

Chuck Blaisdell, Sr. Pastor
First Christian Church
Colorado Springs, Colorado
March 20, 2016 Palm Sunday
©2016

Lent with Luke: 5. What's That Sound?

Luke 19:28-40 The Message After saying these things, Jesus headed straight up to Jerusalem. When he got near Bethphage and Bethany at the mountain called Olives, he sent off two of the disciples with instructions: "Go to the village across from you. As soon as you enter, you'll find a colt tethered, one that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it. If anyone says anything, asks, 'What are you doing?' say, 'His Master needs him.'" The two left and found it just as he said. As they were untying the colt, its owners said, "What are you doing untying the colt?" 34 They said, "His Master needs him." They brought the colt to Jesus. Then, throwing their coats on its back, they helped Jesus get on. As he rode, the people gave him a grand welcome, throwing their coats on the street. Right at the crest, where Mount Olives begins its descent, the whole crowd of disciples burst into enthusiastic praise over all the mighty works they had witnessed: Blessed is he who comes, the king in God's name! All's well in heaven! Glory in the high places! Some Pharisees from the crowd told him, "Teacher, get your disciples under control!" But he said, "If they kept quiet, the stones would do it for them, shouting praise." When the city came into view, he wept over it. "If you had only recognized this day, and everything that was good for you!

I have suggested before that sometimes we read our Bibles far too solemnly, assuming that because this is "scripture," we need to be somber in the face of its words. But when we approach all of the Bible that way, we miss the fact that each of the gospel writers were talented and gifted authors not simply human tape recorders writing down "words from above." The story of Jesus' final week of earthly life is told in all four of the gospels, but each writer brings his own gifts to the telling of that story. And Luke's rendering of this story is funny because, as we also saw a few weeks ago, what we discover if we look at little more closely is that Luke is highlighting the **absurdly comic** aspects of this story. What do I mean by that? Well, let's dig a little deeper.

What we know about Roman imperial processions of that day and time was this: the legions would enter a city mounted on horseback (and usually large and terrifying warhorses) or driving chariots with much weaponry on display and wearing uniforms meant to inspire awe. The people in the town would line the parade route, dressed in their very best, but staying very quiet. (They may not have wanted to be there but prudence dictates that you pretend to honor the occupying army). Now, compare that with the story of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. It may look on first blush like an imperial procession but then you begin to notice the absurd differences. First of all, while it is not as clear in Luke's account as in others, Jesus comes riding on a donkey, not a stately stallion. Donkeys are what the poor use for the most menial of farm chores. And the people line the roads not in silence, but with shouting and singing. What's more, they aren't dressed in their best but actually take off their cloaks and line the ground with them. And what you need to know is that in that day, a person's cloak was the only garment he or she wore over their undergarment. So do you begin to see the absurdity in this picture? It would be as if today the President of the United States or the Governor were to motorcade into town, but instead of an armored SUV was scrunched into a zipcar. And there to greet him were thousands of people lining the road singing and shouting, all of them in their underwear. Can you imagine what Monty Python or Jon Oliver or Stephen Colbert could do with this scene!?!

So what is does this portrayal mean? What is the very absurdity of it all meant to teach us? My favorite line in this story is this: "If [my disciples] kept quiet, the stones would do it for them, shouting praise." Or as Andrew Lloyd-Weber's musical "Jesus Christ Superstar" has it (something, by the way, that I always listen to during Holy

Week), “If every tongue were stilled the noise would still continue; the rocks and stones themselves would start to sing.” Now, I don’t know about you, but I have never heard rocks and stones singing. But I **have** mistakenly attributed the voice of God to things where I shouldn’t have. I know that I have sometimes wanted God to be my own personal concierge, my own on-call Uber driver. I know I have sometimes tuned out the voice of a God of unconditional grace and love for all people and instead heard a God who dismisses or demonizes certain folks, certain religions, certain ethnicities, certain orientations, certain races. And I have heard all around me much too often lately those who believe that the voice of God is to be heard in the battle cries of Pilate and his modern-day ilk, or in the subjugation and torture of certain folks, or in those ISIS voices who claim that God approves of rape as a way to recruit and reward its soldiers.¹ Now maybe the stones don’t sing such things to you, but I know that many have mistakenly thought they heard God telling them that something they’d done was unforgivable or that they could never measure up to God’s expectations or that God simply didn’t care for them as much as for some others.

What do all those mistaken voices have in common? Just this: they are about violence and coercion, harshness and even hatred. But that is where we need to return to the absurd procession as Jesus makes his way into Jerusalem. As one writer puts it,

The Roman Empire conquered and ruled with the politics of coercion and violence. Jesus proclaimed a different kind of kingdom. As Jesus rode into

Cf.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/13/world/middleeast/to-maintain-supply-of-sex-slaves-isis-pushes-birth-control.html> and <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/14/world/middleeast/isis-enshrines-a-theology-of-rape.html>

Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, his entrance was a visual sign that the kingdom of God, the reign of God, is in total contrast to the reign of Rome. The gospel that Jesus proclaimed through word and deed was the politics of service, humility, forgiveness and nonviolent love.²

“Service, humility, forgiveness, and love.” That certainly does not sound like so many of the voices we are hearing these days, does it? And yet despite those voices, despite, indeed, the persistent misunderstandings of who Jesus is and who God is – misunderstandings that go back to Jesus’ very disciples themselves – that message of “service, humility, forgiveness, and love” is the sound that we are meant to have in our ears, in our minds, when we are listening for the voice of God. After all, there were so many opportunities that final week in Jerusalem for Jesus to have become a different kind of Savior, a different kind of King, One who indeed resorted to coercion and violence. It was Passover Week, after all, when the city of Jerusalem tripled in population from all the folks from all over the land who came to celebrate. It would have taken very little, just a tiny word from Jesus’ lips, to have set that crowd off in a revolutionary fervor. And yet, that entire ride, until Jesus says what he does about the stones, he remains silent, refusing to give into the adulation and the willingness of that crowd to crown Him a different kind of king.

For you see, that’s what they wanted, and the fact that Jesus refused them, sat silently on that donkey instead of whipping them into a fervor with hateful words, is also the reason that they turned against him just a few days later. We know the story of this

²Jeanne T. Finley, “PROPHETS, POLITICS AND PALM SUNDAY,”
<http://www.ministrymatters.com/all/entry/6752/prophets-politics-and-palm-sunday>

week, how it whipsaws from celebration to sadness, from triumph to tragedy, from “crown him” to “crucify him.” Yet, unlike so many so-called “saviors” in the course of history, Jesus refused every opportunity to destroy, to hate, to hurt. When Peter drew his sword in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus didn’t cheer him on but told him to put away his weapon. When Jesus stood before Pilate and had the opportunity to save Himself, he refused to become an accomplice in the violent ways of a too-often evil empire by accepting its authority over him and pleading for his life.

This week in Jesus’ life is a remarkable story that it is hard for the preacher to know how to tell in any fresh way, but on this morning what strikes me about that story are two things: First, despite the overwhelming opportunity to do so, Jesus never turns away from that path of “service, humility, forgiveness, and love,” but, second, you and I, though, have too often indeed turned away from that path, listening to the wrong voices, mistaking them for Christ’s voice, and thereby betrayed Him. As my wife, the Rev. Barbara Blaisdell puts it,

This is not only Jesus' story. This is not only the disciples' story. This is our story. And we can find ourselves in it every time because at one time or another, we have all done the betraying: betraying each other or ourselves or God. And... we, like the disciples,... also deny. We also mock. We also accuse. Christ challenges us: our ways, our systems, our selfishness.... Like the others in the story, we desert him. We crucify him. We are the ones who fail him in too many ways. We are the ones who put love to death.³

³Rev. Barbara S. Blaisdell, initial draft of Palm Sunday homily, March 20, 2016, preached at First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Tacoma, Washington.

But, my friends, that is not the final news this morning.

No. For the story of Palm Sunday, the story of the betrayal and death, is not the final word this or any day. For in the end, this story is not finally about us, it is not finally about the crowds then or now who would mistakenly hear the voice of God in all the wrong things. No, this story is about God, this story is about where God's voice is truly heard, what those singing stones were really proclaiming. You see, one of the things that you may not know or realize is that this was not the only procession on that day in Jerusalem. There was another one as well that entered the city from the other side of town. It was the procession of the Roman Governor Pilate, come over from his palace in Caesarea,⁴ replete with infantry and chariots and terrible weapons meant to terrorize and subdue that Passover crowd.⁵ And yet his parade, his procession, is hardly remembered at all, is it? Pilate and Herod, possessors of all that might and all that meanness, apparently so powerful and so terrifying, are now but mere footnotes in the story of what God wrought and what Jesus taught in that last week of His life, that week that will end with the glorious news that God's love and that way of "service, humility, forgiveness, and love" is indeed more powerful in the end and that not even betrayal, not even hatred, not even death itself will defeat such love.

It will be a hard week to go through to get to that truth. But that truth will come, it will out, it will win. And the very stones themselves, all creation itself, will sing of that wondrous love. Can you hear it? Can you hear it?

⁴Cf. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pontius_Pilate#Historicity_of_Pilate

⁵Per Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, cited in "PROPHETS, POLITICS AND PALM SUNDAY," Ibid.