

Even the Stones Cry Out

Did you notice that our Gospel lesson on this Palm Sunday doesn't mention Palm waving? Also, nobody yelled hosanna when Jesus walked by either. That's right, all of the fun stuff that we normally do, waving around palms and singing hosanna songs, wasn't even in Luke's version of the story. It's kind of like our Christmas pageants where we take all the different gospel accounts, and pull them all together for the dramatic reenactment.

While it is certainly fun every year to wave around palm branches and yell "hosanna", I think it's also important to take a closer look at Luke's more subdued version of the story. Today, let's take some time to read through Luke's account by itself. I think we can learn some interesting lessons about fear and celebration here, if we just take a moment to listen.

The story begins with Jesus just a couple of miles outside of Jerusalem during the season of Passover. Let's not forget that Passover was a tense time in Jerusalem. Scholars remind us that of the various religious celebrations in the Jewish calendar, Passover is the one most likely to be a foundation for rebellion.

Passover was a commemoration of God's liberation of the Jewish people from Egyptian rule. According to Michael Joseph Brown, a biblical scholar from Payne Theological Seminary, God's victory over that one ancient oppressive empire would have definitely been on the minds of the Jews who lived under another oppressive empire, the empire of Rome.

Pontius Pilate and his legions would have been present in Jerusalem during Passover in order to stamp out any sign of revolution. They would have come to keep the peace... but this peace was hardly peaceful. This so-called peace was simply a lack of obvious conflict...a kind of "peace" that only comes through great bloodshed. Scholars note that Pilate would have ridden into town on a warhorse, broad, strong, and fearless, ready to do just what Pilate commands it to do. He would also be surrounded by soldiers bedecked in banners and flags, swords and lances shining in the sun.

Now, let's contrast Pilate's likely entry into town with the description of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. Rather than ride on a stately horse, he asks a couple of his disciples to go borrow a colt, probably from someone he knew. Now, this colt was not a highly trained soldier's horse. No, this colt was young and mostly wild. It had definitely never been ridden before.

Jesus probably would have needed help from his buddies to just get on its back. It might have even been a donkey. Matthew said it was a donkey, but Luke doesn't specify. The presence of a donkey makes this scene even more ridiculous when contrasted with Pilate's grand, intimidating entrance. Jesus, a full grown man, could have been astride a half-wild donkey colt, surrounded by a rag-tag line of peasants, fishermen, prostitutes and tax collectors. Unlike Pilate's soldiers, these folks didn't have banners to wave. All they had was the cloaks off their backs, but they threw them down anyway, trying to make a path for the one they thought would bring true peace.

In Hebrew scripture, in the book of Zechariah, there is a prophecy that says the leader of the Jews will one day enter Jerusalem riding on a donkey. This prophecy definitely seems to be on people's minds as they cheer for Jesus. They call him a king, and say that is coming in the name of God.

We should notice something very important here: Rev. Kathryn Matthews reminds us that while in some of the gospel stories there is a huge crowd of either festival goers or of people drawn to Jesus because he raised Lazarus from the dead, here in Luke, this crowd is smaller and made up of Jesus' disciples. These are the people who know him most well and have been following him for the longest. They cheer for him because they have been healed by his love, have seen his miracles, and heard his wise teaching. These are not fickle people who will turn on him and cry out for his death, as the crowds do in the other versions of this story.

No. These are the people who love him most and at this very moment, they finally get something right. They celebrate Jesus as Jesus has been telling them that God celebrates him. They celebrate Jesus' entry into Jerusalem because they know his peace is categorically different than the so-called peace of the empire.

There are a lot of stories in the book of Luke of celebrations – parties for lost sheep, lost coins, and lost sons. You might remember that some people aren't thrilled about those parties. This time, we have the Pharisees worrying about the celebration. They tell Jesus to tell his disciples to quiet down.

Now, over the years, many people have tried to explain why the Pharisees would try to stop the shouting. Some have suggested that they were motivated by jealousy or hatred of Jesus. Those two explanations might be true (we really can't know what was going on inside their heads), but I have learned that these are not the only possible explanations for their actions.

I am more convinced by the explanations offered by other scholars who remind us that the Pharisees once tried to save Jesus from Herod. It seems reasonable to think that they are once again trying to save him, this time from Pilate. Remember, it is very dangerous to appear to be inciting insurrection in Jerusalem during Passover. They all could be in danger if Pilate heard the people calling Jesus "king". I think it is very likely that these Pharisees are just trying to get Jesus to play it safe and stay under Pilate's radar.

Do you remember what happened when the Pharisees tried to warn Jesus about Herod? They told him that Herod was out to kill him. And Jesus called Herod a petty little fox who should not be feared. Well, this time, when they warned him about Pilate, he said, "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out." Jesus was so certain that the testimony of his disciples needed to be shared and that God would find a way to share it.

If they were not permitted to shout out their hopes and joy, not permitted to speak of the healing they had experienced, God would provide the world with another witness, even if that meant the rocks would cry out in revelation.

As Fred Caddock said, "All of creation comes from God and all of creation is capable of attesting to God's great glory, even the typically speechless stones."

We can see that the peace that Jesus brought was, and is, worthy of celebration, even if the celebration is risky, even if the powers that be will be threatened. Jesus says, Shout out now! Celebrate now, even if you know that death is lurking just around the bend. The very rocks on which we walk just may join you.

Jesus is saying What these people are feeling is too important, the kind of thing that just has to come out regardless of whether or not it makes others uncomfortable. The discomfort of others is often not enough of a reason to keep the silence.

Take a look at the art on the front of your bulletin. It is by Rev. Lauren Wright Pittman.

She says, "When I began this image, I wanted the medium to be the message. Initially I thought I might make a mosaic of stones, however, I was wisely encouraged by my colleagues to try photography and digital collage. I went out into my side yard and picked up rocks, I was underwhelmed by what I was seeing. I had already decided that the rocks were going to be dull and boring. My color enthusiast self was annoyed by the prospect of dusty neutral tones and minimal context.

This was an interesting place to begin my process, considering the text I was working with. I was definitely underestimating what the rocks would have to offer the piece and was preemptively disappointed about the mundane color schemes and textures I would have to work with from my photographs. Gosh, I was wrong. As I downloaded the images and began to edit them, a wide spectrum of color came into view. Most of the hues were entirely shocking and unexpected; periwinkle, magenta, turquoise, mauve, rust, orange, gold and plum, just to name a few. It was as if God was saying to me, "See, even if you turn a blind eye, and your assumptions distract you, the stones will cry out"

In this piece there are three stones bordered in gold to reference the voice of God, the truth that will not be quelled. Down the sides of the image are the Pharisees or the "silencers" in postures of quieting judgment. My hope was for the silencers to be completely visually enveloped and drowned out by the stones. I left the silencers simplified and unfinished to signify that their attempts at diminishing the truth would ultimately and always be in vain.

We who have heard this story before, know that death is actually lurking just around the bend. This celebration at the entrance of the city can seem heartbreaking when we know Jesus' death will be ordered in the midst of the city. We might remember that these very disciples, the ones who seem so joyful and fearless at Jerusalem's gate, will falter in the face of Rome's lethal might on the hill of Golgotha.

As I said, it would be easy to despair, observing this little joyful procession not as a model for the reign of god, but instead, as a harbinger to Jesus' great humiliation on the cross. I hope, though, that despair about the future isn't our only lesson this week. I think we can also learn something about bravery. William Barclay once said that there are two kinds of courage. One is the kind of bravery we exhibit by instinct when we rush to pull a child from in front of an on coming car. This is the bravery of crisis, a bravery that exists only when you don't really have time to think about what you are doing.

There is another kind of bravery, though, a kind of bravery that sees danger from a long way off and has a little more time to think about how to respond. This kind of bravery knows that danger is coming, but does not change course. This bravery is faithful, enduring great danger in order to complete the mission to which one is called. This is the kind of bravery that Jesus shows. And, I think this is the kind of bravery to which Jesus calls the church.

We must be willing to risk going against the powers and principalities of our own time to continue the mission that he began in his time. We must be willing to see the danger far off and stand firm in the Gospel of love and justice to which we are called.

We must be willing to stand up to the death-dealers of racism, sexism, homophobia, and classism and call them out for what they are, actions that are contrary to the gifts Christ offers us in the Gospel. We must also be willing to be like the disciples are here at their most hopeful, throwing down whatever we own to make a way for Christ to enter into the city, shouting out praise to Jesus, the one who will build a heavenly peace with us. I pray that we can be both brave like Jesus and celebratory like his disciples. That is how we can find the hope that we seek in this broken world. That is how we can welcome Christ in. Then we won't need talking stones to offer up our testimony for us.

I want to close with a Poem from Rev. Sarah Speed, entitled, "Even the Stones will Cry Out."

The Pharisees found Jesus;
they said,
"Order your disciples to stop."
It's not the first time
justice was almost silenced. People stood on the
sidelines shouting hosanna which means, "Save us,"
"Save me".
It's not the first time we've heard that cry from the street.
The Pharisees said
stop. They wanted the people
quiet, but some things can't be silenced.
Justice will bubble up,
hope will raise its head,
love will rise to the surface.
Hate and fear will try to drown them out,
but you cannot silence
what was here first,
which was love,
and it was good.
It was so good.
So even the stones will cry out.
Remember that
at your parade.

Justice will bubble up,
hope will raise its head,
love will rise to the surface. Amen.