

Contrast Pilate's entry into the city with the description of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. No stately steed for Jesus. He borrows a colt, young, never ridden, and mostly wild. This was not a highly trained soldier's horse. It might have even been a donkey (Matthew said it was...Luke doesn't specify). The presence of a donkey makes this scene even more outlandish when contrasted with the grand spectacle of Pilate's entrance. Jesus, a full-grown man, astride a half-wild donkey colt, surrounded by a rag-tag line of peasants, fisherman, 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, which they threw them down to make a path for the one they thought would bring true peace.

In the book of Zechariah, there is a prophecy that says the king of the Jews will enter Jerusalem riding on a donkey (9:9). This prophecy seems to be on people's minds as they welcome Jesus. They call him a king and say that he is coming in the name of the Lord. In some of the gospel accounts of Palm Sunday there is a huge crowd of festival goers, but here in Luke, the crowd is smaller and made up solely of Jesus' disciples (see Kathryn Matthews). These are the people who know him best and who have followed him the longest. They cheer for him because they've experienced his healing love, witnessed 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 other versions of this story. They celebrate Jesus' entry into Jerusalem because they know his peace is categorically different than the so-called peace of the empire.

All this fuss makes the Pharisees nervous. They demand that Jesus tell his disciples to quiet down. Scholars offer explanations as to why the Pharisees would try to stop the shouting. Some suggest that the Pharisees were jealous of Jesus. Others suggest they hated him for his teachings which contradicted their own. A few scholars claim that just as the Pharisees once tried to save Jesus from Herod (Luke 13:31-33), they are now trying to save him from Pilate. Remember, it was very dangerous to incite insurrection in Jerusalem during Passover. The Pharisees could be in danger of guilt by association if Pilate heard the people calling Jesus their "king." I think it is very likely that these Pharisees are just trying to get Jesus to play it safe and fly under Pilate's radar.

When the Pharisees warn Jesus about Pilate, he replies, *"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, that he was confident God would find a way to share it. If the disciples fell

silent, failed to give witness to their hopes and joy, and did not speak of the transformation they experienced, God would provide the world with other witnesses, even if that meant the rocks would cry out in revelation. All of creation comes from God and all of creation can attest to God's great glory, even the typically speechless stones (Fred Craddock). The peace that Jesus brought, the new reign he inaugurated, was, and is, worthy of celebration, even if the celebration is risky and threatens the powers-that-be. 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 may join you."

We've heard this story before. We know how it ends. Death is lurking just around the bend for Jesus. This Palm Sunday celebration is heartbreaking because we know Jesus' death will come in a few short days. We remember, too, 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. It would be easy to despair, observing this joyful procession, not as a model for the reign of God, but as a harbinger to Jesus' great humiliation on the cross. Despair about the future is real, but it isn't the only lesson for us this week. 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 peril that lies ahead but does not change course. This bravery is faithful, enduring the danger in order to complete the mission to which one is called. This is the kind of bravery that Jesus exhibits. 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 Jesus began in his. We must be willing to see the danger far off and stand firm in Christ's Gospel of love and justice, grace and mercy to which we are called.

We must be willing to stand up to the death-dealers of racism, prejudice, and classism. We must call them out for what they are: these are actions which are contrary to the gifts

Christ offers us in the Gospel. We must also be willing to be like the disciples, here at their most hopeful, throwing down whatever we own to make a way for Jesus to enter our 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 truly welcome Jesus. If we can do this, we won't need talking stones to offer testimony for us.

The Palm Sunday story is a reminder to stand tall in the face of adversity, to cry out against injustice, and to shout "Hosanna!" for Christ is come, God's reign begun, and the Spirit is among us transforming the world. Unlike the disciples, we really do know how this story ends: Jesus died to take away the sins of the world and rose again defeating death so that we might have new and eternal life, now and later with God. This is cause for great hope and even greater joy. Even the rocks know this! Hosanna! Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord! Amen.

Prayer: Gracious God, as we stand at the gates of the city, give us grace to recognize the king we proclaim, and courage to be a part of your kingdom - even when it goes against our ways and the ways of the world, even when it leads us where we do not want to go. Empower us to free ourselves from the tempting alternatives of power and wealth and status. Embolden us to live lives of thanksgiving and praise. Blessed is the king who comes in the name of Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest heaven! In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Sources:

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## Talking Stones

Palm Sunday, April 14, 2019

Luke 19:28-40

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Palm Sunday is traditionally a day for fun and rejoicing. We wave palm fronds and shout "Hosanna!" We sing upbeat songs and the kids have a parade to commemorate Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. But did you notice that Luke's account of Palm Sunday doesn't mention palm-waving? Nobody yelled "hosanna" when Jesus walked by, either. That's right! All the fun stuff we did today, waving palms and singing hosanna, isn't in Luke's version of the story. Our Palm Sunday celebrations are an amalgamation of different Gospel accounts, thrown together for maximum dramatic effect. While it is certainly fun to wave palm fronds and yell "hosanna," it's also important to take a closer look at Luke's more subdued version of the story.

The story begins at Passover with Jesus just a couple of miles outside of Jerusalem. Passover was a tense time in Jerusalem. Of all the religious celebrations in the Jewish calendar, Passover was the one most likely to provoke rebellion. Passover commemorated God's liberation of the Jewish people from slavery in Egypt. The liberation of God's people was on the minds of the Jews who lived under another oppressive empire, the empire of Rome. Pontius Pilate and his legions came to Jerusalem during Passover to stamp out any sign of revolution. They claimed to come to keep the peace...but this peace was hardly peaceful. This peace was simply a lack of overt conflict...a kind of "peace" that only comes through fear, intimidation, and great bloodshed.

Pilate rode into town on a warhorse, a strong animal with broad shoulders, fearless, and ready to do just what Pilate commanded it to do. Pilate also brought legions of soldiers bedecked with banners and flags, swords and lances shining in the sun. Pilate's presence signified the power of Rome. He was the visual representative of the emperor's might-makes-right policy. Everyone knew you don't mess with the Romans!