We used to sing country songs at the top of our lungs on the softball team bus.

In central Pennsylvania the distance to the next high school softball field could be a good thirty minutes to two hours away.

So we would load our heavy bat bags, helmets, catcher’s gear, gloves, sliding pads, drink coolers, and warm clothes into a yellow school bus and go hurdling down the highway.

More often than not one of the older girls, in the back of the bus would start and we would all join in the a’capella singing of songs we quickly learned by heart.

The Dixie Chicks were a favorite, especially Goodbye Earl, a very non pacifist, yet deliciously satisfying song about two best friends, Marianne and Wanda, who conspire to off Wanda’s physically abusive husband Earl, and end up selling Tennessee ham and strawberry jam together at a roadside stand, no longer losing any sleep at night.

Another song we knew by heart was the school’s alma mater.

   Before every game. Even if we were just taking the bus from the high school building to our home field, we could not leave the bus without singing about our high school’s hallowed halls that encircled us with loving walls
   --and that’s the part when we would pound on the bus walls.
   Then we added Go! Fight! Win!
   and whatever other chants seemed appropriate at the time.
But the song that kept slipping through my head this week, stealing bases in my unconscious and pulling me back to the people and the stories that formed me in those growing up years is the song that starts,

If I live to be a hundred
And never see the seven wonders
That'll be alright

If I don't make it to the big leagues
If I never win a Grammy
I'm gonna be just fine

'Cause I know exactly who I am
I am Rosemary's granddaughter
The spitting image of my father
And when the day is done
My momma's still my biggest fan

Sometimes I'm clueless and I'm clumsy
But I've got friends who love me
And they know just where I stand
It's all a part of me
And that's who I am

I found that song on YouTube this week after not hearing it for a long time and it sounded like turn of the millennium country, and it sounded like a softball bus and the women I shared it with. It sounded like my teenage years--what can be an awkward time so many of us are lucky just to survive.

I wasn’t sure if it sounded like first century Jerusalem.
Except for one point. That’s who I am. That’s who he is.
Matthew 21 says, “when they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage at the Mount of Olives,” Jesus asked the disciples to bring him a donkey and a colt, the foal of donkey.
Did he really ride on two animals?
    That seems rather uncomfortable to me.
    More likely we’re dealing with Matthew’s attention
to fulfilling prophetic statements from the Hebrew Bible,
and we’re dealing with Matthew’s attention to symbolism.
    He’s making a point.

See elsewhere in the city that week, there would have been big Roman war horses
carrying Governor Pilate and other dignitaries into the city for Passover,
    not because these folks particularly respected ancient Judaism
but rather, so that on this Jewish holiday
    celebrating the time the entire Hebrew people rose up
in insurrection and liberated themselves from their slavemasters
    that they did not get any ideas about doing that sort of thing again.

Jesus comes as a different sort of ruler. Matthew wants to be clear.
    So much the opposite of those rulers is Jesus that he comes riding a lowly donkey
--no make it two donkeys--one not even fully grown--the foal of a donkey.
That’s who he is. That’s the kind of ruler he is.

It would be like if the President of the United States rode a bicycle to visit Chicagoland
    instead of rolling down Lake Shore Drive in an armored limousine.

Do you know any world leaders like that?
How about the mayor of Bogota, Columbia, Enrique Penalosa?
    In Bogota, a city with a spectacular reputation for kidnappings and assassinations,
Enrique Penalosa forgoes the armored SUV typical of most public figures in Colombia.
    Instead, he jumps curbs and potholes, riding one-handed,
weaving across the pavement on his knobby-tired mountain bike,
    trailed by the bikes of madly pedaling bodyguards, photographers, and journalists.

Young women wave and overall-clad laborers shout out to him as he sails through the city streets.
Charles Montgomery, followed Penalosa while researching his book *Happy City,* and on one such trip, suit pants flapping in the wind and cell phone hurriedly pocketed, the mayor yelled back at the journalist: “We’re living an experiment! We might not be able to fix the economy. We might not be able to make everyone [in Bogota] as rich as Americans. But we can design the city to give people dignity, to make the feel rich. The city can make them happier.”

When Penalosa ran for mayor in 1997, he dispensed with the normal promises of Bogotan politicians. There was no way Bogota’s refugee-overwhelmed and terrorism over-run city’s economy could rival the Americans. He did not promise a car in every garage or a socialist revolution.

He promised a happier city. A city in which people walk. Talk to their neighbors, and connect with the community around them. Penalosa claimed “most things that people buy in stores give them a lot of satisfaction the moment they buy them, but after a few days, that satisfaction decreases, and months later, it completely melts away. But great public space is a kind of magical good. It never ceases to yield happiness. It’s almost happiness itself.”

To achieve his ends, when elected Penalosa threw out the city’s ambitious highway expansion plan and instead poured his budget into hundreds of miles of bike paths; a vast new chain of parks and pedestrian plazas; and a network of new libraries, schools, and day-care centers.

In the third year of his term Penalosa invited his city’s residents to a day without cars. Only buses and taxis were allowed on the streets. And hundreds of thousands of adults and children followed the mayor’s example and biked or walked to work or school.

The residents of the city liked it so much they voted to make it a yearly tradition and by 2015 they voted to ban all private cars during rush hour every day. People told pollsters they were the most optimistic they had been about living in Bogota as they had been in years.
They did it by flipping the conventional understanding of power,
   of what made a person and a city thrive on its head.

What they needed was not more cars.
   What they needed was not even more money.
   What they needed was more connection.
   What they needed was another way of living.

Matthew tells us,
   “A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road [that day]
       and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road.”
Other sources say they used palms, which was something like the national flag in those parts.

And they started shouting “Hosanna to the Son of David!
   Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!
   Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

They were making quite a spectacle of his arrival.
   They were hailing him as a king, Son of David.
   As a Messiah, meant to save them.

One scholar I read this week had been to Jerusalem,
   something I’ve never done,
   and she said the Mount of Olives is an actual mount
   and this road would have been one
   that steeply descended zigzag into the city.

So you would have been able to see him coming from all over the city.
   The religious leaders, the Governor, the people,
   they could all have seen this spectacle.

Indeed, Matthew writes, “the whole city was in turmoil, asking, ‘Who is this?’”
By now Matthew hopes we, listeners and readers, know that answer.

Who is this?
   In chapter 1, Matthew took great pains to list Jesus’ genealogy
   and establish him as a descendant of David. //

Who is this?
   In chapter 2, he is the baby that wise men greet at his birth
   and the baby born to be king of the Jews
   who when Herod who thought he was king of the Jews
   heard about it was frightened,
   and, echoing into today’s story, all Jerusalem with him.

Who is this?
   In chapter 16, he is the one who Peter calls “Messiah,
   the son of the living God.”

Who is this?
   Skipping ahead to chapter 27,
   which we will read in this sanctuary on Good Friday,
   Jesus is the one who will be hanging on the cross.
   He is the one about whom the Roman centurion will say
   “Truly this man was God’s son.”

What should cause him to say that?
   The man was hanging dead on a cross.
   If he had come to claim his throne
   he was either a uniquely failed ruler
   or an entirely different kind of king altogether.

The whole city was in turmoil, when Jesus entered asking, ‘Who is this?’

The whole city was in turmoil. Who is this?

The crowds respond: This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.
In other words, this is our esteemed teacher, whom you may have never heard of from the middle of nowhere, Galilee.

This response is just one more clue that this Jesus is coming to claim his throne as a different kind of king.

Jesus’ power comes not in the form of horses or soldiers. Jesus power comes not from cars, or money, or houses, or social status. Jesus power comes not from Navy destroyer ships or Tomahawk missiles. Jesus’ power comes from who he is.

I wouldn’t have drawn the connection for you at 15 years old sitting on a rubber clad school bus bench singing with twenty other women but now I think that’s the power I felt when we sang together:

I'm a saint and I'm a sinner
I'm a loser; I'm a winner
I am steady and unstable
I'm young, but I am able

I am Rosemary's granddaughter
The spitting image of my father
And when the day is done my momma's still my biggest fan
Sometimes I'm clueless and I'm clumsy
But I've got friends that love me
And they know where I stand
It's all a part of me
And that's who I am
I am not perfect, and I am not God.
   But I am worthy of love—indeed loved by God
       and so are each and every one of you
           and so is each and everyone alive or dead.

It doesn’t matter what we do or do not achieve in this life.
   We are still held by that love.
   It doesn’t matter where have or have not come from
       We are still held by that love.
           That’s who we are.

We began Lent by recalling Matthew chapter 3
   in which Jesus steps from his baptism to the sound of
       “a voice ... from heaven [saying], this is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

Who is this?
   The Beloved.

Jesus not only hears that voice from heaven, calling him Beloved,
   he believes it.
   He believes himself to be God’s Beloved and he lives the rest of his life like that.

Early in his ministry he called his disciples and the crowds that has been following him
   up a mountain and preached
       Blessed are the poor in spirit.
           Blessed are the ones who mourn.
           Blessed are the meek.
           Blessed are the ones
               who the world may not favor
                   but whom God calls Beloved.
           Blessed are the peacemakers
               for they will be children of God.
Priest and peace activist John Dear claims this is an invitation to the whole human race that
“everyone can be a beloved [child] of the God of peace,
everyone can become a nonviolent peacemaker,
everyone is called “My Beloved” by the God of peace,
everyone can claim their true identity as a [child]
of the God of peace.”

Jesus takes this Beloved identity all the way to the cross, dying, fully rooted in that Beloved identity.
He responds to those who do violence to him
not with violence in return.
He responds to those who revile him
not with equal venom and vengeance.
He forgives them. He speaks with compassion. He never abandons who he is, Beloved,
and when he dies on that cross he sets off a “spiritual explosion”\(^{1}\) that has continued to disarm
millions and to teach what it means to be Beloved children of God across the centuries.

Who is this? Who are you? Who am I? Who are we?
Like Jesus, we too are God’s Beloved children.
We are not Jesus. We are not THE Beloved
but we are God’s Beloved children.
And we too can live and die and rise fully rooted in that Beloved identity.
This is a rootedness in God's love, in who we are,
that will sustains us in the worst of what life has to bring
and leads us to treat other people as God’s Beloved children.
that truly have the power to change the world we live in for the good.

That I believe is the power--That I believe is the identity--That I believe is the love that turns this world
toward the kingdom of God on earth.
May it be so.
Amen.

\(^{1}\) John Dear. *The Nonviolent Life.* (Long Beach, CA: 2013), 20. This is Dear’s very apt term. Much of my thinking for this sermon follows his chapter 1. Read the book to get a fuller dose of this logic.