

“Holy Roller.... Coaster”

- Did you ever get to ride the Texas Giant at Six Flags over Texas?
 - It was only about a six hour drive from where we lived growing up
 - I remember going there and seeing that massive, all-wooden roller coaster crawling over what seemed like acres
 - And it met my roller coaster requirements: it did not go upside down, and it did not go backwards,
 - and it certainly did not do the corkscrew thing!
 - Or as they say in roller coaster jargon, it had no inversions¹, so my mom and I would probably not get motion sick
 - So everyone in my family rode it
 - Now the reason I remember this specific event is that at the very top of the roller coaster, right as it slowed down before giving way to gravity
 - There was a little wooden sign- you barely had time to read it before the fall.
 - Hanging from it was Wile E. Coyote, and all it said was, “Wait, let’s discuss this”
 - While this particular ride of the Texas Giant went very smoothly and we had a lot of fun...
 - I have also experienced a coaster break down as it climbed that first and tallest hill
 - You’re stuck up there and have no idea of how long it will take to get moving again, or if they will have to come and walk you down
 - Which brings me to another piece of roller coaster jargon: veloxrotaphobia- is the fear or anxiety of before you get on a roller coaster²
- I bring all of this up because I believe Holy Week is often very similar to a roller coaster- a holy roller coaster of liturgy

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wooden_roller_coaster

² http://wiki.answers.com/Q/What_phobia_is_the_fear_of_rollercoasters

- Or at least it should!
- Like any good liturgy, or worship service, it makes the story almost tangible, participatory, experiential
- We began this journey way back on Ash Wednesday, as we started our slow climb up hill
- We know where this ride is going- it's why we are here
 - We are longing for the moment when we bring on the lights, proclaim the resurrection, and say Allelulia!
 - That's the fun slide downhill, and the weeks to come of spiritual growth thanks to Easter are the subsequent hills and turns that make roller coasters fun
- But before we get to the fun, we have to go up the first hill, and we have to pause at the top, we have to feel the worry
- Before we leave today, it is going to feel like that roller coaster, the one carrying us toward Easter, has stalled out right before the top of the first big hill
- We fear the ride might be over- what if we are stuck in the death rather than the resurrection
- Instead of the joy of a fun, thrilling ride, we fear a long wait and then finally an escort down the walkway
- On this Palm Sunday, I hope we feel the whole range of emotions
- From the excitement of the Palm procession, daring to hope that Jesus might just walk into Jerusalem and fix things!
- To the fear that this all ends terribly with no hope, and all is lost
- Until finally, next week, the joy returns with God's triumph over death.
- So what did Jesus do which we remember today that became so pivotal in his life and death and life?
 - What puts this moment at the top of our roller coaster journey?
 - Most scholars focus their attention on the triumphant procession into Jerusalem
 - There are so many things going on in this one simple story
 - It all begins as if Jesus knows everything that is going to happen next ³
 - He knows where the colt will be, and he knows what to say to convince the onlookers to let the disciples take it

³ James D. Ernest, *Feasting on the Word*, Year B Volume 2, 155

- This action mirrors how a prince would ride when he wished to signify peaceful intentions to another city⁴
- The people watching begin to participate and they spread branches on the ground symbolically making the way easier
- This event would have reminded them of a passage from Zechariah 9:9, which says⁵
 - “Your King comes to you...riding a donkey.”
- Matthew’s gospel, which we read from this year, goes the extra mile and says there are two animals here, a colt and a donkey
 - Where all of the other gospels say there was only one donkey
 - Perhaps they were somehow harnessed together, the mother and the colt
 - Or perhaps the writer of Matthew some 30-40 years after Jesus had died was being over-enthusiastic in his memory of events
 - I like to think in Matthew he is telling us that this symbolism in the donkey is doubly important
- The crowd shouts, “Hosannah!”, literally translated “Save us we pray,” but likely used as a religious cry of “Hurrah!”⁶
- They spread their cloaks and branches on the road as a sign of respect, and a symbolic way of making the path smoother
- This scene is both satirical and desperately hopeful
 - It unfolds in a way that can be likened to street theatre⁷ mimicking Rome
 - It is satirical because everyone knows this is not a great military procession- this is more like a carnival parade
 - Something a jester might orchestrate
 - They are participating as a way to insult Rome, to mock them, to get some laughs at the oppressor’s expense
 - One writer said they were making a “donkey” out of Rome, but he used another word there instead⁸ (a-s-s)

⁴ Margaret A. Farley, *Feasting on the Word*, Year B Volume 2, 156

⁵ James D. Ernest, *Feasting on the Word*, Year B Volume 2, 157

⁶ New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary, Copyright © 2015 by Abingdon Press, Matthew 21:1-11

⁷ Charles L. Campbell, *Feasting on the Word*, Year B Volume 2, 155, cited from Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark’s Story of Jesus*, 294

⁸ Quoting Warren Carter, <https://www.pulpitfiction.com/notes/palmsundaya>

- It pushes the envelope of how much they could do before the Roman soldiers punished them for disturbing the peace
- I can see people laughing, elbowing each other, maybe even fake saluting and bowing
- All to make fun of the Romans, whom very few liked
- Yet this event is desperately hopeful, an edge of truth in the sarcasm, for the Jewish people were oppressed by Rome
- And they longed for a Messiah, a conquering king, to overthrow their current oppressors
- They longed for freedom, for an easier way of life- they want Jerusalem fixed, repaired, restored to its holy position in their life and country
- So they allow themselves to think, if just for a fleeting minute, what if this man Jesus might was the next King in the Davidic tradition
- The one that would give Israel their autonomy and their pride back
- The one who could right all of the wrongs.
- It is likely that Rome also was having a military procession of its own around the same time
 - Rome would have been bringing in additional military presence for the Passover because it was historically a volatile time
 - A festival celebrating deliverance from Egyptian slavery while currently being occupied by Rome cannot go over well
 - We have already seen proof in Jesus' procession of how complex and deep these emotions were
 - Rome brought in its troops in the grandest fashion- a military parade
 - Soldiers, chariots and especially war horses
 - These parades often occurred when a victorious Roman general returned from war, bringing the spoils of war with him
 - Everything about it celebrated Rome's military might and domination
 - A not-so-subtle reminder of how this powerful army had conquered Jerusalem.
 - These two processions were destined to meet and the outcome would not be good for Jesus and his followers
 - Certainly Jesus was aware of all of this as he rode that donkey into the city that day
 - Allowing the people to mock Rome and long for a better way of life
 - But I believe Jesus was also presenting them with an alternative view of the Messiah

- One that was not there to forcefully conquer Rome, or spearhead a violent resistance- that's just another war horse
- Riding on that donkey instead embodied what Jesus had been teaching all along.
- Jesus was presenting them with a way of life in God's kingdom where the meek inherit the earth and peace-keeping was a valued occupation
- Where the least were cared for and loved, rather than being judged and excluded
- And this was their final chance to accept Jesus' vision of a new kind of Messiah and Kingdom
 - Different from the way of Rome
 - Also different from their current expectation of the Messiah
- Sadly, we know that ultimately most of the people that day rejected Jesus' way of life
- For me, Palm Sunday is one of the most dynamic and participatory liturgies we have, (and my favorite color is red!)
 - It is hands on- we feel and experience what Christ felt- up, down, up
 - It helps us, I hope, to experience more fully that mind of Christ Paul wants us to have from our NT reading
 - We stand in this procession today much like these people so long ago
 - With so many layers of expectation and such complicated lives
 - We find ourselves shouting Hosannah one minute, then turning away the next
 - We too are presented with these very different processions, or ways of living- we too have a choice.
 - I keep coming back to the donkey and the war horse, or donkeys plural in Matthew for extra emphasis
 - And all the times in our lives when we are presented with the choice- how do we live out our lives in faith?
 - Do we choose the war horse, riding high above others and looking down, putting our faith in our own strength, guns, and oppression?
 - Or do we chose to ride a lowly donkey, eye level with those around us
 - Following Jesus in the path of humility and nonviolence, leaning on God's strength for us instead of our own
- I hope you chose to fully participate this year in the Holy Week services
 - Maybe we can get over our veloxrotaphobia and climb on board
 - They offer a chance to almost live out the last few days of Christ's life

- I know it is a serious time commitment with four additional services, but the story they tell is as important today as it was then
- The dynamics within this triumphant processional are still very much applicable
- It is still easy to find demonstrations of military power much like the Roman processions
- But what I hope today shows us is that there is a another way, one that rides right into the middle of that tension and redefines it
- The path that Jesus took- one of peace in the face of violence
 - Love instead of fear
 - Humility instead of domination
 - One of trust, and hope- that in spite of the odds, God would make a way through even this!
- By the end of today, it will seem like God failed, and that the warhorse was victorious once again
- But today is not the end of our ride, and is certainly not the end to God's great story of salvation
- Turns out, the donkey wins every time.
- Love wins every time. Against all odds.

Amen.