

“Roller Coaster Rides of Faith”

Matthew 21: 1-11

(Humble Jesus rides into Jerusalem with loud hosannas, but . . .)

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A couple of years ago I visited our daughter while she was spending a summer in New York City working in a tutoring program in Harlem. I stayed in her room at the Y on 92nd Street. Then during the day we went to meet all the children she'd been telling us about. The next day, after a morning field trip with the children, we were free to play! We traveled by subway to Coney Island! I had never been to Coney Island and was excited. I wanted to put my feet into the Atlantic Ocean. We both were eager to see the baseball game we had tickets for—it was the Brooklyn Cyclones, a minor league team named after the roller coaster nearby. Alex was also enthused to ride that roller coaster, built in the 1930's. She asked if we could do that too. “Sure,” I said, not really thinking. But, when I did think, I reminded myself that I really do enjoy Disneyland's Matterhorn, and I recalled once riding on and *pretty much* enjoying Space Mountain. I had developed a special trick that enabled me to relax and not be frightened on those rides. I simply kept my eyes glued to the track ahead, so I'd know which direction we were heading next; then I would have a little bit of time to prepare myself mentally for the turn. I realize that might take some of the joy out of it for those who like to be surprised and scream...but it made me comfortable.

We got to Coney Island, waded in the Atlantic, and still had time before the game. Alex said, “Let's go on the roller coaster.” “Alright,” I said. It's really a small-looking roller coaster I told myself. And it's still daylight. Not many people are in line. We probably can be in the front seat, so I can see clearly what's coming up ahead and prepare for it. We paid, then had to give the ride attendants our cell phones, our hats, our sunglasses—anything that might fall out of our pockets. It's a wooden roller coaster, painted white. Kind of cool-looking. We got into the front seat—red leather, or at least it looked like leather, worn and repaired. Alex was excited. By that time I was getting a bit dubious. The attendant pulled the bar across our lap and the ride began.

We traveled up and up and up. As we approached the top—we could see quite well as it paused a little: the ocean, the baseball stadium, the hot-dog stands that make Coney Island famous. Then, DROP. Completely down, immediately, instantly, DOWN. **I did not see it coming.** It was horrendous. I felt like a human bobble-head. I looked to my left with my first idea—I know it was irrational, but I wanted off. I realized there was **no way off.** I yelled to Alex, “*What do you do with your head?*” She looked at me and got worried. She told me afterward she thought at that moment, “Oh man, this is going to be bad.” She answered my question, “*Maybe you don't have to do anything with your head.*” Then we had a duet going. I didn't want to spoil the ride for her, since she was enjoying it so, and she was reluctant to express her thrills, for I was so not good. I leaned over toward her. I prayed to be okay. I prayed to make it through. JOLT. It was over.

Never before, when someone had said to me, referring perhaps to their career, “It has been like a roller coaster ride,” had I *any gleam of understanding* what kind of career jolts the speaker must have endured.

I confess that just this week as I sat in my office typing up this experience to tell you about it today, my heart started beating fast and my hands got sweaty, just recalling this event.

There are experiences in our lives that are aptly described as “being on a roller coaster.” My father was at the height of his business career in the grocery business when the company he was working for went bankrupt and he was out of a job—my sister and I were seniors in High School. After more than a year of looking, he found another job that required a move, then another job, with another move. Then he had heart surgery, and when he went back to work the first day after his surgery, he was fired. Eventually he and my mother picked themselves up and got a job managing an apartment building near my sister and their first grandchildren. They were settled and happy there and thoroughly enjoyed their grandparenting years with my niece and nephew. My father could rightly compare his career to a roller coaster ride. Going up, excited, enjoying himself, then the bottom dropped out. He carried on, went through twists and turns, heading upward again, then faced another jolt.

Some people live through roller coaster rides with their health. They are healthy, exercising, enjoying a vibrant and vital life, and then the bottom drops out. They are hospitalized or suddenly have to face physical limits or they live in fear, not knowing what the problem is. After a while, there is healing, and they get back onto their feet, and are feeling much better, then perhaps wham, something else happens that includes more twists and turns...

Other people face roller coaster rides in their relationships. Intimacy or good friendship, then a fall they don't see coming. No matter the circumstances, it feels like rejection. They do carry on; they do make other friends. But, there are yet other jolts and jags ahead.

These roller coaster rides of careers, health, and friendships can lead to or be accompanied by *roller coaster rides of faith*. We might start out with bold faith: God is so good. Everything is blessed. What a great life. BOOM. FALL. Soon we are asking, just like the one who wrote Psalm 22: “My God, Why have You forsaken me?”

With regard to our faith, we might ask the same question I screamed to our daughter Alexandra, “*What do you do with your head?*” How do we get our head on straight combining our belief in a loving God and our experience of this shocking turn of events?

Last year on Palm Sunday I preached on the “Pig’s Advantage.” I quoted Tennessee William’s play character Big Daddy who pointed out that the pig has the advantage of not knowing that it’s going to die. Humans don’t share that pig’s advantage. Humans know we’re going to die and can fear it.

Someone sent me an email shortly after that sermon suggesting that I look at the book *Charlotte’s Web* for next Palm Sunday, which is today. So, I have. In this story there’s a pig named Wilbur and a spider named Charlotte. A sheep tells Wilbur that the farmers are fattening him up because they’re going to kill him, turn him into smoked bacon and ham.ⁱ Wilbur’s good spider friend Charlotte declares, “I’m working on a plan. I will not let you die.” “How is the plan coming, Charlotte? Have you got very far with it?” Wilbur asks trembling. Charlotte assures Wilbur she is working on the plan. “When do you work on it?” begs Wilbur. “*When I’m hanging head-down at the top of my web. That’s when I do my thinking,*” Charlotte explains.ⁱⁱ

Eventually Charlotte writes in her web these words—“SOME PIG.” That catches the attention of many humans, so Wilbur the pig becomes famous and wins prizes. Such a famous pig would never be made into ham. At one point in the drama Charlotte needs to weave another word and finds a very special one for Wilbur—“HUMBLE.” Humble.

All this weaving has worn Charlotte out, plus spiders don’t live as long as pigs. So Charlotte lays a sack of 514 spider eggs, then she dies. Wilbur is sad to lose his good friend who saved his life; however he takes tender care of her sack of eggs. When the tiny spiders hatch most fly off, but three of Charlotte’s children remain in the barn and become Wilbur’s new friends.

Wilbur as a piglet had been happy. Then the bottom dropped out of his life when he learned that he was intended to become dinner. Charlotte saved him, through a bumpy ride of twists and turns. Wilbur lost his good friend Charlotte, though through the years joy returned as he played with her great grandchildren who hung around the barn.

Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a high. People lined the roads and sang with wild jubilation! Here he comes. In the Gospel of Matthew, this was Jesus’ first trip ever to Jerusalem—the big city. The King of the Jews who heals, who bridges barriers between peoples, who will bring peace, is arriving. Jesus wasn’t asking for all this adulation. He rode into Jerusalem on a donkey—an act of humility. The spider Charlotte could have woven “Humble” into her web as Jesus rode by.

Jesus knew there was danger ahead—things could get out of hand, people could misunderstand his call from God, could think he was seeking political leadership instead of seeking to reveal God on earth in simple and profound ways.

Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a high. But people were confused—“Who is this man, the prophet? The One who is to come?” Then the bottom fell out. DROP. Betrayal, confusion, false charges, wrong accusations, and crucifixion. Death. Even Jesus expressed a roller coaster ride-full of emotions. Quoting Psalm 22, he asked God “Why Hast Thou Forsaken Me?” Declaring his needs, “I thirst.” Letting go, “Into Your hands I commend my spirit.”

The words to the third verse in the Spiritual, “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” are “I’m sometimes up, I’m sometimes down, coming for to carry me home, but still my soul feels heavenly bound, coming for to carry me home.”

Jesus was “sometimes up and sometimes down.” Yet, he trusted God to be God, no matter what. He continued to build community. He stayed close to his friends. (I believe he stayed close to his friends for his own sake as well as theirs.) He told his mother to take care of his friend John and his friend to take care of his mother. He ate with his disciples and suggested that they remember him every time they broke bread or drank from the cup. He forgave. Jesus was sometimes up and sometimes down. Yet, he trusted God to be God.

It’s possible that either we or loved ones are enjoying life, and then our journey becomes a roller coaster ride. The bottom drops out. If the fall is also accompanied with a roller coaster ride of faith, we might find ourselves asking, “*What do I do with my head?*” How do I think of God, of Jesus, of life?

I think that there’s a time for figuring things out, for discussing “Questions of Faith,” but when we’re in the midst of the fall, and shortly thereafter, we might need to heed the advice of my seat-mate on the Cyclone roller coaster at Coney Island, “*Maybe you don’t have to do anything with your head.*” Just wait. Like a cocoon waits. Like

Wilbur had to wait as he watched Charlotte hanging upside down in order to *use her head*. Like we have to wait on Palm Sunday and Maundy Thursday and Good Friday.

Maybe the most important thing, when we're on a roller coaster ride is to stay together. Stay close. Real close. Adopt mothers, adopt sons. Take very good care of eggs that bear the future. Then, wait; trusting God to be God.

Eventually, it's likely we'll again gain equilibrium...perspective. We'll stop being so dizzy. Life will never again be as it was before the bottom fell through. But a time will probably come when we know as Jesus did, that marvelous events were yet to happen...

ⁱ E.B. White, *Charlotte's Web*. New York City, NY: Harper Collins Publisher, 1952, 49.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid*, 63.