

PALM SUNDAY, 2019, Luke 19:28-40 Stones Cry Out

This morning, on Palm Sunday along the North Shore of the world's largest fresh water lake, there are a few jarring discords between how we might imagine Palm Sunday should be and how it actually is. First of all---the weather. Does it look like Palm Sunday outside, with Easter just a week away? I'm pretty sure we've had Christmases with less snow on the ground! Liturgically speaking, our hymnal pretends that every Palm Sunday worship begins with a procession that starts outside of the church. The order of service persists in insisting that we will begin our liturgy standing outside and then process into the church and into the sanctuary while singing "All Glory, Laud, and Honor". Well, how often could that realistically take place in northern Minnesota? Can you imagine all the injuries if we were to attempt to cross the snowy, icy, muddy field and road while singing? Just not happening! And to top it off, a careful study of our Gospel lesson today from Luke will reveal that Luke doesn't include the two details about Palm Sunday that are dearest to our hearts: there is no mention of palm branches in Luke, and there is no mention of the cries of "hosanna"! Those details are included in the accounts of Matthew, Mark, and John, but not in Luke, this year's Gospel reading. Well, what's a Palm Sunday without palm branches and cries of "hosanna"? We might feel that the only thing absolutely going right with all Palm Sunday so far is the pancakes that will follow worship! Although strangely, no mention of pancakes is made in any of the Palm Sunday gospel accounts!

However, if we might find ourselves missing the "Hosanna" and the palm branches in Luke's account, we can find ourselves more than compensated by what Luke

does include, that the other Gospels, don't: the final sentences of our lesson today. Only Luke tells us that the Pharisees ask Jesus to tell his followers to pipe down and not draw attention to themselves, and Jesus replies, "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out." That's a powerful verse. And we're going to dig into it for a moment.

Last week our lesson was the beautiful and moving story of Mary of Bethany anointing Christ's feet with an expensive perfume, one which filled the entire room with its fragrance. We smelled our way into the heart of that story through the perfume. This morning we are probably using a different sense to mix in with the crowd in our text-- that of hearing. This is a noisy story, full of sounds! We might imagine it as being somewhat like our coffee hour each Sunday, when we're all talking loudly to one another simultaneously. What would we hear if we were there? The clacking of the donkey's hooves. The excited cries of children. Adults shouting out praise to God. Joyful noise, for sure! Let's briefly review the set up for this noisy occurrence in the Gospel of Luke. It's the week of Passover, a festival that draws Jews from all over to the capital City of Jerusalem and the Temple that stands therein. Accordingly, large and fervent crowds gathered in the City, and there was often political unrest and rebellion that was stirred up amongst those Jews, living as they were under the heavy oppression of Roman rule. In order to quell any thoughts of rebellion, the Romans had taken to putting on a military display of might at the time of the Passover; a pageant, a parade of sorts. Roman officials and soldiers entered from the West gate, riding steeds, carrying weapons, and generally making a statement about their power and strength. Any Jewish peasant fermenting with thoughts of rebellion might look upon that display of might and decide it was easier to

just keep quiet. The Roman characteristics of efficiency, organization, and armed enforcement were there for all to see with no subtlety whatsoever.

In contrast to that, then, is this spontaneous gathering of peasants and children, forming around Jesus. They aren't carrying any weapons, they are bearing no arms, but they are waving palm branches—at least in the other Gospel accounts. There are no imperial officials on impressive steeds, but there is an itinerant carpenter and preacher on a donkey, heading up the parade. This ragtag assortment of people come from the East, rather than the West, and they shout no slogans of war, but rather words of praise. While Luke doesn't report any "hosannas" amongst the cries and shouts, he does tell us this: "the whole multitude began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, saying, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!" Both processions gather around a center of power, and yet they stand in stark contrast to one another; one represents the rule of force, the other the rule of God. And those caught up in the loud celebration surrounding Jesus are making so much noise, that the pharisees become fearful. That Roman parade is near at hand; the last thing they want is for Jesus and his followers to give those Romans a reason to make a show of force to quiet them down. "Teacher, order your disciples to stop", they urgently tell Jesus. Who responds so compellingly: "If these were silent, the stones would shout out."

These words make so vivid an impression, because they are incongruous. Stones don't shout out, do they? Stones don't have living voices! Or do they? As North Shore dwellers, we can consider ourselves well versed in certain natural elements: we know

about water. We know about wind. And we know about rocks and stones. Nevertheless, I felt a need to verify my supposition that rocks aren't alive. I checked. They aren't! Confusion could arise, in that sometimes they grow, we might say, like stalagmites or stalactites, for example; but they aren't considered to be alive, because they don't have cells or hormones or metabolic processes that cause them to grow, they aren't born, they don't eat, and they don't die; these are among the prerequisites for an entity to be considered a live being. They may also move around at times, but only when an external force, like the waves we had last week, cause them to move. And actually, stones not being alive is kind of a good thing, isn't it? Would we really want stones to be living and mobile of their own accord? Don't we hope that mountains or bluffs or rocky shorelines will stay in their places, so that we don't wake up the next morning and discover they've decided to move on? Don't we *need* the massive rocks of buildings to remain where and as they are? Even in the stunning Memorial Garden stone mosaics outside that window, don't we assume and want the rocks to stay put? Yet, if we accept that rocks aren't alive, mobile, or able to vocalize, then how will they shout out for Jesus?

There are countless references to rocks and stones in the Bible. Some of them refer to God; God is our rock, we learn in the Psalms, for example. A metaphor speaking to God's eternal strength, perhaps. Peter is described by Jesus as being the Rock on which the Church will be built in the Gospels. In 2nd Peter we are all invited to be "living stones" as part of the Body of Christ, built around the Cornerstone of Christ himself. Even to this day, stone creates lasting buildings and monuments---think of the grand

structures on the National Mall of granite or marble, or the monuments at Mount Rushmore, carved in stone.

Stones, like so many natural elements, can be used to build up or to tear down. We can, for instance, use stones to build a little pyramid, or we can pick them up and throw them at someone. In fact, stoning was a form of execution, was it not? Jesus stops a group of men from stoning to death a woman caught in adultery. The apostle Stephen is martyred by a crowd that stones him to death while Saul, not yet converted to Christianity, looks on with approval. Stones are associated with death in another way; many of us may be aware of the Jewish tradition of placing stones, rather than flowers, at a graveside. This can seem a little disconcerting, but I found this explanation on a Jewish website online: “Stones have a special character in Judaism. In the Bible, an altar is no more than a pile of stones, but it is on an altar that one offers to God. The stone upon which Abraham takes his son to be sacrificed is considered to be the foundation stone of the world. The most sacred shrine in Judaism, after all, is a pile of stones — the Western Wall. That is why today one rarely sees flowers on the graves in traditional Jewish cemeteries. Instead there are stones, small and large, piled without pattern on the grave, as though a community were being haphazardly built.” And the author points out that while flowers are an apt symbol of the beauty and brevity of life, stones are symbolic of that which lasts, which does not die; they speak off the permanence of memory.

Do we realize, in light of this, that Jesus and that noisy throng walk past a cemetery full of stones as part of their parade on Palm Sunday? There is an ancient Jewish Cemetery on the Mount of Olives, present for at least 1000 years prior to Jesus’

entrance into Jerusalem. Today it contains over 150,000 graves, many of them marked with stones of memory. Those stones on graves may have been among those that Christ declared would shout out praise to God if the crowds were silenced. But can stones shout out?

I know some that do. Let's think again about those mosaic stones in our Memorial Garden that I referenced earlier. For those of you who may be newer, just a review that those mosaics were designed , appropriately, by Laura Stone, and they were actually put together by 50 or more members of our church and community in an amazing process, using north shore beach stones. So those mosaics depicting Creation are, literally, unique in all the world to this place. When I see our mosaics of stone, I feel that those stones are shouting out, are speaking the praise of the God who created them and the entire universe. Those stones are *alive* with the artistry, effort, and sweat equity of many human hands, and with the blessing of Almighty God. Unlikely though it seems, apparently stones can shout out the praise of God. And anyone who has walked along our rocky shores on Lake Superior might feel the same; those rocks praise God.

Jesus declares that the stones will praise God if human voices fall silent. I find that deeply moving. Here's why: The praise of God cannot be silenced. Not by fear, like the fear of the Pharisees that the Romans will further victimize them if they hear their commotion. And not by force; the military power that ancient parade of soldiers represented is long gone, the Roman empire a memory, like all earthly empires that decline eventually. But the praise of God continues. The earth itself praises God, as do

we, with voices and bells and clarinets and organs, and with acts of justice and love.

God's praise cannot be silenced.

I'm thinking that after reflecting on our lesson this morning, I am going to look at stones a little differently, maybe all of Creation a little differently, as those who share with me the capacity and the desire to praise God. I also wonder if we do well to ponder a few questions in response to Christ's words. Are there forces today that yet try to silence the praise of God? Bigotry, greed, fear, racism, the demonic powers that deny God's goodness and humanity's best instincts? Is *our* praise of God sometimes silenced? By doubt? By fear? By forces of one kind or another? We are assured in this lesson that, powerful though those others forces may seem to be, they are like the flowers on the graves that bloom but then waste away. The forces that deny God do not triumph. God is praised, one way or another; God's praise cannot be stilled by any human or supernatural force. However and whenever we are a part of that living chorus of praise, we are blest and we are a part of living out God's good intentions for a world filled with joyful noise. As we enter Holy Week, perhaps we might be aware of the ways in which stones cry out for God, and how we do not allow our voices to be silenced, but join in the song. Amen.

