

Sinners Welcome Here (2002)

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Driving past the humongous brick building set way back from the street, I do an instant double take. Did I just see what I thought I saw? Did that sign say, "Sinners Welcome Here?" While I'm supposed to be negotiating traffic on my way to Costco, I'm rubber necking, and I see that the sign says what I thought it said. The words are painted on a shiny plastic, weatherproof banner attached near the top of the building.

Sinners. I blush. The tips of my ears turn red. I've made way too many mistakes in my life. I want to pull over, walk through the doors, and see what this church has to offer to the myriad of sinners out here on the streets—the cheaters, the liars, the drug addicts, the pimps, and me—whoever might be out here screwing up the world. I'm fascinated with the idea of sinners being welcome at a church. But wait a minute. What does it mean to be a sinner, anyway? Do I really think Satan lies in wait behind every bush, waiting to trip us all up and lead us into sin and hard times?

Sinners Welcome Here. The sign teases me. I'd like to see one of those hanging across the front of a Mormon chapel where I haven't been for eighteen years, but that's not the Mormon style. Even though members there can and do fail at times, a given with all human beings, I remember more emphasis being placed on the idea of perfection: "Be ye perfect even as your Father in Heaven is perfect." Not so much talk about sinners being welcome.

As I continue driving down Florida Street in Denver in the sum-

mer of 2002, the word “sin” overtakes my mind. *Do I believe in it the way the TV evangelists talk about it, like sin is bad, odious, accompanied by the smell of sulfur and the raucous laughter of the Devil, like it’s the province of evil humans bent on destroying the world and the good people in it? Or is it something less melodramatic?* Sin means “missing the mark” in the original Greek. Or even “a mistake” made on the path of eternal progression, the Mormons might say. One from which a person can learn if he or she doesn’t get tangled in the wires of guilt and despair. But right this minute, despite my intellectual efforts to wrestle the idea of sin to the mat, call it a misconstrued and misunderstood idea, and punch it in the nose, I think maybe the idea has its hook in me.

I can still feel a self-imposed noose around my neck that tightens when I remember how I was taught to live life and how I haven’t followed those rules. Am I caught in an ancestral web spun by the natural man and woman, the supposed enemies to God? Or can I just laugh off the idea of sin and sinners and make jokes about CTR rings?

All I know for sure, bottom line, is that right now, my heart is broken. Again. *Been down so long, it looks like up to me.* (Can’t help that my brain keeps track of the first line of every song I’ve ever heard.) Romance has been a bust in the past ten years. I’ve just signed the dotted line that ended my second, very brief, marriage and moved from Utah back to Denver to lick my wounds. Maybe there’s something out of place in my human engineering—too independent, too idealistic, too whatever. Maybe I need something besides love and romance which I don’t know how to do or what it is or where to find it. *Looking for love in all the wrong places* is the next song in the jukebox of my brain as I pull a sharp left into the Costco parking lot. It’s packed with a mass of Detroit metal. As usual.

Mother Mary full of grace, help me find a parking place. Thank you, my Catholic daughter-in-law who taught me that handy prayer. Even as I say the words, I see the taillights of a maroon mini-van blink red. I brake to wait for the opening. And I wait. And wait. Then I creep up a few feet and see a stroller, a shopping cart half full, and a harried mother trying to strap her two-year old into his car seat. Since there are no other prospects, however, I accept this as my personal parking place, my gift from Mother Mary.

My thoughts turn to her son. His name still comes to me, even

though I keep telling myself I've given up hope that there's anyone named Jesus, the Son of God. Maybe that's another one of those stories I'm prone to believe since I love stories of every shape and size. But then I hear my mind humming an oldie, this time a church song: *Jesus wants me for a sunbeam, to shine for him each day*. The Sunday School children used to sing that song with unreserved glee at the Boulder City Ward of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, our favorite activity singing the "beam" part in a squeaky falsetto. When I'm done with that song, I'm onto another one: *The Lord is my shepherd, No want shall I know*. Songs live in the layers of my synapses.

But then, I'm a sucker for all kinds of music and musicians—Joshua Bell with his violin, Jim Morrison's "L.A. Woman," Yo Yo Ma, Alison Kraus, Radiohead, Muddy Waters, Robert Plant, Aretha Franklin and her interminable version of *Amazing grace that saved a wretch like me* that goes on for hours while she embellishes every syllable and makes the hair on my arms stand straight up. I tear up when I hear "I Believe," the fifties song that says something about believing in every drop of rain that makes a flower grow, something about darkest nights where a candle glows, something about the people who go astray and how someone will come to help them find the way. *I believe. I believe*. I feel my lips forming those words. Who am I kidding when I say I've given up hope?

The flustered mother is now folding up the stroller and opening the back hatch of the mini-van. Her grocery cart is empty. I lean my forehead against the top of the steering wheel.

For forty years I was an active Mormon. I'd been told all my life that Jesus Christ was the answer, that I needed to accept him if I wanted to be saved. I used to listen to the Mormon Tabernacle Choir broadcasts on Sunday mornings while I ironed my wrinkled dress for Sunday School, the one that had slipped off the hanger and spent the week in a crumpled hump on the floor of my closet. From Salt Lake City, Utah, the Crossroads of the West, Richard L. Evans uttering *The Spoken Word* in his mellifluous voice. I can still hear the cadence of his speech, even now in the Costco parking lot, as he encourages everyone to live a good life, to love as Christ taught. But I'm also thinking that when I was attending church for those forty years, the lay members who delivered sermons at sacrament meeting seemed to talk more about modern-day prophets,

Joseph Smith, the Word of Wisdom, obedience to authority, tithing, sexual purity, having a year's supply of groceries and first aid supplies, etc. It's not that Mormons don't believe in Jesus. They absolutely did and do. But there seemed to be so many other things that needed attention, so many proscribed rules for perfection, so many cultural codes of behavior. When they spoke of Jesus, they spoke of Jesus the Christ or Our Savior, not so much just plain Jesus—the kind I could use today.

Now that the maroon mini-van is finally pulling out, I think of the times when I took the sacrament passed to the members at church—aluminum trays filled with broken bread and mini-cups of water—and how I'd tried to envision the body and blood of Christ, to feel what it must have felt like to hang from a cross by nails in your hands and feet. Maybe I wasn't very good at concentrating, but I'd never quite felt Jesus in my heart the way I was supposed to. I could go through the motions, I was good at that. I could be intellectual about what Jesus said and repeat the book answers about the Atonement being At-One-Ment, but right now, at this one-ment, I feel the need for a just plain Jesus, a living Jesus. I need to call on His name the way they do in Gospel choirs, singing from the tiny bones on the bottoms of their feet, filled with Spirit and begging, "Save me, Jesus, save this motherless child."

After I flash my Costco card to the greeter and purchase dried mangoes, paper towels, and the Growers' Special bouquet of flowers, I drive home. As I'm putting things away, my friend Laney calls. She's been watching out for me since I returned to Denver earlier this summer—limping from the suddenness of the second divorce and in need of a wheelchair of friendship. Out of the blue, she asks me if I want to go to the Heritage Christian Church with her next Sunday. I'm amazed at the serendipity. "You mean that church with the sign out front?" I ask her. "The one about sinners? I just did a drive-by. You're on." I can't believe this coincidence. And yet I can.

I welcome the opportunity to pass through the doors of that massive building with a friend by my side. But I'm also nervous. I don't know what happens inside that brick fortress. Will it be full of Pentacostal, Born Again, and Fundamentalist Christians, some of whose strident political rhetoric and almost militaristic approach to Christ's teaching troubles me? The way I see it, his teachings are much more subtle, much more nuanced and challenging to live, and

some of the televangelists I've heard can sound like the Pharisees whom Christ disparages. I have no idea what this congregation is like. There were those Sundays when I was growing up in Boulder City, Nevada, when my brother and I would sometimes sneak up to the window sills of the Holy Roller church down the block from our home and try to peek inside, though the windows were always covered. We listened for the sounds of thumping, shouting, even rolling, but never heard much to get excited about.

The next Sunday, I meet Gil and Laney in the parking lot that stretches for miles it seems. They arrive in their white camper, the one they take to go bird watching in Nebraska when the sandhill cranes migrate. Gil once studied to be a Buddhist monk. He's now considering Christianity. He reminds me of Yoda. Laney, a gifted artist with many big ideas, is a woman constantly looking for a philosophical and spiritual home. Fellow seekers whom I met in a Gurdjieff study group, searching, looking, considering. I have very few friends in town. I'm grateful for these two.

The hall in front of the main sanctuary is filled with greeters who hold out their hands, palms up. "Welcome," they say with wide smiles that make me feel like a fish-on-the-hook being reeled in. "We're happy to have you here." One of them stretches out her arms to fold me into a hug, but, even though I could use a good one, I offer my right hand instead. A handshake will do. We work our way through a wide spectrum of humanity. Despite my down-and-out state of mind, everyone's smiles are contagious, just like my father always said they were. I find the hardness of my face creasing into a half-smile from beneath the bottom of my deep, dark blue sea of sadness. A sad-eyed smile. Poster child for Hard Times, Been There, Done That, Seen It All.

When we walk through the doors into the sanctuary, there are neon lights lighting up the interior architecture of the pulpit with its high-tech aluminum tubing, framing two huge video screens, delineating the stairways to the stage, maybe even to the stars, one can never tell when there's so much going on. Flags from every country line the towering walls, and a thousand or more people fill the cushioned seats, clapping their hands, responding to a gospel choir dressed in maroon robes and standing in front of three rows of cushioned chairs on stage. They're singing "I am a friend of God, He is my friend. The Lord God Almighty calls me Friend," accom-

panied by a six-piece rock band—a lead and bass guitar, drums (a trap set and bongos and a tambourine), plus a Hammond B-3 organ. *A free concert. All right.*

Ushers roam the aisles, ready to hand out questionnaires if you're a first-time attendee. Greeters line the aisles, putting out their hands and saying, "Welcome. Bless you, Sister, Brother." We've happened upon a mega-rock à la gospel concert at nine o'clock on a Sunday morning. Even though I've visited small Pentacostal services where a fainting cloth was held at the ready in the event one of the sisters swooned, fell to the floor, and was left embarrassingly uncovered, it's surreal to watch so many people clapping, raising their arms and waving them as if they were palm trees in stiff wind, people saying "Hallelujah" and "Praise God," people singing "I am a friend of God" with no self-consciousness.

Because I had a well-entrenched habit of church-going or maybe even a spiritual gene, I'd been attending all kinds of churches for the past ten years, mostly African American congregations. Gospel music and Gospel choirs lifted my soul in ways it needed lifting, but I'd never seen anything done up in this mammoth, even behemoth scale. This is a two thousand decibel, multi-media show. The words of the hymn are being flashed across screens mounted on both sides of the stage.

After we find our seats on the raised-up left side of the auditorium, I notice the quartet of singers standing in front of the choir, two of them black, two of them white. They're each wearing black and white as well—one woman in a houndstooth check jacket cinched with a black patent leather belt, the other in a drapey, floral dress that compliments her memorable figure. The tenor is leaning his head back, holding a microphone pointed down at his mouth and reminding me of a sword swallower. His notes are higher than high, falsetto even, and he's going on and on about how the Lord God Almighty calls him friend, then stays with that word "friend," the notes going round and round his head like bees close to a hive, notes up and down and all around the scale.

People are standing up and sitting down, sometimes raising their hands high above their heads, sometimes clapping, sometimes saying, "Yes, Brother. Sing it out." I look over the literal sea of people in this sanctuary, grains of sand, grains of mustard seed, even, replete with faith. There are very few empty seats, and the variety

of color, size, and style astounds me. A cameraman on the stage manipulates a huge boom that swings out over the audience, and then individual faces show up on the screens. This turns the audience into a reality show of the faithful whooping it up and swaying and joining in with the choir. I find myself standing up, hear myself singing the words projected onto the mammoth screens, feel my hands clapping against each other, and hear a shy “Hallelujah” escape from my mouth when the instrumentalists are playing a bridge. Gil and Laney stand up with me. We clap each other’s hands. We rock out. We’re singing, “I’m a friend of God. He is my friend.” We’re almost dancing, though the row is too narrow to get into any serious moves. After the music ends, Laney is hugging me, Gil is patting my shoulder, and I’m saying, “All right,” two thumbs up. We sink into our seats.

The minister comes in through a door at the right side of the building. He’s dressed in an immaculately tailored suit, the jacket slim around the hips, his collar starched. He’s got a razor haircut, a tan, and he lays his hands on the rocket engine pulpit, ready to take off, to energize his congregants with jet propulsion.

“Welcome, every one of you,” he says. All of the musicians take a rest except for the organist who keeps a low change of chords murmuring softly while the minister speaks, sometimes punching it up a little when he says something people need to remember. “Glory, hallelujah, it’s a sight for sore eyes to see so many of you here, ready to take God into your lives, ready to turn your hearts to the Master. Bless you.”

The organist rips a glissando, and I feel a little smile considering a walk across my face.

This is good theater, whatever your beliefs. Good times.

“Before we get started today,” he says with a smooth, practiced, even silvery tongue, and the organist takes a more somber turn and plays chords that turn thoughts inward. “We have our prayer teams down in front. If any of you need to be prayed over, if your hearts are burdened, if you can’t seem to take the right steps in your life, come down to the front and allow prayer and our Master and Lord Jesus to change you and your life.”

Without looking at me, Laney takes my hand in hers. It’s nice to have a friend by your side when you feel abandoned by life and its glittery hopes. This brings tears to my eyes, though. I don’t let Laney see the glistening on my eyelashes, those crystallized bits of

interior water I've seen too much of this summer. It's not so much that I'm feeling sorry for myself. It's like I can't get a toehold in the wall, a place to help me climb out of this hole of down-heartedness that's been dogging my psyche every day. It's like a boxing match when that mean, chew-me-out voice gets wound up and lets loose with a one-two punch and I just lie there in my bed at night letting the blows fall where they will without putting up my dukes. *Is there a hooded wrestler, a master of despair who wants to take me down? And is there something outside of me trying to topple my spirit, take the air out of my tires? Is there a devil, a Satan, who relishes in people's despair, who tries to keep them down because his plan didn't win in the War in Heaven? Because God the Father chose Christ's plan of salvation—the freedom to choose? to exercise free agency? Or is this me at war with myself?*

Small groups of two and three gather in front of the stage, people from all walks of life, the men wearing nice suits and the women sporting heels, pearls, and Sunday-go-to-meeting outfits. They stand ready to help, ready to accept the few people who are making their way to the front to stand inside their small circles. The organ plays its mournful commentary on people and their troubles.

"I know you might be feeling hesitant," the minister says, "but put your hand in the Hand. Release your burdens. Bring them to the front where our prayer teams will lift them from your shoulders, where you can give them to Jesus. Accept his goodness and mercy. Now is the time. Not tomorrow or the next day. But now."

I swallow. I feel as if big hands are cupping my elbows and urging me to get out of my seat. I stay in my chair. But suddenly, as if I'm a marionette on a set of twelve strings, I stand up in the row where Laney, Gil, and I are sitting. I say "Excuse me" and try not to step on anyone's purse or their toes. *What am I doing, holding on to the chairs in front of my row, trying to get to the end of the row that just won't arrive? Who am I in this crowd of people trying to make peace by holding each other's hands when the preacher says, "Take the hand of your neighbor and tell him or her, 'Gee, it's great to see you here today?'" I'm aware of something like the walls of Jericho crumbling around me, something breaking down barriers, something saying surrender to a will greater than your own.*

After negotiating a journey past a long row of protruding knees and dodging feet, I take each stair on the aisle with caution. I'm wearing a new pair of high heels. I could topple. There's too much air around me, too much light shining on my weakness. I keep walk-

ing slowly toward the people standing in front, the prayer teams. I don't look left or right.

"Welcome," a dusky African says, a tall, spindly, kind-looking man with bent shoulders inside a pin-striped suit jacket. "Are you here to take on Jesus's name?" he asks with a British accent. I'm not ready for this big order. Too soon. I just wanted to come up here as an experiment. It's too brash to say yes, I'll do this. But my face has more than enough to say.

"Jesus loves you," the man says, and I feel those crystal drops of liquid running past the lids of my eyes and down my cheeks. "Accept him into your life, sweet sister. Give your burdens to the Lord. He can carry them. He will carry them if you'll surrender to him."

In this moment, I'm suddenly my eight-year-old self, standing in the waters of Lake Mead in southern Nevada with my father who's dressed in white as I'm dressed in white. The water comes up to my waist and to the tops of his thighs. It's cold in the early part of May with all of the snow runoff from the Rockies siphoning into the tributaries of the Colorado River. My father's holding his right arm to the square. He's saying, "I baptize you in the name of Jesus Christ," and then he's laying me back in the water, making sure that my toe doesn't break the surface. I feel his strong arms holding me under water for a brief second, then they're pulling me out again. Water rushes over me as I surface, as I rise, re-born, clean, fresh, free from all of my sins. Before my baptism, I'd cleaned the slate: I'd confessed to my parents that I'd stolen a dollar's worth of colored paper from the five & dime. I didn't take good enough care of our dog, Rocky. I even said I'd love and respect my older sister better.

In the next moment I've advanced to my ten-year-old self standing up to bear my testimony at testimony meeting in the Boulder City Ward, saying things I don't really know for sure. I am a good learner and a faithful, dutiful daughter. I'm repeating what I've heard my elders and other children say: I know the Mormon Church is the Only True Church and that Joseph Smith was a prophet and David O. McKay is a modern prophet. I'm saying that I love Jesus Christ. I'm saying that I know he's the way back to God, even though I'm not sure how I know what I'm saying at all. But I always loved the stories of Jesus looking for the lost sheep and of that woman with the issue of blood who touched the hem of his robes and was healed, so I wasn't a talking robot when I gave my testimony and

said I loved Jesus. Except maybe I didn't love him very much back then. Maybe I couldn't understand what he was all about, let alone comprehend the word atonement.

Did I have any idea of who Christ was, even though I'd heard the Christmas story a zillion times and played the part of Mother Mary in our family Christmas pageant? And heard the stories about branches of palm trees being waved when Jesus made his triumphal journey into Jerusalem and people shouted "Blessed is the King of Israel that cometh in the name of the Lord?" And listened to stories about Gethsemane and Golgotha and drops of blood? Did it seem real to me when I was in Ecuador and saw a massive parade of Penitentes with purple pointed hoods over their heads and long white robes, jamming together in a huge crowd that moved like a slow amoeba down the street, past the Plaza Central in Quito. Penitentes who were asking forgiveness, repentant Penitentes full of sorrow that they wished to place at the feet of Jesus? Had I felt anything in the many cathedrals I'd visited in Paris, London, Mexico City, Santa Fe, Santa Barbara, or Cusco, Peru, when I'd seen Christ hanging on the cross, Christ with a bowed head and the stains on his hands and feet? Or had I only been an observer, a tourist, someone who respected Christ's teachings but considered him more of a concept, an idea, a symbol? Maybe I'd just mouthed back the things I'd heard about Jesus being the way, the truth and the life, but maybe I believed in some quiet corner of myself that there was something important here. I wasn't sure about all of this.

Now, I'm standing in front of thousands at the Heritage Christian Church and this kindly, lanky man in a pencil-striped suit is looking at me with tenderness and watching the tears falling down my cheeks and putting his arm around my shoulders. I feel Jesus standing there by my side, looking at me with those liquid eyes and his reams of kindness and love and compassion, saying, *Come to me, child. Enter my kingdom like a little child*, and I want to be His child. I want to know he's been looking for me, the little old lamb tripping over a rock and stumbling and falling away from the fold. I want to hear him saying, *Come to me, my child*.

"Do you take Jesus Christ as your Savior?" the man is asking. I can barely hear him as I'm so full of the many times I'd been taught about Jesus and did I or did I not believe everything I'd heard? And, too, I am filled with my self, my suffering, my bad deeds, my hurts,

my sin and all of the wrong turns in the road.

He's standing there. He's waiting. And a woman joins us and a circle is being formed around me. Two people are holding my hands and patting my shoulder to reassure me. "It's all right, Sister. It's all right."

I lift my head. The man's eyes appear to be someone else's eyes. Someone in Sunday School once told me that you need to be kind to everyone you meet because it might be Jesus in disguise, asking you to reach out, asking you to be kind as the Good Samaritan was kind to an Israelite who was supposed to be his enemy. God could be speaking to you out of the mouth of anybody you met. You never knew who was standing next to you or in front of you and who was asking you to receive the God in them.

I look at this man again and at the woman who's joined our circle. I see the kindness of Jesus in both of their eyes, the kindness I'd read about in the New Testament, the way Jesus said it was time to let go of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth kind of thinking, but to come to him in love, to forgive, to be compassionate, above all to be charitable. And I hear myself saying, "Yes. I accept Christ as my Savior." Two people are hugging me and squeezing me as if I were their young daughter who'd escaped a near fall from a cliff. I hear the organ, its vibrato, the way music's fingers are everywhere present, and these people are shaking my hand and telling me how good it is I've accepted Jesus as my Savior, because He is the way, the truth, and the life.

For one brief second, I wonder what I've done, what I've promised, what I've agreed to, and then I hear the guitars amping up and I feel like dancing. I feel like dancing in front of those thousands of people. Twirling even. It's okay to let Jesus inside. It's okay. It's okay to sing *Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so*. It's okay to be a cliché if that's what I'm being, to let Jesus back into my life, to be one of those people who are sheep in the flock. I've been so afraid of being a lowly sheep, part of a herd. I've fought hard to stand apart, to distinguish myself—so afraid of being a lamb running back to the fold when the shepherd calls.

But it's okay. It's okay.