

Sermon – “Shouting Stones”

Palm Sunday, March 20, 2016

Scripture Readings – Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29 and Luke 19:28-40

Rev. Hannah Dreitcer

Westminster Presbyterian Church

Springfield, Illinois

We are delighted to present a portion of Handel’s *Messiah* under the leadership of Dale Rogers at each worship service this Lent. As we begin Holy Week and remember Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem, we hear “Lift Up Your Heads, O Ye Gates,” taken from Psalm 24, a declaration of God’s triumphant victory and read by many Christians on Palm Sunday.

Our first reading for today, Psalm 118, is another song of praise glorifying God and the many marvelous works of God’s hands. Hear now God’s holy Word.

1 O give thanks to the Lord, for God is good; God’s steadfast love endures forever! 2 Let Israel say, "God’s steadfast love endures forever."

19 Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them and give thanks to the Lord. 20 This is the gate of the Lord; the righteous shall enter through it. 21 I thank you that you have answered me and have become my salvation. 22 The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. 23 This is the Lord’s doing; it is marvelous in our eyes. 24 This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it. 25 Save us, we beseech you, O Lord! O Lord, we beseech you, give us success! 26 Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. We bless you from the house of the Lord. 27 The Lord is God, and God has given us light. Bind the festal procession with branches, up to the horns of the altar. 28 You are my God, and I will give thanks to you; you are my God, I will extol you. 29 O give thanks to the Lord, for God is good, for God’s steadfast love endures forever.

Our second reading today is the account of Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem from the gospel of Luke, chapter 19 verses 28-40. Hear what the Spirit is saying to God’s people.

28 After he had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem. 29 When he had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples, 30 saying, "Go into the village ahead of you, and as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here. 31 If anyone asks you, "Why are you untying it?" just say this, "The Lord needs it." 32 So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them. 33 As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, "Why are you untying the colt?" 34 They said, "The Lord needs it." 35 Then they brought it to Jesus; and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it. 36 As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. 37 As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, 38 saying, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!" 39 Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, order your disciples to stop." 40 He answered, "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out."

The Word of the Lord.

The title of the sermon: *Shouting Stones*

Text: "You are my God, and I will give thanks to you; you are my God, I will extol you." Psalm 118:28

Let us pray: Giver of light, your steadfast love endures forever. Open our hearts to the Blessed One who comes so humbly in your name, and may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

I feel it is only fair to begin with a disclaimer: this is not a short sermon. In fact, this sermon will last seven days. (You can all breathe normally again and let the panic subside.) Today Holy Week begins, and with it, the week-long sermon of which this is part one. The services of Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Easter morning are in fact all one service, spread out over many days as we, uniquely in the church year, tell this story more or less in real time. And today is the prologue to that several day-long service, the introduction, the necessary run-up to the end of the week. Today moves us from standard Lent to premium Lent, as it were, functioning as a transition into a higher gear, into a different energy. The season of Lent is a time of self-reflection, self-examination; a quiet time, of discipline and prayer.

And Holy Week is still a part of Lent, but beginning today we give ourselves over to this story that has been told for two thousand years, and this week we will retrace the confusion, the terror, the grief of those first followers of Christ. We move from the quiet of self-reflection into the high emotion of a momentous week. And as we give ourselves over to this story today, we take a deep breath. To me, Palm Sunday always feels like a last day of sunshine before entering a week of night. After all, we will be back here twice more this week, each time after the sun has set, worshipping in the dark. And in this deep breath, in this pause, I often skip over Palm Sunday itself. After all, it's all just pageantry. We know the drill: donkeys, palm branches, clean children singing Hosannas. The good stuff, the meaty stuff starts once Jesus gets into Jerusalem. He's going to flip over tables! He's going to drive out the moneychangers! He's going to go toe to toe with the powers that be, bold and unafraid! He's going to institute the meal at the heart of our life together. That's the good stuff.

Palm Sunday in my mind is always just donkeys, and palm branches, and clean children singing hosannas. So you can imagine my surprise when I read the text for today, from Luke's gospel, and found exactly none of those things. It's true! Luke's account of Palm Sunday has no palms. Despite what Andrew Lloyd Webber tells us, no one sings Hosannas. The donkey is entirely absent. In fact, the whole story is a bit odd. Jesus instructs his disciples to find a colt, a young horse that has never before been ridden. In Mark's gospel he gives similar instructions, but adds the reassurance to the owner that he will bring the colt back when he's done.

In Luke's account, there is no such promise when the owner protests the apparent theft of his property. Jesus simply commandeers a stranger's animal. His disciples cover the colt with cloaks, and then spread more cloaks on the road. And as Jesus rides this young, untrained horse, the multitude of disciples walk alongside, crying out the deeds of power they have seen, and shouting "Peace in heaven and glory in the highest heaven!"—an echo of the angels' proclamation of Christ's birth. The Pharisees find this absurd parade threatening, and so threaten it. Yet Jesus insists that this noise, this joy, this exuberance, is irrepressible, and even if the disciples were silenced, the very stones would shout out. No palms, no hosannas, no donkey.

In this odd story without the elements I always thought so reliable, I am intrigued by Jesus' insistence on a colt that had never been ridden. I know nothing about horses, so I turned to my resident expert:

Westminster youth elder, Lizzy Olmsted. According to Lizzy, a colt in a crowd like the one Luke describes is very likely to be quite nervous. A colt in a crowd like this would prance around wildly looking for an escape, a chance to run away and be alone. And a colt like this, who has never before been ridden, would be even more frightened. “Put the two together,” Lizzy says, “you’re asking to be bucked off.”

But this is Jesus! Son of God! So I asked about such a colt who had complete trust in its rider. I know of no Biblical evidence as to Jesus’ horsemanship—he is an avid pedestrian throughout the gospels—but he is God incarnate. Surely he inspires deep trust in all living creatures. Should such a colt in such a crowd trust and love its rider, Lizzy told me, best case scenario: the colt will go check on its rider after said rider falls off. Ok. So Jesus doesn’t seem to have fallen off the horse. I do hope the gospels would have included that detail.

But this is no stately procession, no measured parade. Jesus is, by his own insistent choice, riding a nervous and difficult-to-control young animal, one bucking and twitching and prancing and trying to run away. Jesus seems to have chosen the least dignified way possible to enter the city. And Jesus always knows exactly what he is doing. In this ludicrous entrance, Jesus is reenacting and subverting the imperial processions of his time, processions his audience would know well. In fact, Pilate and his legions of soldiers likely rode into Jerusalem in such a procession only days before, an intimidating show of power and might, a symbol of the empire.

Pilate lived in comfort in a palace in Caesarea Mar-i-tima, and yet this week he is in Jerusalem, because it is the Passover. Remember, Passover commemorates the liberation from slavery in Egypt. In many ways Passover celebrates the entire Exodus experience, from escape to establishment of an independent nation. Passover is a holy season celebrating freedom and national identity. And for the Jews of Jesus’ time, this was a freedom desperately longed for, not just ritually remembered. For the Jews of occupied Israel, the Passover spoke to them of the hope in another physical liberation, this time from the oppression of the Roman Empire.

And so Pilate, the governor, comes to Jerusalem. And Pilate very likely entered Jerusalem in triumph, a victorious ruler over a long subdued people. Riding in on a stately, well-trained grown up horse, surrounded by legions of uniformed soldiers, Pilate reminds the people of the power of Rome, and the futility of resistance. And Jesus chooses to stumble in on a confused and nervous colt, surrounded by multitudes of disciples, the great unwashed masses, fisherfolk and tax collectors and beggars and more, a great noisy visual parody of imperial processions, a mockery of imperial might, a protest against imperial power. And his disciples shout out what they have seen, the way this carpenter’s son has walked among the least of the people, healing and feeding and caring: everything Rome in all its power and might has failed to do. The disciples cry out with loud voices!

But on Thursday all voices will fall silent. And unlike in the other gospels, these loud cries of praise are not from a faceless crowd, carried along by the excitement of the day. In Luke’s account, these are Jesus’ disciples, his followers and friends, and their silence will be deafening. Even these, his closest followers, those who have seen all his works, will fall silent before the week is over.

And this is the slight oddity in holding baptisms on Palm Sunday. For in baptism we declare ourselves followers of Christ, and declare our trust in him. But on Palm Sunday, we give ourselves over to this story, and become a part of it. With the crowd we welcome Jesus into Jerusalem with palm branches and hosannas, raising our voices with those who will soon go silent and flee. And in doing so we are confronted with our own failings, our own times of silence, with the ways we cheer Christ on when

everyone else is doing it, when it is easy, but when night falls let fear keep us quiet. There is no blame or accusing in this. In fact, I find it so reassuring that we have this story of those who walked with Christ confronting the reality of their own fear. If even those who knew him and saw his miracles felt their courage flee and their voices fail, what chance do we have!

So it might seem a bit odd to baptize on this day God's Word confronts us with the ways we fail to trust Christ, when we fail to live out the declaration we make in baptism. But perhaps that makes this the perfect day. For as we reflect on our times of fear and silence, it is good to hear again the promises made in baptism—that Christ is our Lord and Savior—that we trust him—that we are forgiven, known, named, and claimed by God, whose steadfast love endures forever, no matter our failings.

Today we tell the story of how Jesus chose to enter Jerusalem, this chaotic and unstable, frantic and frenetic, noisy, threatened and threatening parody procession. Jesus coopts imperial imagery to subvert and undercut imperial power. And his disciples get excited, because they think the week will end in earthly victory, with the overthrow of Rome and Jesus as the new David, seated on a throne in the city of Jerusalem. Because even his disciples don't get that Jesus is not just mocking and undercutting *Roman* power, but **all** earthly power. Christ comes as a king on a bucking, borrowed colt, surrounded by the forgotten and ignored.

And he will not win battles this week. He will be arrested, and executed. And in their terror and confusion and upset expectations the disciples, so loud today, will fall silent. But listen! If these were silent, the stones would shout out. And in seven days the stones WILL shout out. For in seven days the stone will roll away from the tomb. God will do a new thing, a marvelous thing—beyond the chaos of kingly processions, Christ will show us a new image, a new way. And out of the silence of a fearful night, in the quiet of the early morning, a stone will shout out the good news. And it is in that good news we are baptized, that good news in which we declare our trust and our salvation. Let us be disciples and always look for our king, the Christ, walking among the forgotten.

As the confused crowd cries its loud hosannas, let us instead shout out with the stones, and let our lives be the proclamation of the Christ of the empty tomb, the one who came not with soldiers and force and pageantry and pomp, but came in humility and vulnerability, feeding and healing and caring for the least among us.

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!