

Palm Sunday

April 9 2017

Kobayashi Maru

Kobayashi Maru. If you are a Star Trek fan you know that means a no-win situation, only a decision between two untenable choices. For example, I just finished re-reading a mystery in which, at the climax of the action, one of the main characters is faced with a dilemma. His adored mentor, his teacher, is running to an abandoned building because he thinks that he, the equally loved student, is in there and in danger but the student knows that if the teacher reaches the door it is rigged to explode. He has no way to reach him in time to stop him. His only choice is to shoot him, possibly ending his life but saving him from certain death. Kobayashi maru. No good solution.

At this point in the Easter story, I dare to believe that Jesus' disciples, dim as they may sometimes seem, are beginning to realize that this palm-strewn path to Jerusalem would be fraught with no-win decisions. Perhaps along the way they tried to talk him out of it. This trip into town, Jesus. Have you really thought this through? Do you have an escape plan? This meeting with Pilate and the Pharisees. Have you considered what your defense will be? You say that one of us will betray you. What can you do about that? Execution? Well, you are divine and have wrought miracles. I'm sure you have another card up your sleeve, right?

And to all of their spoken or silent questions, the answer is the same. There is no other choice to be made.

John Vest teaches at Union Presbyterian Seminary in Virginia and apparently, his childhood was deeply influenced by the theology in Star Trek. (As you know, I'm personally a follower of the Gospel of Jagger, but to each his or her own). He even wrote a sermon once linking Easter and the no-win decision called kobayashi maru. And warning, this contains Easter spoilers. He writes:

“Kirk's first officer and best friend, the half-Vulcan half-human Spock, makes the heroic decision to give up his own life to save his friends. The death of Spock forces Kirk to realize that he's never really faced death before. He's cheated death and tricked his way out of death. But now he must confront the bitter reality of his closest friend's demise. Yet this wasn't the end of the story. In the next movie—there's always a next movie—Spock is resurrected. You see, *Star Trek* doesn't believe in the no-win scenario. Even Spock gets resurrected.

A movie I probably first saw when I was seven or eight years old has stuck with me three decades later. When we immerse ourselves in a story, it shapes the way we see the world. It influences the way we think. It becomes a part of who we are.”

He continues, “Each year we gather (at Easter) to immerse ourselves in the sacred story of scripture. From creation to the empty tomb, we tell and retell this story that shapes the way we see the world, influences the way we think, and becomes a part of who we are.

And here is what my heart and mind were primed to hear this time around: God doesn’t believe in the no-win scenario. With a relentless tenacity we hear it over and over again in these stories.

The perfection of creation is ruined by human sin, but God doesn’t believe in the no-win scenario. All of humanity becomes evil and God even regrets making us in the first place, but God doesn’t believe in the no-win scenario.

God gives Abraham an impossible test that cannot end well, but God doesn’t believe in the no-win scenario. The ancient Hebrews suffer for centuries under the oppressive burden of Egyptian slavery, and their escape is so bad that they think it would have been better to die in Egypt, but God doesn’t believe in the no-win scenario.

Their holy temple and sacred city are destroyed—burned to the ground—and the people are sent into exile where they wonder how they can worship God in a strange land—they wonder if even God has been destroyed—but God doesn’t believe in the no-win scenario.

God sends us Jesus to show us the way and instead of following him we kill him on a cross and bury him in a tomb, but God doesn’t believe in the no-win scenario. Throughout these stories we are reminded of this timeless truth: there is no danger, no disaster, no tragedy, no mistake, no sin, no failure—*nothing*—that is beyond the redemptive power of God’s love.”

Mr Vest’s sermon on Easter ended on that positive note, but at this dot on the timeline, we are not there yet. We are suspended like an insect in amber, waiting for the next step, for the next decision to be made, waiting not in rejoicing but in dread. Today we put on the bravado of a hosanna-lined road to Jerusalem but we know that darkness lies ahead. Holy week does not feel like a winning situation. And we hate that the choice is not ours to make. And at the same time, we feel that with 20/20 hindsight we might have done things differently from the disciples or the people standing by the side of the road waving their palms.

But kobayashi maru. In order to save us, there have to be sacrifices made: our illusions, our innocence, Jesus’ life on earth. Nothing can stop what has to happen. Our job is to clear the way, clear the path, clear our hearts.

The Reverend Jeanne Gay wrote a liturgy for Palm Sunday that includes this prayer:

“O Lord our God, we love the part about the parade. What fun that would have been, throwing palm branches and cloaks on the road to ease your way! But the reality is that our lives often don’t welcome you so well. We’d like to be the ones tossing the palm branches ahead of you to

soften your path but it feels like often we're tossing obstacles instead: spiteful speech, angry actions, bitter thoughts. We'd like to think of ourselves as loving and peaceful, but too often we're people who do not recognize the things that make for peace. Help us join the parade, O Lord, even those of us who have been sitting like stones alongside the road. Help us be open to loving, eager to bring peace, excited to spread your joy. The Lord's steadfast love endures forever".

We are given Holy Week to clear the way, clear the path, clear our hearts. And to hope, remembering, believing, that God doesn't believe in a no-win scenario.

Amen.