

Defying Expectations  
Preacher: Rev. Lauren Lorincz  
Date: April 1, 2012

15:17

I happen to love musicals. I grew up watching all sorts of musicals and singing along to them in the car with my family. Yes, we're huge nerds. We would often go see shows in Cleveland when a national tour came into town. And actually, since it's now Holy Week, I've been having a one woman show of Jesus Christ Superstar in my office to get in the zone. And I'm sure Diane has a rave review for my stunning performance, not everyone can play Jesus and Judas simultaneously like I can. But seriously I'm a big fan of musicals, and in addition to adoring Jesus Christ Superstar, I also enjoy My Fair Lady. I've seen the movie with Rex Harrison and Audrey Hepburn too many times to count.

I just like the plot, which is based on the play Pygmalion. The premise is that Henry Higgins, a professor of phonetics, takes this diamond in the rough Cockney woman, Eliza Doolittle, who sells flowers on the streets and has had a rough life in general and turns her into the belle of the ball who dazzles everyone she meets. He teaches her how to speak in a more refined manner, teaches her etiquette, and basically thinks he's changing her life—though she changes his in the process too.

I still hold my breath when she makes that entrance up the stairs at the ball, and the Prince of Transylvania dances with her, and you're hoping that everyone believes her story, but you just don't know if they will or not. You want her to succeed, but have this pit in your stomach that she'll somehow fail. And good lord, Audrey Hepburn knows how to make an entrance. She's wearing this gorgeous sparkly gown and beautiful jewelry and she just has this muted smile and look in her eyes, so classic and elegant. The people in the room all gravitate toward her, all eyes focus in on her and you as an audience member on your couch or in the theater can't help but get caught up in the moment cheering her on and wishing her well on her big night.

This ability to captivate a room, to make an entrance has always fascinated me. There are just some people who are so dynamic, so inspiring, so interesting that you can't help but be drawn to them somehow. In the musical, Eliza becomes this woman whom people naturally gravitate toward, and Audrey Hepburn played that part beautifully on screen.

I think that Jesus was someone people naturally gravitated toward as well, and today we get to see one of the biggest entrances he makes in his ministry. He enters into the lion's den, into Jerusalem itself right around Passover. He enters to shouts of "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!"<sup>[1]</sup> These were shouts of praise and affirmation, shouts of respect and admiration. And as I said in the children's message today, I don't think Jesus got off his donkey and paraded around making the crowds see just how cool and powerful he was. He enters Jerusalem in a humble way, in a pretty muted way.

Jesus enters on a donkey. Why? This passage is all about Jesus making a stand and confronting expectations of him. The people are shouting "Hosanna" which can roughly translate as "Save us!" The crowds want saved from Rome, and saved from the religious authorities who oppress them. They wanted Jesus, this man who gained a following, this hopeful leader who emerged from the Galilean countryside, to be a military leader, a savior who would come rescue them from those in power.

But Jesus wasn't that type of Messiah; we've talked about it before. The people wanted the conquering hero and Jesus was the Suffering Servant. If you've ever defied expectations

others have placed on you, if you've ever decided not to be who everyone else wants you to be and you've gone your own way, you may be able to understand what this must have been like for Jesus during that parade. This parade, where the people's expectations on what kind of Savior he should be were thrown out there along with their cries of "Save us!"

In Jesus Christ Superstar, right after the big number "Hosanna" which chronicles this Palm Sunday processional, Simon, one of Jesus' own disciples, gathers some friends and sings to Jesus. Here's what Simon proclaims, "Christ, what more do you need to convince you that you've made it and you're easily as strong as the filth from Rome who rape our country and who've terrorized our people for so long? There must be over fifty thousand screaming love and more for you. Every one of fifty thousand would do whatever you ask him to. Keep them yelling their devotion, but add a touch of hate at Rome. You will rise to a greater power! We will win ourselves a home! You'll get the power and the glory, forever and ever and ever! You'll get the power and the glory, forever and ever and ever!"[2]

Simon is calling Jesus to take advantage of this situation. You have the crowds on your side, they are screaming to you, "Save us!" So let's act on this momentum, now is the time that we can strike the Romans and get our country back. Now is the time we need you to be the military leader.

And here's how Jesus responds in the musical, and I'll spare you by saying it and not singing it, "Neither you Simon, nor the fifty thousand, nor the Romans, nor the Jews, nor Judas, nor the twelve, nor the priests, nor the scribes, nor doomed Jerusalem itself understand what power is, understand what glory is, understand at all, understand at all."[3] Jesus completely turns the argument around, telling Simon, basically you don't get it. You don't know what power is, you don't know what glory is. I'm not trying to go to war and kick the Romans out of Jerusalem; I'm trying to build a kingdom on earth here and now.

So instead of riding in on a great big war horse as the military leaders of the day would have done or riding inside a fancy chariot with a sword in hand waving it triumphantly for all to see, Jesus rides into the city on a humble beast-of-burden, symbolizing a peaceful leader. Kind-of a let-down if you're expecting a big show and you're used to seeing people a whole lot flashier than Jesus. And right when Jesus has the crowds behind him, he doesn't capitalize on this the way some of his disciples may have wanted him to.

Jesus is trying to build the upside-down Kingdom of God on Earth. A Kingdom that doesn't conform to the world's norms and mores. A Kingdom where the first will be last and the last will be first. A Kingdom where a widow with one coin can give more than the rich in the Temple. A Kingdom where a Father runs out to embrace his wayward son who finally comes home.

We have to put Jesus' humble entry into Jerusalem into context to see just how much it might have let down the zealots like Simon. After all, the Romans had a long history of Triumphal processions. Usually, generals were the ones who had Triumphs after significant victories were won over a foreign enemy. After the successful military campaign, the general would bring his troops home and they'd place themselves just outside the city and request a Triumphal procession from the Senate during the time period of the Roman Republic. If the Senate decided to award the Triumph, politicians worked a little faster back then it seems, there was protocol that was followed as to who should process in when and the route taken throughout the city.

The Senate came first in the grand processional, go figure, and trumpeters would follow announcing the festivities. Carts would be wheeled through the streets of Rome laden with the spoils of war, followed by white bulls and oxen that would get sacrificed later on. If it was a more elaborate Triumph, there would be more musicians and then exotic plants from the

conquered land to show off, followed by the arms and insignia of the conquered enemy, and leaders and captives taken from their homeland.

But wait, there's more, this would be followed by some of the civil servants of the general marching in single file and then the general himself driving a 2 or 4 horse chariot. Finally, the processional ended with the general's sons and officers that lead the infantry, though they were unarmed because the procession took place within Rome, the sacred city.[4] That's more than you probably ever wanted to know about a Roman Triumph.

But here's the thing, compare this Roman Triumph to Jesus entering Jerusalem on his donkey. Do you see the stark contrast? The Romans would have looked at this little show and wondered what to make of Jesus. They might have laughed and scoffed at him, thinking back to the Triumphs they've witnessed in their lifetime in glorious Rome and seeing this pathetic Jewish peasant riding into Jerusalem on a lowly donkey.

And the Jewish crowds gathered would have probably wanted someone to ride in on a glorious chariot for once and call the people to rebel, to throw off their oppressors, to be in line with the great King David and bring some power back to the nation.

And Jesus doesn't do that, he'll teach and march into the Temple, throw over some tables, and die for love of all of them within a week. "Neither you Simon, nor the fifty thousand, nor the Romans, nor the Jews, nor Judas, nor the twelve, nor the priests, nor the scribes, nor doomed Jerusalem itself understand what power is, understand what glory is, understand at all, understand at all." [5] Amen.

[1] Mark 11:9-10

[2] Andrew Lloyd Weber, "Simon Zealotes/Poor Jerusalem" in Jesus Christ Superstar.

[3] Andrew Lloyd Weber, "Simon Zealotes/Poor Jerusalem" in Jesus Christ Superstar.

[4] <http://web.mit.edu/course/21/21h.405/www/ArchesOfTitus/triumph.html>

[5] Andrew Lloyd Weber, "Simon Zealotes/Poor Jerusalem" in Jesus Christ Superstar.