



I will be the first to admit I remember absolutely nothing said by our high school graduation commencement speaker. However, at the time, it was still the tradition to also invite the class valedictorian and salutatorian to the podium to say a few words. The one who finished at the top of our class wasn't too bad, but then came the runner-up. Now, it didn't hurt that he was also the most popular student: played basketball,

football, and baseball, and all relatively well, at that. He was also the lead in the musical, and obviously didn't so bad on the academic side of things either. And yet, on that Sunday afternoon of Memorial Day weekend, as he made his way up the platform in his black gown and many tassels around his neck, he was carrying something along. It was his guitar.

And he started strumming along a relatively familiar tune: not one that was near the Billboard Top 40 or anything along those lines at that time, but it was a song that stood the test of time: one that had reached record heights when it was originally released three decades before. One of those musical numbers that if the usual graduation party this time of year faded out in the evening hours, and the last few remaining could just sit around a campfire, they could easily just sing it along. It was Don McLean's *American Pie*, but our salutatorian changed the words a bit to match the occasion. So, instead of "bye, bye, miss American Pie," he sang "bye, bye, 'ole Upper high," and he continued through this litany of memories from our four years together, some of which would only be meaningful for the about 150 of us in the black gowns. But for a few minutes in that...not-most-edge-of-your-seat-entertainment-graduation-ceremony, us graduates started clapping along with the beat, because for a few precious minutes, we could forget about the GPAs and ACTs and perfectly worded scholarship essays and never-ending applications and whether we did well enough on all the above to be accepted to wherever we were hoping to go in a few months. All of those seemingly impossible-to-fully-navigate-tasks as we entered the adulting world, just vanished, as he played the guitar and sang, "Bye, bye, 'ole Upper high."

Now, as for the original song written 30 years before by Don McLean, there was this refrain that we didn't hear in our graduation rendition. The story so goes that it came from a fateful day in February of 1959, when one of America's greatest musicians of the time decided to adjust in taking a bus to all the different tour stops across the Midwest, and instead wanted to take a charter flight with some of the other famous musicians who would serve as the opening acts to his shows. And then a winter storm took over the state of Iowa, and in the middle of the night, one of America's treasures in Buddy Holly was tragically killed at 22 years young. He also happened to be one of the greatest sources of inspiration for the man who wrote a song that has stood the test of time, including the line in recognition of that fateful winter night "the day the music died."

Those five words were not included in the graduation rendition we heard, but maybe it should have made the cut amidst the reliving of our treasured high school memories. Because on a day when we were told with the rest of our senior classmates across the country, to reach for the stars and never give up on our dreams or the like; it might have been helpful for a little bit of honesty, too: that there just might come a time when it feels as if the music within us has faded away. All the passion and the creativity and the drive to make a difference not only for our personal lives and our families, but in the

world: that we have been told over and over again that we have what it takes; that there still might just come a time when we wonder if that captivating music of hope and belief has somehow vanished within us.

Except the church, God, has something to say not only to high school graduates, but all those who still insist on learning about the inner-workings of the world and this humanity that God supposedly still loves and the very God of them all: the church, God, says quite emphatically that the music within you will never ever stop. Because, as the original song, so goes, we believe that the “book of love” has most definitely been written and not just on Scripture pages, but within the very hearts of our graduates and all of you; with a love that God insists will never fade away. And that not only do we have faith in the God above, but we believe that God dwells among us mere mortals as described in Revelation. We believe that love of God brought to life in Jesus Christ, for some reason, continues to be so immense that God cannot help but want to live within us each and every day.

We also believe that God did not wait to live within the graduates across this country and beyond once they achieved the 4.0 GPA or high enough on the ACT to impress a college admissions counselor or perfected the wording on the scholarship essay or masterfully crafted an eye-catching application. No, we believe that God made the decision from the very beginning to live within you even before you said a word, even before your first day of school, even before you heard about a “book of love” or of a “faith in a God above.” Not only that, we but we believe this God has adored you far too much to want to stay above, at some far-off heavenly distance.

And even if there does come a time when you’re not sure if that “book of love” has you in mind anymore, or you’re not so sure where this God is in your life, or if you wonder if the music of all the passion to move forward at all has died within you, the Gospel has been the same for you today, at your birth, and all the way to the end and beyond for you: that the music ignited by the Holy Spirit from your very beginning is too powerful to stop. But even if you’re not so sure some days, rest assured that the book of love is never going to close from you, and the God who is no longer above, but in the very depths of your soul, is never ever going to leave. Yes, we wish you graduates our congratulations to be sure, but we also insist on the Gospel: that no matter where your journey takes you, God cherishes you far too much to want to leave for you to fend it all for yourself. You have been God’s child from the beginning, you are now, and always will be. And for that Greatest News of all, we most certainly give thanks to God, indeed! Amen!