

Sunday, March 24, 2024
Psalm 118: 1-2, 19-29; Luke 19:28-40
“Shouting Stones”
The Rev. Joan Withers Priest, preaching

I start by saying, this is going to be a really long sermon. In fact, this sermon is going to last for seven days. Now before you panic, let me explain. Today we focus on Palm Sunday, the parade, Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem but today is also the beginning of Holy Week. The Prayer Service on Tuesday, Communion on Thursday, worship on Good Friday, and the celebration on Easter morning are in fact all one service, spread out over many days, as we uniquely tell this story more or less in real time. Today is the prologue, the introduction, and I urge you, urge you not to run from the Palm Sunday Parade to the Easter Sunday Party, but enter into this weeklong sermon. And relax, this introduction, this ending to our season of Lent, this sermon is actually only four pages!

As one pastor writes, knowing what this week is made up of – the really good stuff, the really hard stuff – I mean, Jesus is 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. (1) The women are going to weep at the base of the cross and return with spices three days later to honor him. So, maybe we should just skip today. I mean it's just donkeys and palm branches and choirs singing hosanna, right? Except, did you listen to Luke's version of the Palm Sunday parade? Here no one sings hosanna, there are no palms, and the donkey isn't even mentioned, it's a colt, a baby horse! It's such an odd scene in Luke that we have to look at it, study it, figure out why Luke throws in - shouting stones.

It is the time of the Passover Festival in Jerusalem, and the streets are filled with people making their way into the city. Everyone who could, went to Jerusalem for this most sacred week of the Jewish year. And while it sounds festive and fun, the people back then were severely oppressed by their leaders, they were poor, struggling and had little hope. They liked the festival sure, but they wanted a parade, they wanted a leader, they wanted a new king. The people back then were excited about Jesus, they followed him because of what they had seen and heard.

They wanted a parade; they needed a parade. And Jesus, knowing the scriptures, asks the disciples to, in this case, secure a colt which had never been ridden, which oddly goes as planned; for there is no disagreement. It almost seems like the owners of the colt were expecting this. Down he comes from the Mount of Olives, down this dusty, dirty road, this full-grown man Jesus, comes, riding on this little colt, who's never been ridden. A colt like this would probably be nervous, or at least wildly looking for an escape. But this colt just trots along as people lay their cloaks on the road and then begin to sing “Blessed is the king, who comes in the name of the Lord”. Or perhaps this colt was scared, bucking and twitching and wanting to run away. The least dignified way possible, to enter the city. Maybe Jesus did know what he was doing. But where are the soldiers? It's Passover and so there are mobs of people and soldiers everywhere. But here we only a few Pharisees who appear at the very end of the account to react negatively and beg Jesus to stop this symbolic drama. Symbolic is right.

And the crowds, including now, many, many followers or disciples of Jesus. The fisherfolk, tax collectors, a noisy visual parody. These folk rolled out the red carpet for this man, as if he was

just as important as the King, laying their cloaks, so he wouldn't have to walk on the dusty roads. The crowds had heard his stories, seen his miracles and knew he was a prophet. They wanted and expected a revolutionary to overthrow the government and be their new king. They wanted a parade, a king on a high horse, majestic, powerful, but Jesus came riding a little horse or donkey, which would have put him not above the people looking down on them but at eye level, an equal. For we know that Jesus could have ridden into the city that day on a mighty horse. He had some connections with the wealthy (think Zacchaeus or Nicodemus). They were looking for a king. They were waiting for Jesus' showdown with the authorities. They wanted that kind of power.

But Jesus came with a very different kind of power. He had the power of God, he had the power to heal the sick, turn water into wine, and feed thousands, he had the power to exercise demons, and raise people from the dead! He wasn't the king they wanted, he was God's kind of king, riding on a humble little scared, fumbling along - colt.

And so I ask you this, if Jesus rode or walked or came into the town of Westerly today, what would he be riding in or on? What would demonstrate to us right away that he associates with the poor, the vulnerable, that he would sacrifice anything, for us to begin to understand God. And – what kind of parade do we need? Would we understand who this prophet really was? What would we be shouting, singing? Would we be shouting for a new leader, a new king so to speak?

Today we need to be reminded, Jesus brought a different kind of parade. Not a majestic parade only for the chosen, but a procession for the people who expected it the least. A joyful celebration of a people united with one message and the message is so simple – love. Love one another. Jesus loved people even when they deserved love the least, when they were least loveable. His steadfast love endures forever. He didn't expect righteousness, he taught it, he demanded it, knowing that love and sacrifice are more fulfilling and powerful than authority and rulers. Jesus wasn't in the king business he was in the transforming business.

We all would rather be saved, Hosanna, fixed, cured but God is in the business of transforming us. Saving us in that way. Because here's the thing. Christianity is not a self-improvement program, it is a transforming program, a transforming program where we are moved to look outward, not inward. To see the needs of others rather than our own. Our existence, our meaning, our well-being, our future is bound up in the existence, meaning, well-being, and future of those around us.

We need this transformation, why? Because it is how we can enter the week ahead. If we really enter this coming Holy Week with all of the confusion and emotions as the disciples did, and really allow those feelings to invade our lives, it might allow us to reflect in a much deeper way what is really going on in this world and in our lives in particular, and where God is moving us right now.

You see if we don't face the struggle that Christ did, if we go from the parade of Palm Sunday to the party of Easter, if we believe life is one long party for those who trust in God, then what happens when the party ends? What happens when your world falls apart? Does faith end because good times have ended? If we don't face the struggle of Jesus, we can't face our own struggle with the confidence and assurance that God is with us, and we are never alone.

Everything about the parade and all of the events of this holy week to come were purposely created or happened because Jesus knew what was to come. And when he is questioned about

his excited disciples, or this excited shouting crowd, he dismisses their worries, whimsically pointing to the loose, jagged stones scattered in the Kidron valley, and saying, "If these disciples or this crowd were silent, these stones would shout out!" There's no stifling our hosannas. Sometimes, the praise within us, the spirit within us, just needs to shout, we can't keep it inside.

That triumphal entry of Jesus wasn't a first century Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade, it was a statement. It was an in-your-face statement to those in power, those looking at him as a heretic, dangerously drawing large crowds and all those miracles. And here's the real surprise in this story. Jesus enters Jerusalem amid the cries which he knows will turn into accusations. He avoids the privilege of his divine state and takes on the form of a servant and dies the death of an outcast. Why does he do this? It's not to show us how messed up we are, we already know that. It was to invite us into an authentic relationship with God and with each other.

Because in the end, Christ does come to save us, hosanna, not from the Romans, not from the authority, but from ourselves, from a world that teaches that what matters most is what I want rather than sees the possibility, that meeting my neighbor's need will also satisfy my own heart's deepest desire. Jesus came to save yes, but also to transform. As one pastor writes, "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, we take a deep breath," because today feels like the last day of sunshine before entering a week of night. (2) And if you cannot come out one of these nights this week, read for one or all of these services, please take the time to read the story, all of it, the pain of it, because only when you have entered into this weeklong sermon can you return next Sunday and truly know the meaning of the resurrection.

In a week's time – another stone will feature in the story of Jesus. A stone that rolls shut to seal him in the tomb. But what was meant to be the last word is only the next-to-last word, and the silent stone, will then shout out and roll away, and will bear witness to those who come looking for the living one in the tomb that the last, most joyful word, belongs to God. But here and now, it's for us to shout with our lips and our lives, "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!" For if we are silent, the stones will have to shout for us.

As Dr. Taylor states, "It's our turn now, our turn, to show the world what God looks like, to show the world what love looks like, to show the world what it looks like to love your enemies, and not only your enemies, but the immigrant, and the alien, the stranger, and the other. Show the world what it looks like to forgive those who trespass against you, to forgive this one not once, not seven times, but seventy times seven times. Show the world." (3) It's our turn to show the world what mercy looks like. To reach out in all of the creative ways we can think of to be Christ to one another. To be a people who shout out with unconditional love to the world, who helps each other and holds each other through their holy weeks of really hard times, so that we can come together next week with the knowledge that we are a resurrection people. We have been transformed, we are saved, we are blessed, we are forgiven, we are loved.

I close with a poem called **Knowing**, by Roddy Hamilton

Did the stones know?

Did the stones know they would soon have to shout 'Hosanna'
because those who had first shouted it would soon be shouting 'Crucify'?

Did Jesus know?

Did Jesus know that those who followed in this fickle crowd
would soon turn their back on the only hope they had?

Did Jesus tell the stones?

Did Jesus tell the stones that they would be needed to shout
for they alone knew the secret of tombstones?

Do we know?

Do we know when to shout and when to hold silence
as the Savior struggles for love and love struggles with him.

If we remain silent in our faith, will the stones speak out for us? Amen.

(1) Dreitcer, The Rev. Hannah. "Shouting Stones" 3/20/2016.

(2) Taylor, The Rev. Dr. Nancy. Players and Protagonists in the Kingdom of God. 3/20/16.