

Wednesday March 28, 2012

Whitewater rafting into Jerusalem

By Jim Taylor

There comes a moment, when you go whitewater rafting down a turbulent river, when you can't turn back. The first time the Taylor family tried it, we went on the Maligne River in Jasper National Park.

The guide launched our group on Maligne Lake. As we paddled across the still waters of the lake, he taught us the various commands – paddle forward, backwater, draw to this side, draw to that side...

As we approached the spot where the lake emptied itself into the river, the surface was still glassy smooth. But we could feel a current moving beneath us, carrying us forward.

Then the lake was no longer horizontal. It tipped. The slope got steeper. We could no longer pull out of this adventure, even if we wanted to.

We had passed that point of no return. We had no choice, now, but to plunge down the chute into the welter of foam at the bottom, to carry on to the end, wherever that might be.

Point of no return

This coming Sunday, most of the Christian world celebrates Palm Sunday – remembered as the day that Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey. He didn't get an official red carpet, so the crowds created their own carpet by flinging cloaks and palm branches on the road.

I wonder when he passed his point of no return. Was it that Palm Sunday ride into Jerusalem? Or did it come later – assuming the usual chronology of the gospels is accurate – when he stormed through the Temple, overturning the tables of the moneychangers and setting the sacrificial pigeons loose?

Or perhaps it came earlier, when he decided that he could not let the body of his friend Lazarus moulder in the darkness of a tomb.

Or perhaps even earlier, when “he set his face to go to Jerusalem” -- despite warnings that he would be killed there.

Whenever it was, there came a point where he could no longer back out. He could no longer retreat to the relative safety of the boondocks around Galilee.

If he had stayed in Galilee, he might have attracted a sizeable following, built a megachurch, hired lots of staff, and lived comfortably on tax-exempt donations.

But he didn't stay in Galilee. At some point, he made a decision. He was going through with this, whatever the outcome.

Christian karma

Did he know it would end on a cross? The gospel narratives suggest that he did – but then, they were written at least 50 years later, when every implication of his words had lots of time to ferment in his disciples' imaginations.

“Aha!” they would say to themselves, much later, “that must have been what he meant! Let's make it clearer!”

Hinduism might speak about the karma of the cross. Each decision committed Jesus to the next action. Once started, the river of karma swept him along inexorably. Past a certain point, there was no pulling out.

As I went down the Maligne River, I felt a mixture of wild exultation and sheer terror. I wonder if Jesus had similar feelings as he rode into Jerusalem.

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YOUR TURN

Apparently I'm not the only one who sometimes feels out on a limb.

Vic Sedo spoke for all who make music: listeners, he said, "never look at us anymore. Their heads are buried in their Pods!"

Clare Neufeld also feels lonely sometimes: "How might I express the profundity of your reflections, and their resonance with my current (2+ yrs) journey? Let me attempt to do so in metaphor: 'You've been reading my mail -- ahem!-- my soul's lament!'"

Jeff Johnson, from Raleigh NC, shared his own experience: "As a Baptist minister in the South for over 20 years, my faith has evolved beyond the traditional evangelical mindset. After losing my last church job in 2010, I found myself outside one of my major 'communities of consensus,' the Baptist boys' club of fellow ministers.

"Working as a hospice chaplain and a community college instructor now, I don't move in the same circles as many of my friends and former colleagues. When I talk to them, I find myself missing some of the perks of church ministry like flexible hours and a good salary. I don't miss other things about church work, like power struggles, placating malcontents, and downplaying issues of race.

"I don't get the same amount of affirmation in my current work, but I do get a lot more meaning from being a minister in a non-traditional context. And when the affirmation comes, it seems more authentic."

Mary Faith Blackburn responded to the sentence I wrote about singing "of cosmic holiness in a society that seems unable -- or unwilling -- to imagine anything beyond a private and personal God?"

"This sentence spoke to me just now," Mary Faith wrote. "So many people that I speak to say they are 'spiritual', and have a relationship with God, but see very little need for a community experience of worship or learning/teaching or sharing. I wonder what 'church' needs to look like in this rapidly changing society, and I wonder what society is/will become as we no longer worship, wonder, give thanks, celebrate, and mourn in community."

Isabel Gibson picked up on the same image: "I love the implication/assumption that they knew what the Lord's song was.... How wonderful if the pain of being in a new place can transform into the discovery that there is more than one song to be sung -- not just for the Lord, but for ourselves too.

"On a side note, how *do* you sing of cosmic holiness? And how/what do you understand that to be?"

Book plug: I recommend Bruce Sanguin's book, "Darwin, Divinity, and the Dance of the Cosmos," available through Wood Lake Publishing, 1-800-663-2775 or info@woodlakebooks.com

Finally, Sally Stoddard followed up on John Clinton's query about gorse: "Please tell John Clinton he'll not find gorse or even many sheep droppings in Nebraska, but he'll see the greatest migration of sandhill cranes in all the world!"

ABOUT MY BOOKS, ETC.

Sorry, I have no more copies of "Seeing the Mystery" available any more. Please do not send any more cheques.

PSALM PARAPHRASES

Seventeen letter hardly makes a scientific survey, but your preferences are clear: 14 in favour of including psalm paraphrases; 1 opposed; 1 maybe....

So I will include a paraphrase for the coming Sunday with each Soft Edges column. The psalms seem to me to fit better with the general mood of Soft Edges, which is more likely to deal directly with faith-related matters than with the more news-oriented Sharp Edges columns. Also, Soft Edges is about 250 words shorter than Sharp Edges, and so including the paraphrase on Wednesday won't make the e-mailing quite as long

Here's a paraphrase of Psalm 118:19-29, hopefully suitable for Palm Sunday, April 1.

- 19 Show us our opportunities, so that we can seize them!
Open our doors, so that we can step into a new tomorrow.
- 20 God gives us many doors;
we hang back instead of knocking boldly.
- 21 Knock, and the doors will be opened.
Seek, and we will find the opportunities God opens to us.
- 22, 23 Even a quivering coward can conquer new worlds.
- 24 With God, we can fling our fears aside;
We can sing and dance through every day.
- 25 Show us our doors, God;
Help us to recognize our opportunities.
- 26 Happiness is yours in God's company.
Those who live as God's companions welcome you.
- 27 You will be surrounded by illumination;
you will be lit up by the presence of God.
- 28 You, God, you are my only God.
There is no other like you;
I want nothing more than to live in your company.
- 29 I renounce all other loves;
I will live in the light of your love forever.

YOU SCRATCH MY BACK...

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For other web links worth pursuing, try

- David Keating's "SeemslikeGod" page, www.seemslikegod.org;
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, isabel@traditionaliconoclast.com
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap," write reynoldsrap@shaw.ca

- Wayne Irwin's "Model T Websites." a simple (and cheap) seven-page website for congregations who want to develop a web presence <<http://www.modeltwebsites.com>>
- Alva Wood's satiric stories about incompetent bureaucrats and prejudiced attitudes in a small town are not particularly religious, but they are fun; write alvawood@gmail.com to get onto her mailing list.

TECHNICAL STUFF

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You can access several years of archived columns at <http://edges.Canadahomepage.net>.

I write a second column each Sunday called Sharp Edges, which tends to be somewhat more cutting about social and justice issues. To sign up for Sharp Edges, write to me directly, at jimt@quixotic.ca, or send a note to sharpedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca
