizes Jesus’ Jewish identity, and in the King James Version, begins with the “begats:” as in, “Abraham *begat* Isaac; and Isaac *begat* Jacob; and Jacob *begat* Judas … until [another] Jacob *begat* Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus, who is called Christ.”⁷ The forty-two-generation⁸ genealogy serves to set Jesus – even before his birth – in the line of Israel’s leaders, heroes, and kings.

What I expected to be a celebration, turned into a warning: the flashing ax was there, lying at the roots of the tree, at the foot of the Marshall stack, at the toe of my Chuck Taylors ...

set within a prophetic vision, this time of Micah¹²). The Holy Family then escapes to Egypt to flee the tetrarch’s massacre of all children under two-years-old.¹³ Upon receiving word from an angel that Herod has died, Joseph, Mary, and Jesus safely return to their country and make a home in Nazareth,¹⁴ fulfilling another prophecy of Isaiah.¹⁵

Chapter three then begins with the opening bars of today’s appointment: “In those days, John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.’”¹⁶



Back in twentieth-century Massachusetts, Evan Dando grew up in Essex, the son of a real-estate-attorney father and a former-fashion-model mother.¹⁷ Likely benefiting from his mom’s connections in the industry, Evan modeled as a child,¹⁸ including in a mid-70s commercial as “The Jell-O Boy.”¹⁹

Following a move from the north shore into the city, Dando started at the Commonwealth School, just around the corner from us at Trinity. After a freshman year that brought waning academic interest and the beginning of his drug use, the administration attempted to expel him. However, his mother intervened: the independent school's officials had a change of heart, and he stayed through graduation.²⁰

In time, Evan started a band with two classmates: Ben Deily, who would graduate *cum laude* from Harvard and enjoy success as an award-winning ad executive;²¹ and Jesse Peretz, who would become the band's photographer before a notable run as a Hollywood producer-director-writer, including the HBO series *Girls*.²² Skidmore opened its doors to Dando, but a first semester of “four Fs and a D” closed them, and closed his academic career for good.²³

From 1987 to 1989, the band released three albums on the Boston-based label Taang!.²⁴ While still adolescent and mostly unremarkable, The Lemonheads showed a knack for lightning-in-a-bottle: catchy hooks, clever lyrics,²⁵ and punchy covers. Of the latter, their first album includes a punkified version of “Amazing Grace,”²⁶ and two long-players later, their version of Suzanne Vega’s “Luka”²⁷ found regular rotation on college radio and MTV’s *120 Minutes*.

Atlantic Records noticed the attention and signed the band. In 1990, the Lemonheads released their major-label debut, *Lovey*.²⁸ After two years of worldwide touring, promoting, and steeping in the rock-n-roll lifestyle, their breakthrough into the mainstream arrived with the follow-up, *It’s A Shame About Ray*.²⁹



Matthew credentials John with ancient authority, naming, “This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, ‘The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight.’’’”³⁰ Torquing that passage’s punctuation³¹ to emphasize John’s wilderness-ness, Matthew notes the Baptizer’s camel’s hair coat, leather belt, and appetite for honey-encrusted locust.³² The next verse’s location



detail reiterates John's outsider status, his having taken up a faraway post where the Judeans must "go out" to reach him.³³

And then the Gospel pivots.

With the single-sentence, eighth verse – "Bear fruit worthy of repentance" – the lesson's weight forcefully shifts

from John's *identity* to John's *message*, and from Jesus' lineage to *our* behavior.³⁴ With affirmation after affirmation of Jewish heritage,

the authoring community of Matthew builds a three-chapter setup for the Baptizer now to warn the Abrahamic leadership against depending upon their inheritance as a qualifier for fidelity. John challenges any idea that they and their ancestors have somehow collectively "banked" sufficient holiness to pay forward their right relationship with God. Instead, John challenges them to *demonstrate* their righteousness. He **stirs their urgency**: "Even now," John cries out – *not* soon, *not* tomorrow – "Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees."³⁵



For those of us who grew up somewhere other than LA, New York, or Boston, bands provided a taxonomic shorthand for identity that could counter the happenstance of our geography, the cut of our cheek bones, and the financial circumstances of our homes. Identifying with a music scene amounted to a chosen family, a community to hold one's aspirations and sense of self – an "alternative" to the overproduced neon dreck of 1980s popular radio.³⁶ With our stereos, we found the freedom to endorse a different set of values than the one the predominant culture imposed upon us. The record stores we visited and the mixtapes we traded offered us an identity we could *elect*, rather than only *accept*.

Along with cosmic-country³⁷ and poppy-punk ambassadors The Replacements and Soul Asylum,³⁸ The Pixies and Dinosaur Jr, Missy and I chose the Lemonheads – and Wednesday-before-last, we took our daughter, Ginna, to see the band at The Wilbur [She was *so* excited!³⁹]. Though we maintained enough pluck to buy floor tickets, we also made plans to limit the amount of our standing; we arrived long after the doors opened.⁴⁰

Entering the theater, we immediately observed Ginna would join a rank of teenaged children brought by their middle-aged, former alt-rocker parents⁴¹ to bear devoted witness to a prophet of old. Despite the fortifications of those multi-generational ticket purchases and what amounted to a holiday homecoming show for the band, the venue remained two-thirds empty⁴² – a far cry from the congested, contagious energy of that show Missy and I attended long ago; I confess my surprise.

And Evan Dando, *sigh*: bless his heart. Sweaty and donning an ill-fitting suit that accentuated his late-middle-aged physique, he wore his hair as he had when he was 20 – but the locks that once framed a face fit for charming a string of Hollywood and runway girlfriends, now looked only worrisomely tangled. Instead of whimsy and easy cheer, his beard shrouded a mouth of shiny caps and a bridge that has changed the shape of his jawline. As Dando tells the story, he lost most of his teeth on Martha's Vineyard during the pandemic, the consequence of a drug habit that included a daily cycle of heroin and cocaine, speed and weed.⁴³ Until dental assistance, he subsisted on the delivery cheeseburgers he could barely chew with his aching gums.⁴⁴

Though Dando's spirit seemed affable and bright enough on stage that night, trouble

seeped from the edges of his meandering, inconsistent performance.⁴⁵ We could sense it, even before we could hear and see it. My first feeling about the show was worry for him.

On most days, the fond devotions I have invested in my favorite bands across a lifetime of loyalty allow me to blind and deafen myself to time's passage. Listening to the same records I spun 30 or 40 years ago unrolls a convincing gauze of dopamine'd nostalgia. Without deliberate effort or any conscious intent, I can daily slip into a season long since passed, one where I'm still twenty with a full head of hair and the world on a string, and likewise, my college-radio favorites remain young and vital and forever cool. Down Stuart Street Wednesday-week – with an *actual* 20-year-old at my side – the-world-that-was crashed against the-world-that-is, and what I expected to be a celebration, turned into a warning: the flashing ax was there, lying at the roots of the tree, at the foot of the Marshall stack, at the toe of my Chuck Taylors.⁴⁶

So, too, John's sermon seeks to tear the curtain of the stories we tell ourselves – including that winsome one where we have as much time to make a difference in the world as we had a half-century ago. While images of flames and sharp objects can feel frightening on their surface, Matthew's opening gambit fluoridates⁴⁷ the Baptizer message that God loves all people – and God's hopes that those people (that's us!) will take maximum advantage of the limited time they have to do good. John asks us to appreciate that living other ways, with other priorities, will bring other costs, even if those damages' incremental creep remains slow, almost imperceptible – those consequences arrive not as a judgment, but as a mortal inevitability.

Sharing freedoms and holding one another's hopes in our chosen family of the Church, John calls us to *demonstrate* our faithfulness. Endorsing a different set of values than the one the predominant culture imposes upon us, John invites us to an identity we can elect, rather than only accept. John reminds us of the Good News that we can realize God's dream when we love more and love better ... not soon, not tomorrow, but *now* – making a straight path through the wilderness and following it together.

With grateful hearts and gracious lives;
Amen.



¹ From Psalm 31.

² The “Edge Christmas Party.” The Internets tell me the date was December 19, 1993, a Sunday.

³ Last summer, three or four Catherine Wheel CDs found the shelf of our favorite thrift store, and I gave them a go. They may be slightly better than I remembered, but I’m still *meh* on them.

⁴ We saw Matthew Sweet four or five times in those years, and I remain a fan.

⁵ Bennett was nearly 70 at the time and experiencing a renaissance among young-adult nerds looking to pivot even further from their peers’ mainstream. Though I had missed the memo on his emerging cool, Missy and I enjoyed “Fly Me To The Moon” and a few spirited holiday numbers – and Bennett seemed to enjoy the attention.

⁶ This roster included Juliana Hatfield on bass.

⁷ The genealogy comprises vv. 1-17. The opening line: “The book of the generation of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.”

⁸ Matthew 1:17.

⁹ Matthew 1:18-25.

¹⁰ Matthew 1:23a, quoting Isaiah 7:14.

¹¹ Matthew 2:1-12.

¹² Matthew 2:6, quoting Micah 5:2.

¹³ Matthew 2:13-18.

¹⁴ Matthew 2:19-23.

¹⁵ Matthew 2:23, quoting Isaiah 11:1.

¹⁶ Matthew 3:1.

¹⁷ Sturges, Fiona. “Interview: The Lemonheads’ Evan Dando.” *The Guardian*. October 6, 2025. Dando recently published an autobiography, prompting fresh interest in his life and music.

¹⁸ While his family’s social station and his good looks would bring advantages, they would also cost him credibility with the tougher crowd his music courted. I also attribute the media’s swift willingness to criticize him as another mode of reaction to his perceived privilege.

¹⁹ “Like Mrs. Susan Dando of Boston!” All this makes sense for me of the last track on 1993’s C’mon Feel The Lemonheads, “The Jello Fund.” Apparently, his dad created an investment account (see the Petridis article referenced below) with his adolescent earnings.

²⁰ Petridis, Alexis. “*Rumours Of My Demise by Evan Dando – Review.*” *The Guardian*, October 17, 2025. Ouch: “Indeed, you get the sense that Dando’s real issue may be that he’s never had to try very hard. His parents are wealthy and he’s educated privately at a school so liberal that the only rule involves not rollerskating in the corridors; they

nevertheless try to expel him after the first year because of his disinclination to do any work, but his mum steps in and talks them round.”

²¹ bendeily.com.

²² Peretz’ profile on the Internet Movie Database.

²³ Bell, Max. “It’s A Shame About Evan.” *Vox*, August 1994.

²⁴ The label name includes the exclamation point, ergo the period concluding this sentence. Taang! also released The Mighty Mighty Bosstones’ *Devil’s Night Out* and 1990s reunion-ish albums from the great Stiff Little Fingers.

²⁵ I attribute Dando’s willingness (or maybe that he lacks a certain social filter?) to write exactly what he’s doing or feeling as the key to his wit. Lots of examples, but an early one: in “Don’t Tell Yourself,” he shares what, in the right light, feels like a tender ambivalence: “*Why don’t you try more?* You’re ringing in my ears. I’m going to try more.”

²⁶ *Hate Your Friends*, 1987. The opener, “Glad I Don’t Know,” is my favorite on the album, and it hits both their Dinosaur Jr-ish sound, as well as their characteristically poppier turn for the chorus. Deily’s “Uhhh” and “Ever” still sound great, too – play me 1,000 guitar tones, and I could identify that one as early Lemonheads.

²⁷ *Lick*, 1989. I wore the writing off this cassette, ca. 1990. My heart leapt when he played “Mallo Cup” at the show week-before-last.

²⁸ Both Missy and I loved this album – which definitely set us on the “We like the Lemonheads” side of a judgmentally drawn, alternative-punk/alt.country line. We love Gram Parsons, and the cover “Brass Buttons” had us from the start. Likewise, “Stove” appeared on most of the (gajillion) mixtapes I made.

²⁹ As another important signal of the scope and era of our fandom, Missy already had one of the original pressings before the label added “Mrs. Robinson” as a bonus track.

³⁰ Matthew 3:3, quoting Isaiah 40:3. After checking with Trinity’s resident grammarian, we believe this nest of quotation marks – “ ’ ”, if adding spaces to see them a little better – is correct (quoting a quote within a quote).

³¹ From A voice cries out: ‘In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God’ to The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight.’

³² Matthew 3:4.

³³ Matthew 3:5. “Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him ...”

³⁴ Matthew 3:8.

³⁵ Matthew 3:10.

³⁶ While some punk and metal might point in other directions, I generally think of this alternative ethos as valuing good humor, good taste, kindness, and creativity

above who looks the best and/or has the most expensive car parked in the school lot.

³⁷ Derived from Gram Parsons' description of his genre.

³⁸ Following my closest friends, I chose the Minneapolis scene, with Soul Asylum at center. In addition to The Replacements, add Hüsker Dü, and The Jayhawks (and from the mainstream, Prince). All these bands – along with Athens' Drivin' N Cryin', Indigo Girls, and R.E.M. – had the country sensibilities of Gram Parsons and Alex Chilton at their edges, which I love.

³⁹ Definitely sarcasm font here, but she was a *little* excited. Unfortunately, the band didn't play "The Outdoor Type," which is their song she knows best. Dando also didn't play Shreveport native Victoria Williams' "Frying Pan," which may have been for the best, because I might have cried.

⁴⁰ We arrived during the opening act – which I customarily consider disrespectful, but it was a rock-etiquette concession we needed to make on the night before Thanksgiving.

⁴¹ While Ginna may have feared my embarrassing her, there were (thankfully) conspicuously more embarrassing dads around us busting some of the most awkward 90s dance-ish moves you or anyone has ever seen. In another setting, someone might have worried these men were experiencing a medical event.

⁴² This made my heart hurt.

⁴³ In this piece from *Rumors Of My Demise* and posted to *Literary Hub*, Dando writes of some hard days. There's clever ("I lose stuff all the time: phones, guitars, pencil sharpeners, gin and tonics, girlfriends, jewelry, bagels, tuners ...") and deeply sad ("As the years melted away, I knew I needed to do something different. I had come to the island to quit heroin, but I fell into my old habits. Martha's Vineyard is a tough place to be a junkie. Everybody knows you there. It was impractical and embarrassing. I swallowed my pride and became a miserable pariah. Most of my real friends retreated, hoping things would change. The rest got a kick out of watching me unravel ...").

⁴⁴ Ibid. A second consecutive Advent sermon about faithful urgency, righteous priorities, and cringy orthodontia.

⁴⁵ When he was on, though, he was on: the "Confetti" solo is not for the meek or messy, and he nailed it, note perfect. Generally, his guitar competency – the only one on stage – impressed me. After all these years, I'm still quick to defend him!

⁴⁶ No matter, we had a good time.

⁴⁷ The teeth, man. I'm not over it from last week.

Photos from Wikimedia Commons.





Trinity Events

New to Trinity? Whether you're new among us or you've been here for years, we look forward to helping you make a home for faith at Trinity.



Complete the short Welcome Form at trinitychurchboston.org/welcome (or scan the QR code) so we can get to know you better.

BREAK BREAD TOGETHER

You're Invited to Community Breakfast

First Sunday of the month, 9 am, Commons & Lloyd Forum

On the first Sunday of each month we host a community breakfast at 9 am, between the 8 and 10 am services. **From cereal to bacon, there is something for everyone!** This is a parish-wide gathering and a fantastic way to see your church family and meet new folks. Mark your calendar and make plans to join us!

We always need a few helping hands to pull the breakfast together. Sign up at trinitychurchboston.org/communitybreakfast2025



WORSHIP

Sunday Schedule

8 am	Holy Eucharist, Rite II, spoken
9 am	Coffee & Community Hour, full "Community Breakfast" on the first Sunday of most months
10 am	Holy Eucharist, Rite II, with organ, choristers, and choir. Includes Children's Homily & Nursery. Online at trinitychurchboston.org/live-worship , youtube.com/@trinitychurchboston , and facebook.com/trinitychurchboston
11:15 am	Formation for All Ages
5 pm	Holy Eucharist, Rite II, with organ and choir



Tune in to our worship livestream each Sunday at 10 am by scanning the QR code.

Weekday Worship at Trinity

Tues.

12:15 pm Holy Eucharist, in the Church

Tues/Thurs.

8:30 pm Online Compline join us on Zoom at bit.ly/tcbTTcompline or dial in with **1-646-558-8656** and enter Meeting ID **206 654 379**

Weds.

5:45 pm Choral Evensong in the Church, led by the Trinity Choristers



LEARNING

Formation for All Ages Every Sunday

Sundays, 11:15 am

At Trinity Church Boston, all of us—committed Christians as well as those just beginning to explore—are pilgrims on the way. We offer formation opportunities for learners across the life spectrum. From our youngest in the Nursery to those who are more “experienced learners”—**Trinity welcomes all to explore and grow in their faith journey.**

To learn more about formation for **infants through children in third grade**, contact Kenna Bartholomew, kbartholomew@trinitychurchboston.org

To learn more about formation for those in **fourth grade through high school** or those in their **20s and 30s**, contact Rebecca Hughes, rhughes@trinitychurchboston.org.

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