

Get on Board
Mark 12:28-34, Revelation 21:1-6a
November 5, 22006

Today is All Saints' Day, and we are called to remember and celebrate all those who have gone before us, have gotten on board the glory train, and now rejoice with all the saints in heaven. It is a day to look back and a day to look forward – to give thanks that the glory train still runs, is still coming on 'round the bend, so we too can get on board for the journey to the ultimate destination, the New Jerusalem, where there will be a great day of rejoicing, where we'll all see Jesus, where we'll wear long white robes and crowns, where death will be no more, where crying and pain will be no more, where we'll sing and shout the victory. But if we're not careful, in celebrating the destination, we can forget there are necessary stops along the way.

Ever since the choir first began practicing "Glory Bound" I've been thinking and wondering about the glory train. Many of you perhaps know that it has historical roots in pre-Civil War America, when in the early nineteenth century, African American slaves, knew the glory train as a way out of bondage. Slaves were allowed to sing work songs to help coordinate their efforts when working together; even prisoners sang "chain gang" songs as they worked on roads or construction projects. Some slaves were allowed to sing "quiet" songs if they were not obviously against slaveholders, and these songs were often used to express personal feelings and to encourage and cheer one another.

They became the perfect vehicle for sending secret messages that only Christian slaves could understand, messages about the Underground Railroad, a network to assist persons held in bondage to escape from slavery. Thus, the songs referred often to escape to a free country, a "home," a safe place where everyone could live free. So "home" could mean Heaven, but it also meant a sweet, free country, a haven for slaves. The way used by fugitives running to a free country was riding a "chariot" or a "train." "She is coming – get on board – there's room for many more." "Swing low, sweet chariot" refers to the town of Ripley, a "station" of the Underground railroad, where fugitive slaves were welcome. Ripley is atop a hill by the Ohio River, which is not easy to cross, hence the words, "I looked over Jordan, and what did I see, coming for to carry me home, A band of angels coming after me, coming for to carry me home." (from "Songs," at www.negrospirituals.com)

The "glory train" and the "chariot" were metaphors for freedom, for escape to a new life, representing not only life after death with God, but a transformed life in the here and now, in a place of freedom, equality, and safety.

Centuries before the glory train and the Underground Railroad, Jesus was in Jerusalem, during the last week of his life, teaching and preaching, when a scribe approached him to ask "Which commandment is the first of all?" And Jesus answered him from the book of Deuteronomy, "The first is 'Hear O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength,'" and then he adds from Leviticus, "The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'" Impressed by Jesus' statement of the law, the scribe repeating what Jesus said, replied "you are right teacher . . . this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." And Jesus answered, "You are not far from the kingdom of God."

In that conversation, did you hear the whistle blowing coming on down the track? Did you hear, "Good news, the chariot's a coming, and I don't want it to leave me behind," when Jesus said, "You are not far from the kingdom of God."

The kingdom of God – for Jesus, that life in that kingdom has two aspects – one, at the end of time, like that described in the passage from Revelation, when there is no pain, no suffering, no death and God's reign is fully realized in the new Jerusalem – and also one in the

here and now, that gives us glimpses of the kingdom and encourages us to live our lives on earth as if God were king, and not Herod, not the Romans, not the Republicans or Democrats, not Walmart or the insurance companies—a kingdom where there is peace, where there is justice and everyone has enough. A kingdom, where in the words of the spiritual, “The fare is cheap and all can go; The rich and poor are there./ No second class aboard this train, No difference in the fare. Git on board, little children, get on board; there’s room for many a more.” (“De Gospel Train,” *Songs of Zion*, 1981, p. 116)

The disciples thought they understood the glory train – we heard them ask Jesus for tickets a couple of weeks ago, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand, and one at your left, in your glory.” And Jesus answered, “Sorry guys, you’re standing on the wrong platform. My glory train runs through Jerusalem, through arrest, trial, conviction, crucifixion, and death. Are you able to get on board that train?” Well, maybe he didn’t say that quite that way exactly, but you get the idea!

Who wouldn’t prefer the glory train to be an express – one that doesn’t make stops, one that from the moment of our baptism is a straight shot to glory, to heaven, to bliss, to God. But the message of the gospel is that the glory train is a local. It makes all the stops. There is no express route. It stops at all those places we’d rather avoid, places like soup kitchens and hospitals, prisons and homeless shelters, the upper room, the garden of Gethsemane, a hill called Calvary. And the glory of this train is not the razzle-dazzle of grandeur, success, prosperity and triumph. It is the awe and wonder of service, of obedience, and of sacrifice where the great must become servants, and the first must become slaves of all.

Paul Copenhaver has written, “As a journey of discipleship, [the glory train] it is not so immediately attractive that any fool would want to sign on. In many ways it is so fearsome that you have to be a special kind of fool – what Paul calls ‘a fool for Christ’ to get on board.” (Paul Copenhaver, “Jostling for Position,” *Christian Century*, Oct. 5, 1994)

There are many modern day saints we could point to, who understood the perilous path of the glory train and chose to get on board anyway – Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Desmond Tutu. In our country, Martin Luther King, Jr, perhaps best understood what the glory train was all about. In the last speech he ever gave, on April 3, 1968 at Mason Temple in Memphis Tennessee, he was visionary enough to proclaim the reality of the fully realized kingdom of God, “I’ve been to the mountain top . . . and I’ve seen the promised land . . . Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord,” yet he was honest enough to proclaim as well, “It’s all right to talk about ‘long white robes over yonder,’ in all its symbolism. But ultimately people want some suits and dresses and shoes to wear down here. It’s alright to talk about ‘streets flowing with milk and honey,’ but God has commanded us to be concerned about the slums down here, and his children who can’t eat three square meals a day. It’s alright to talk about the new Jerusalem, but one day, God’s preacher must talk about the [new] New York, the new Atlanta, the new Philadelphia, the new Los Angeles, the new Memphis, Tennessee.” (*A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, James M. Washington, ed., 1991, p. 282)

We’re called, I think, to get on board the glory train – and at each stop along the way to make this world a better place – a foretaste of the kingdom – until we together reach that final destination, when “I’ve got a robe, you’ve got a robe, all God’s children got a robe” and we all can “shout all over God’s heaven.” Thanks be to God. Amen.

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