

The Church's "El Camino" Solution

Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it.
(Mark 11:7)

A sermon by Siegfried S. Johnson on Passion/Palm Sunday, **March 25, 2018**
(Volume 1 Number 36)
Christ of the Hills UMC, 700 Balearic Drive, Hot Springs Village, Arkansas 71909

On October 16, 1958 Chevrolet began to sell a car-truck hybrid called El Camino, inspired by the Ford Ranchero, which had been introduced the previous year, the Ranchero becoming known as the *Cowboy Cadillac*. The original El Camino, a combination sedan-pickup truck built on the body of an Impala, was advertised as *"the most beautiful thing that ever shouldered a load!"*

I thought about that phrase reading the Palm Sunday account of the borrowed colt carrying Jesus from the Mount of Olives into the gates of Jerusalem. *"The Son of Man came to Jerusalem,"* we will sing later, *"Not on a war horse, but on a humble donkey."* Yes, but if you ask me, that donkey was *"the most beautiful thing that ever shouldered a load."*

"It rides and handles like a convertible," Chevy advertised, *"yet hauls and hustles like the workingest thing on wheels."* Appearing in 1958, the El Camino wasn't exactly a new idea. The Australian division of Ford Motor Company was the first to produce such a vehicle, in response to a letter to the Ford Motor Company in 1932 from the wife of a farmer in Victoria, Australia, asking for *"a vehicle to go to church in on Sunday, which can carry our pigs to market on Mondays."*



Ford engineer Lew Bandt got to work designing a solution, and so the first coupe/utility model was released, way Down Under, in 1934, a ritzy sedan in front complete with wind-up windows (a top notch luxury in those days), but a rough and tumble pick-up in the back. That car/truck hybrid would not appear on the American market until over 20

years later, the Ford Ranchero in '57, and the Chevrolet El Camino in '58.

Discontinued after only two years, the El Camino was resurrected for a time, until 1987 when Chevrolet dropped the El Camino from its lineup. Today it's a cult classic. The El Camino

pictured is a 1970 model owned by Christ of the Hills member Tom Aubry, and is in the parking lot this morning.

You may by now be wondering where I'm going with this. My point is simply this, that just as the El Camino was conceived as a solution to a problem (how to go to church on Sunday and take the hogs to the market on Monday, all in the same vehicle), *The Church's El Camino Solution* is a hybrid which can be found in the "official" liturgical name of this Sunday -- *Passion/Palm Sunday*.

It's true. What this day has become in the church's liturgy is a hybrid and so, I think, a bit ineffective to accomplish its purpose. The slash between Passion and Palm is an attempt, on this Sunday, to accomplish multiple things, seemingly contrary things.

Don't get me wrong, I understand the pragmatism behind this nomenclature, seeking to keep Christians from jumping from one parade (Palm Sunday) to the greater parade (Easter) without reflecting upon the suffering Jesus endured during this week. Since many Christians can't or don't participate in Holy Week services such as Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, each engaging the passion of the Christ, our liturgy seeks to merge all of Holy Week into this Sunday's readings.

Perhaps I'm just being nostalgic. We can do that, you know, criticize the way the things are based only on our remembrances of how we use to do it. So let me preface my slight criticism with "When I was a boy," our faith tradition knew the day only as Palm Sunday. We focused on the *Pure Rapture* of the triumphal entrance of Jesus, withholding until mid-week the coming *Painful Rupture* of hope.

Holy Week begins with a moment of *Pure Rapture* for the disciples, elated at Jesus' entrance into the Holy City. Many had come to harbor fervent hopes that he was the Messiah, the one to close the ugly chapter of Roman occupation. In their messianic dream Jesus would be the conductor of a symphony of revolution, on Palm Sunday presenting himself to the orchestra and raising the baton to sound the first notes which would inspire a patriotic Jewish march to victory, Jesus conducting his patriotic and revolutionary magnum opus.

But a *Painful Rupture* of those nationalistic hopes was on the horizon of this sorrowful week, Palm Sunday's shouts of "*Hosanna*" turning by week's end to "*Crucify Him!*" We'll get there. The Bible takes us there. I just wish it didn't rush us to consider it all on Palm Sunday. Today, I want to celebrate the Palm Sunday parade, even knowing that the magnum opus hoped for would be the symphony that never was.

Let me tell you another story of *Rapture* and *Rupture*, the story of a famous composer, Jean Sibelius, and his patriotic symphony that never was. Sibelius died in 1957 (the very year the Ford Ranchero was born). From Finland, he was the most famous Scandinavian composer, his life an El Camino hybrid of elegance and its opposite.

For 53 years before his death, since 1904, he lived twenty miles north Helsinki in a villa that itself was a hybrid of timber and stone on the shores of Lake Tuusula. Surrounded by birch forests, it offered the composer the isolation he sought. Here Finland's most renowned figure withdrew into seclusion, from 1933 on composing no music of any significance, only a few trifles to make a little money for expenses. Through those years, though, he was waging an artistic struggle within himself as he sought to write his 8th Symphony, his magnum opus.

In a sad moment, early 1940's, his inspiration drained to the point that he felt the struggle lost. Taking a laundry basket filled with his 8th Symphony into the dining room, Sibelius began peeling off the pages, tossing them into the fire of the stove. One after another after another. Sibelius' 8th would be the symphony that never was. Afterwards, a strange calm settled over the composer. He was no longer depressed but strangely optimistic, as if the fire had been redemptive, bringing some magnificent catharsis, a purifying of body and soul. It was as if, embracing the *Rapture*, he found a glimmer of *Rapture*.

Sibelius had referred to his 8th Symphony as brilliant, a great work in the making. Why he would destroy such a highly anticipated and promising work remains one of the most perplexing questions of European music history. We will ourselves experience this morning one of his greatest compositions in a patriotic tune to which words of a Palm Sunday hymn have been joined, but his real legacy was his composition of symphonies.

As a symphony rises and falls, finding its crescendo moments amid descents into valleys, his life was lived in just such a paradox. On his 70 birthday in 1935 he was been recognized as a national hero, a celebration attended by several of Finland's former presidents along with the prime ministers of Sweden, Denmark, and Norway. His 6th and 7th Symphonies were highly acclaimed by music critics and all awaited his magnum opus.

Reading about Sibelius and his symphonies, I imagined the disciples describing their experiences of the previous "symphonies" of Jesus as they awaited his Magnum Opus.

There was Jesus' 1st Symphony played in Cana in Galilee to a private audience of family and friends at a wedding, he directing the very elements of H₂O to transform into wine. In this symphony I can hear the woodwinds, the flutes and piccolos excitedly announcing what's yet to come in this new maestro's career.

I can hear Jesus' 3rd Symphony performed in a storm on the Sea of Galilee. As his baton directs even the winds and the waves of the Galilee I can hear the drums and the booming tubas – the most intestinal of all instruments – as if in contest with the thunder.

Ah, and I dare not forget Jesus' 5th Symphony performed in the Golan Heights, bringing peace to the Gadarean maniac possessed by a legion of demons. Casting them into the swine I can hear Jesus directing the stringed instruments – the violins, harps, and cello – until at last the crescendo drives the swine into the sea, leaving the Gadarean at peace with the soft notes of the piano.

Yes, and of course who could forget the rousing strains of Jesus' 7th Symphony, when the words "*Lazarus, come forth*" commanded death itself to obey his baton. In Jesus' 7th I hear the trumpet sounding the resurrection, as Paul wrote, "*the trumpet will sound and the dead will be raised imperishable.*"

Many awaited magnum opus, his 8th. Why would he burn it? And how, in the burning of it, did he find peace? During a radio interview in 1948 he said, "*here in Ainola, the silence speaks,*" words making me think of Palm Sunday, "*if the disciples were silent, the stones would speak.*"

Many awaited Jesus' magnum opus, his 8th Symphony that never was, the overthrow of Rome. Why would he throw it away? Can the silence speak?

It's not only the story of Sibelius, you know. Is it yours, as well? Is there in your life, an unfinished work? Worse, a self-destroyed work? Hoping and dreaming of your magnum opus, is there in your life story a symphony that never was? How many symphonies are out there being written now which will be, at last, unsounded? And how odd, surpassingly so, that in the letting go of something dreamed of for so long, one can discover peace, beauty in the silence.

Sibelius was, as I said, from Finland. His tune *Finlandia* is, at least for Christians, his most recognizable composition. Written when he was 34 years old in 1899 with a patriotic pace, it premiered on July 2, 1900 in Helsinki with the Helsinki Philharmonic. It's long been a favorite of mine, since I heard *Finlandia* with the words of Katerina von Schlegel:

*Be still, my soul; the Lord is on thy side;
Bear patiently the cross of grief or pain;
Leave to thy God to order and provide;
In every change, He faithful will remain.
Be still, my soul; thy best, thy heavenly, Friend
Through thorny ways leads to a joyful end.*

Many have set words to the majestic *Finlandia*, and I love the Palm Sunday words written by David Miller, "*Not on a war horse, but on a humble donkey.*"

Jesus would not enter the Holy City to conquer any land but the heart, nor lift the flag of any kingdom, but that of God's Kingdom. Let's rise now and sing these Palm Sunday words, to the majestic tune of Jean Sibelius' *Finlandia*.

*Not on a war horse, but a humble donkey,
the Son of Man came to Jerusalem;
great city full of faithful Hebrew pilgrims
received one more as she had often done.
And yet this time, Christ journeyed into danger;
to be betrayed, to suffer and to die.*

*They paved his way with scattered cloaks and branches
- a prelude to the coming victory.*

*Crowds of disciples shouting out their praises;
"Glory to God! Hosanna to the King!
Bless'd is the one, Jesus has come to save us."
The very stones would cry out if they could.*

*His friends knew not the horrors that awaited,
imagining an end to Roman rule.
Instead God's plan was moving to fruition;
his Son would gain a greater vict'ry still.
Not by the might of gathered rebel armies,
but strength of purpose and submissive will.*

*Out into darkness, Jesus' time is coming;
a kiss to greet, a sign - "this is the one"
The soldiers mock, yet still our Lord is silent;
the sentence passed and all our crimes his own.
Christ hoisted high, humanity is ransomed;
through Jesus' death, we all are given life!*