

Easter Sermon Year A 2011
"Choo Choo, Choo Choo, Ch'boogie World"
Sunday, April 24, 2011
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Alleluia! Christ is risen!
The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!

Every Good Friday I play CD's of music appropriate to the solemnity of the day in the Great Hall. The music gently wafts through the building and is a suitable accompaniment to those praying at the Altar of Repose in the Chapel. Signs on all our entryways request that people engage in a respectful silence when they are in the building as well.

Together these two things create a subdued ambience in which to reflect on Jesus' passion and crucifixion. It creates a subdued tone, befitting the day our Savior died.

This past Friday *Miserere mei, Deus*, "Have mercy on me, oh God," a paraphrase of Psalm 51 by the seventeenth century Italian composer Gregorio Allegri, was playing. Suddenly I felt the urge for a cup of coffee. As many of you know my second office is the Starbucks across the street and so off I went for my caffeine fix.

Entering Starbucks I encountered a reality radically different from that at the church. That joint was jumpin'! Evidently people with Friday off needed a place to hang out and they were there in droves. Animating this exuberant scene further was the music coming through the speakers:

Choo choo, choo choo, ch'boogie!
Woo woo, ooh ooh, ch'boogie!
Choo choo, choo choo, ch'boogie!
Take me right back to the track, Jack!

Don't get me wrong. I love R&B, and Louis Jordan and his Tympany Five are cool cats. Plus, I have been known to cut a bit of a rug in my day. But the transition from *Miserere, mei, Deus* to *Choo Choo, Choo Choo, Ch'boogie* was a jarring shock to my system.

That jarring moment was a poignant reminder for me of the stark reality of the culture we live in: most people strive to live in a Choo choo, choo choo, ch'boogie world. Most people diligently deny the troubles and pain that beset them or the troubles and pain they are culpable for. Few look to express remorse and seek God's mercy for our sins and offenses – whether individually or corporately – as expressed in Allegri's hauntingly beautiful musical setting of the 51st psalm. How many people at Starbucks would want to hear, never mind say, "Have mercy upon me, O God, after Thy great goodness. According to the multitude of Thy mercies do away mine offences. Wash me thoroughly from my wickedness: and cleanse me from my sin. For I acknowledge my faults: and my sin is ever before me." Not many I suspect.

We live in very troubled times. I would venture to say that we live in a time of impending crisis from which there may be no return. We are at a critical tipping point; a point where we will either decline as a people or grasp the reality of our tenuous situation, make an amendment of life and engage in an authentic effort at renewal. The life of our culture and even that of the world is in the balance.

Yet the only response we have been able to muster to this confront our precarious situation is to seek facile fixes, elect inept leadership, engage in petty and childish rhetoric and deny the serious problems we face actually exist. So what we are left with is a lot of Choo choo, choo choo, ch'boogie. Which is apparently what people want.

A New York Times/CBS poll released this past week indicates that the nation's mood is at its lowest level in two years. The poll reported that, "Americans are more pessimistic about the nation's economic outlook and overall direction than they have been at any time since President Obama's first two months in office, when the country was still officially ensnared in the Great Recession...Amid rising gas prices, stubborn unemployment and a cacophonous debate in Washington over the federal government's ability to meet its future obligations, the poll presents stark evidence that the slow, if unsteady, gains in public confidence earlier this year that a recovery was under way are now all but gone."

That poll is only the tip of the iceberg of our gloomy despair. For years we have been roiling from one crisis after another: foreclosures, two wars (maybe three), the oil spill, the worst economic turndown since the Depression, rampant corruption in our institutions, hideous environmental degradation, critical loss of jobs, and millions of people being left behind with no jobs or insufficient ones in what is ironically being billed as a recovery.

We cannot under-estimate just how bad things really are for us.

I suspect you didn't expect that depressing litany of woes in an Easter homily did you? Well, cheer up, we are not without hope on this Resurrection Day.

This Lent Christ Church offered a study program collaboratively with St. Paul's titled "Countering Pharaoh's Production-Consumption Society Today," with the Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann. Brueggemann's premise is that humanity is and has always been easily enslaved to production-consumption systems run by elite minorities who manipulate the system for one purpose; their own attainment of power and wealth. The majority of the people in these systems are seen as mere disposable commodities and treated as such.

The proto-type of the production-consumption system is the story of the Hebrew people when they were enslaved under Pharaoh. Brueggemann believes it is only when people come to terms with their own wretchedness that things change. It is in that moment, as people come to terms with their denial of their ever-deteriorating lives under whichever of Pharaoh's enslavements they live, that things begin to change for the better. In other words human beings must come to terms with their reality and they must make sacrificial and hard decisions to change their condition. It is in that moment that God becomes powerfully present.

God became present with the Hebrews by giving them Moses, a charismatic and ethical leader who led them out of slavery into Sinai. It was at Sinai where the covenantal relationship with God was established. Through following God's ways in the covenant the people entered a system that was ethical and fair. It respected and honored the dignity and worth of all people, versus Pharaoh's system that used them as mere commodities. This was the Passover from slavery to new life that the Hebrews experienced.

This narrative of moving from abusive systems to healthy, holy ones occurs repeatedly in the scripture. It reaches its apex in Jesus' resurrection. The entire purpose of Jesus' life was to free humanity from enslavement to all the degrading production-consumption systems that bring death to human life and the human spirit. Jesus lived, died and rose to proclaim a definitive no to those systems that treat people as commodities and do not respect their dignity as children of God.

Jesus' resurrection was a resounding no to those who live as though the world is a place of scarcity and not abundance with enough for all.

His rising from the grave shouted no to those who live only for themselves and not for the common good.

Jesus' resurrection calls the world to a new set of values and actions centered on a new covenant with God and not on consumption-production systems that grind people up and throw them away.

In Jesus Christ our Passover, we are lead from enslavement to the things that bring death to human life, to a new life of freedom.

Like our Jewish brothers and sisters at the Seder table, we re-tell the story of our Passover from slavery to freedom around Jesus' table. We do this to remind ourselves how God calls us to live in covenant with God. But remembering Passovers is also a cautionary tale.

Passovers remind us that the reality of life is challenging. And they remind us that it is equally challenging to stay the course on our Sinai journey to the Promised Land once we have attained our freedom. Trust and perseverance are critical elements if we desire a better life. Pharaoh's power to draw us back into slavery is immense and seductive.

The Hebrew people at one point of their journey yearned to go back to Egypt and slavery because the food was so good. The disciples deserted Jesus at the most critical juncture of the journey and attempted to return to their old way of life. They ran and hid when their journey to new life hit the skids of his arrest, interrogation, suffering and death.

Keeping us addicted to material goods so we don't rebel and keeping us afraid of their power so we live in fear, are two ways destructive systems control us, impeding our journeys to a better life.

In our remembering our Passover we must always hold the promise of our new life before us. Resurrection life always happens and it is always there for us despite the enormous powers the Pharaohs of the world exert to prevent us from attaining it.

There is just one prerequisite to all this; we need to want it. Freedom and new life do not come of their own volition and they do not come without sacrifice. If we want the tipping point of our current precarious situation to tip the right way we will need to deny the production-consumption systems that enslave us. That will take diligence, perseverance and sacrifice: just like it did for the Hebrew people. Just like it did for Jesus.

The road toward resurrected life begins by acknowledging our own critical state of affairs. We need to cry out in our wretchedness. We need to name the production-consumption systems we are enslaved to for what they are: slavery. We need to stop denying our precarious position and looming crisis. And we must return to the only one who can restore us to the life we are made to live and that is God as we know him in Christ Jesus; which means we must follow him. Once we do this God can and will act in our lives in powerful ways.

God will transform us. God will lead us from the systems of denial and death. God will lead us to a life of gratitude and of generosity toward all people because we will understand that it is only through the gifts of a loving and generous God, that life is worth living. As a generous people of gratitude, we will no longer need to live in fear and denial. Bye-bye Choo choo, choo choo, ch'boogie world. Resurrected life will be ours.

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!

Amen.