

EVEN THE STONES WILL CRY OUT

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

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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, saying, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!" Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, order your disciples to stop." He answered, "I tell you, if these were silent, even the stones would cry out." Luke 19:37-40

I always think of Palm Sunday as a day of celebration and happiness, a kind of dress rehearsal for Easter. I suppose our 10:00 a.m. run to Washington Square Park with bagpipes adds to that feeling. But as a child, I remember this day as a kind of spring festival, the Sunday before Easter when there was a story about a parade and lots of enthusiasm and excitement in the air, a celebration in the making, a happy day.

Here in New York it seems like there is a parade almost every weekend, the Steuben Day Parade, the Columbus Day Parade, the Puerto Rican Day Parade, the Gay Pride Parade, the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade, even elephants coming down 6th Avenue this week for the Barnum and Bailey Circus Parade with Bello riding high on the lead pachyderm, his hair looking as if he has put his finger in a light socket!

Jerusalem probably saw fewer parades than we do, and I suspect that the one we remember today was barely noticeable in some respects. The streets of the Old City of Jerusalem are so narrow, the gates so cramped. I suspect it was less like a New York parade, and a lot more like an impromptu protest march.

Luke tells us Jesus came to town riding on a donkey; far less impressive than Bello on an elephant. But it wasn't meant to be splashy or polished. It was more like the enacting of a church play hastily thrown together and written by the prophet Zechariah, "Your king comes to you, triumphant and glorious, riding on a donkey,"¹ Zechariah predicted, and Jesus dutifully acted the part. The words the crowds say are scripted too, lifted from Psalm 118, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna, save us, we beseech you."²

Expectations were running high that day among the crowds, but the way Luke tells the story there is a sub theme as well, an under-plot that overlays the events of the day. Coming to Jerusalem is hitting the big time. It's playing your royal flush. It's forcing your agenda on scribes who are skeptical and Pharisees who are critical and a temple crowd who have seen pretenders come and go.

Jerusalem was a political hotbed of those invested in keeping the lid on things, and those ready to blow off that lid. The Jews hated the Romans, and would have liked nothing better than to see them gone from their land. The Romans viewed the Jews with disdain and were interested only in keeping them quiet. They were ruthless in enforcing that famous *Pax Romana* that held the empire together. They were not about to let a small subversive group of political or religious malcontents upset their uneasy peace in Palestine.

So for Jesus to ride into town like King David himself, on the back of a donkey, implying the ironic humility of a king described by Zechariah, and greeted to shouts of welcome and enthusiasm from the rabble, it raised the eyebrows of both the Jews who were vested in appeasing Rome, and the Romans who were vested in keeping the Jews quiet.

No wonder the Pharisees tried to quiet Jesus' followers when they got carried away, throwing their confetti and laying their coats on the ground and waving their palm branches welcoming King Jesus.

"Rabbi, they shouted to him," tell your disciples to shut up. Get them to stop. The world is going after him." But Jesus answered their cries, "I tell you, if these disciples were silent, even the stones would cry out."

There is a certain inexorable quality to what unfolds from this point on. Jesus is a man determined. He has a cause, he becomes a cause, an stoppable cause whose momentary stopping and ultimate unstopability is the salvation of the world. Even the stones cannot keep from crying out that certain truth.

Luke has a certain fascination with stones. At one point, he reports that John the Baptist, in his call for repentance, warns Israel, "Do not say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham."

It's in Luke's gospel that Jesus laments over Jerusalem, the city "that kills prophets and stones those who are sent to it."

And on yet another occasion, when some were admiring the temple and the beautiful stones that adorned it, Jesus warned that there would come a day when not one stone of the temple would be left on top of another. In 70 A.D. that prediction came true.

You will remember that one of the temptations in the wilderness that began these forty days was the temptation to turn stones into bread.

And perhaps the most notable reference to stones in the entire gospel has to do with that stone that was rolled away from the entrance to the tomb where Jesus' body was laid in death, but pushed aside in resurrection.

There, on that Easter morning, the stones cried out with their loudest voice a truth written in the stars, a message borne in the heavens, that love will not submit to hate, and life cannot be held in death's captivity.

Annie Dillard writes a signature essay in her book by the same name, "Teaching a Stone to Talk". She describes the futile effort of a neighbor of hers who is trying to do just that. It's not that the neighbor is possessed of madness, mind you, it's just that there is this obsession that he has that some day the smooth palm sized oval beach cobble will speak. And so he waits and listens and patiently prepares for that day when the stone will make a sound."³

On the day that Jesus rode into Jerusalem, his disciples shouted their welcome, and hollered their praise, and had they been silent, Jesus says, even the stones would have cried out. And I wonder what he meant. Maybe the world, maybe the stones and the mountains, the seas and the stars cry out more than we realize.

Sometimes the world's noise is so deafening we cannot hear the more subtle voices that are also there. The city's sounds, for instance, are so distracting. The sirens on their missions of intervention, rushing to the scenes of holdups and domestic violence, of muggings and accidents. The ambulances speeding their way to people hit by cars, bicyclists careening into taxis, heart attacks at home, strokes silently striking down the unsuspecting, and drug overdoses snatching away our youth.

There are arguments on the street outside my window sometimes, right here on Twelfth Street, so loud, these private conversations. A marriage coming apart right below my casement. Children waiting for the bus impatient at the delay. Where did they learn to complain so loudly? And boom boxes and cars that have audio systems so reverberant they shake the windows and vibrate the tires.

The world has its sounds, its shouts and crying. Far away from here, there are cries of people blown apart by bombs, and maimed by mines, soldiers making daily rounds trying to keep the peace while we as a nation make up our mind as to what we are doing. It is the sound of war that shatters the silence of the night, and turns laughter into tears, and joy into sorrow.

Sometimes the earth is full of wailing, as if all of us were at that wailing wall in Jerusalem, the Temple's foundation, as we bob and weave and pour our hearts out for the ones we love and for this poor world so sorely broken.

Were we silent, I suppose the very stones themselves would cry out, for the blood that has been spilled upon them, for the shattering they have endured, for the cries they have heard from so many.

The earth is mute sometimes, teaching us a lesson if we would only pay attention that it is in silence that we are restored, in peace that we are made whole, that when we listen even the stones have their story to tell.

In a few moments we will hear again the story of how our salvation was wrought, the death of a man who was all goodness and right. All kindness and peace. As he rides into the city today and faces the crowds who will welcome him with hosannas, he knows that at this very moment in some carpenter shop in a military barracks, crossbeams are already being hewn, and nails are already being forged.

The crowd will soon shout "Crucify" and another injustice, the great injustice of this world will be done.

But come next Sunday, after the events of these days, there will come another shout, a joyful expression of resurrection, a truth of which even the stones will speak, when the stone is rolled away from the tomb.

You, weary of war and afraid that peace may never come in this world careening out of control, the stones are crying out.

You who are bright and energetic, who have your life ahead of you, challenged by all that is coming your way, the stones are crying out.

You who are young and unsure of what life will bring, discouraged that whatever it is you are supposed to have you don't enough of it, be still, the stones are crying out.

You who are facing cancer at too young an age, struggling with pain, unsure which is worse, the disease or the treatment, take heart, the stones are crying out.

You who are getting older feeling as if life is passing you by and there is not much joy left in life, the stones... can you hear them?

You who are walking the valley of the shadow of death and feeling alone, you are not alone, the very stones are crying out.

God has been this way, walked our journey, known our life, carried our sorrows, forgiven our failures, faced even the worst that the world can do, and has borne it triumphantly. For our sake, and for our salvation, he rides high today, into the city that will be the death of him, the death of him, but the life of us all.

It is the message that even the stones cry out, that God is love, and God is life, and nothing can separate us from that love, in that love, ever. Just you wait and see.

Hosanna in the highest. Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.

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¹ Zech 9:9

² Ps 118:25-26

³ Annie Dillard, **Teaching a Stone to Talk**, (New York:Harper & Row, 1982) 71-72.