

Epiphany 5, 2012

Out of Orbit

Isaiah 40:21-31; Psalm 147; Mark 1:29-39

“Why do you say. . .My way is hidden from the LORD, and my cause is disregarded by my God? Have you not known? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable.”

I couldn't have been more than four or five years old when I fell in love, that is, when I fell in love with the magic of a carnival.

That carnival magic, as I came to sense it, wasn't the sort that, in a couple of weeks from now, will cast its spell on streets of New Orleans.

The carnivals that enchanted me as a child traveled on

trucks, crossing broken stretches of asphalt road during sweltering summer days, camping a few days here, a few days there in drowsy little towns gathering for their “crabgrass days” and county fairs.

The Lauritsen family were devoted followers of those trucks bearing their magic to exotically named places like Pisgah and Ute, Onawa and Little Sioux, Dunlap and Mondamin, places “where all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking, and all the children are above average.”

Our family of “happy Danes” rarely missed a carnival that came within twenty miles of the house.

So, on many a sultry summer evening, “as the sun was going down,” Dad would pile the seven of us into the old ‘59

Ford *Galaxy*, and away we would spin into the *orbits* of the Ferris Wheel, the Scrambler, the Tilt-a-Whirl, and, for the little ones, the Merry-Go-Round.

Perched between my parents in the front seat of that Ford, a fresh crew-cut for the occasion, I would imagine ahead of us the colored lights dazzling and circling; the roller coasters roaring in free-fall; the buttery smell of steaming popcorn; the tingle of melting fibers of cotton candy on the tongue; the serpentine crowds churning, slithering through the gambling concessions.

And, then, I would remember those very worn, tired and mysterious-looking men and women with hollow eyes, whose forearms, leathered and inked by hard times, flexed as they pushed and pulled the levers of the Octopus.

Aside from an occasional fishing trip to northern Minnesota, carnival was about the best that summer could offer a kid on the Plains.

And, for the first few years, anyway, the best of summer's offering was the Merry-Go-Round.

My brother and I, who were close in age, always chose a pair of wooden horses, oftentimes a grey speckled with a golden palomino.

We'd shinny up the platform, saddle the horses, and, as we slowly began to move, pretend that we were in a race, up and down we plunged, one lurching forward as the other falling back—round and round, each time, grinning and tipping our hats to Mom and Dad so far below.

Around and around until my head started circling, my

belly convulsing, the world turning on its side, and I gripping the white mane that golden palomino.

“Even youths will faint and be weary,” I heard the prophet say, “. . .the young will fall exhausted. . . .”

Racing through a darkness buzzing with excitement, even delirium—that I loved about the Merry-Go-Round, yea, the magic of the carnival itself.

It was carnival.

It was magic.

It was delirious.

And, it made me very sick.

So sick, that several carnivals thereafter, I refused to go near a Merry-Go-round until my parents finally convinced me that I'd be okay if I just set my gaze directly *ahead of me*

rather than watching the whirling night *beside me*.

“Don’t look at us,” they said, “Don’t look at the trees speeding by. Just look strait ahead at the rider in front of you. . . look at the man in the middle. . . fix your eyes on one thing. . . you’ll be fine.”

Not so many years ago, as a father spinning on playgrounds with our little ones, I remembered that lesson.

Look ahead.

Focus on one thing.

Set your sights on the center.

Don’t let the magic make you sick.

It’s a lesson I need to remember hourly in a world beset by the magic, overcome by the powers, sickened by the forces—what the Gospel writers call *daimonia*, the demons.

(Now that I think of it, my favorite roller coaster at great America is appropriately named “The Demon.” First time Isaac rode it, I couldn’t get him on it the rest of the day)

In his *Screwtape Letters*, Lewis writes that “there are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the [demons]. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them. They themselves are equally pleased by both errors, and hail *a materialist* or *a magician* with the same delight.”

The Tilt-a-Whirls, the Scramblers, the Merry-Go-Rounds of life—all draw us readily into their orbit. And we can scarcely detach ourselves for a moment.

We get dizzy.

We become feverish.

The world turns on its side.

And, sometimes, we get very sick, convulsing like the man in the synagogue a week ago, convulsing like the waves of the ancient deep, bedridden by fever like Simon's mother-in-law.

And around and around and around we go until we fall exhausted, "even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted. . . ."

This pull of the powers, mighty at times as the pull of gravity, is more than we can bear, "For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh," Ephesians reminds us, ". . . but against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places."

Ask yourselves how you have “gone into orbit.”

Around what powers does your life spin?

What (or who) keeps you going in circles, doing same thing over and over, settling for a lifetime into lifeless routines?

What (or who) blinds you from looking forward, moving ahead, making changes, breaking habits, trying something new—for a change?

What (or who) has charmed your life into its web?

What (or who), finally, has exhausted you, sickened you, laid you low with fever?

Ask those questions, name those powers.

Ask those questions, name those powers, that also dominate the life of the church.

What has us in its orbit of control?

“That evening, as the sun was going down, they brought to him all who were sick or tormented with demons. And the whole city was gathered around the door.”

This whole scene, for me, has the feel of carnival.

“Immediately [Jesus’] fame began to spread throughout the whole surrounding region of Galilee.”

So, they loaded up the Ford and moved to Galilee, Capernaum, that is.

There’s magic in the air of Galilee, a magician afoot in Capernaum, they say.

People are astounded at the man’s teaching, “for he taught them as one having authority.”

We heard somebody showed up at the synagogue with

an unclean spirit, and that the spirit was cast out with a word, “Be silent, and come out of him!”

“At once his fame began to spread. . . .”

And today, this man comes to the house of Simon where Simon’s mother-in-law is sick in bed with fever. The man takes the woman by the hand and raises her up. The fever leaves her. She’s on her feet again. And she served them.

So, “as the sun is going down,” as night is settling in, the whole town crowds around the house, dropping at the door “all who were sick or possessed with demons.”

The man will soon raise up a paralytic and a man with a deformed hand, a little girl who has died and a boy with epilepsy.

Jesus is raising people up, just as he, too, will be raised up on the third day.

Here is new strength given to those laid low.

New strength allowing people to resume their place in the world.

New strength for people to serve even as “the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve. . . .”

So, people are coming into Capernaum’s orbit by this One who “commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.”

“He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless.”

Capernaum is staged to become the capital of this

kingdom for the weary.

And Jesus also surely have been felt pulled into the orbit of his own corporate success at First Mega-Church of Capernaum.

His disciples seem to crave the rising success.

When Jesus leaves the house in the middle of the night, he's going to a desolate place, not unlike that from which he has just returned after forty days.

Long before the sun rises, we are told, Jesus has gone out to pray—to detach himself, to focus on the center, to have an awareness.

But Simon and the others waste no time hunting for him, chasing him down like a pack of hounds, urging him to get back to town as fast as he can because: “Everybody’s

looking for you.”

Two of those four will later ask Jesus “to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.”

But Jesus refuses.

He refuses to be pulled into the orbit of Capernaum.

He refuses to be drawn into the orbit of his own success.

The centrifugal force of what has happened on this first sabbath will not overpower the “beloved Son of God.”

He’s looking ahead.

He’ll not be sickened by success.

He’s detaching himself from all that would set him spinning on a Merry-Go-Round of his own achievement—success that would deaden his forward movement to

Jerusalem and the proclamation of the royal rule of God.

“Let’s go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do.”

“That is what I came out to do.”

It’s a model for the church that so often just goes in circles, doing same thing over and over, powerless to pull away for the orbits of control, unwilling to detach itself from lifeless routine in order to move forward into God’s future.

And so, his gaze set ahead toward the cross, unfazed by the whirling darkness near him, Jesus moves on.

“Let’s go on. Let’s go forward. Let’s move into the orbit of God’s rule—God who “gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless. . . those who wait for the LORD

shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings
like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk
and not faint.”