

“IF THE STONES SHOUT OUT!”

Psalm 118:14-29; Luke 19:28-40

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With palm branches for every worshiper, upbeat music and liturgical dance, Palm Sunday is one of the most festive days of the Christian year. Even the most liturgically unsophisticated person on the street knows that today is a day of joy and celebration as churches around the world commemorate Jesus' historic ride into Jerusalem. While scholars differ over the size of that first Palm Sunday parade of long ago and its impact upon the city of Jerusalem, it is clear from a careful reading of the Gospel story that this was more than just a leisurely ride by Jesus on the back of a donkey. Jesus is making political statement. He is challenging the authority of the Jewish leaders, and he is challenging the authority of Rome. While Palm Sunday is one of the most festive Sundays of the year, it is also one of the most “political.” For Jesus is asking the first century inhabitants of Jerusalem and the 21st century residents of Cleveland: **Who rules your life?** Who is in charge here? Who will we follow, not only today, not only this Holy Week, but each and every day of our lives?

Last Sunday night at the Upward Basketball Celebration Dinner, over 300 people heard the challenge of the Gospel. Then, each man, each woman, each boy and girl was asked to pray that Jesus would come into our hearts and take charge of our lives. Many of the children and youth prayed that prayer for the first time. I trust it will not be the last time. For every day we must decide whether or not we will follow Jesus in all the myriad of choices and challenges that make up our lives.

The parade started a little way from town, but as Jesus got closer to Jerusalem, more and more people saw the commotion and joined the celebration. You could feel the excitement in the air. For nearly three years, Jesus had been talking about the Kingdom of God. Now it appeared he was going to take charge and take control of the situation. Luke tells us that the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God and they began to say, “*Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!*”

Did someone say “king?” The Pharisees perked up their ears. They had worked out an amiable relationship with the Roman occupational forces and certainly didn't want this rabble rouser upsetting their applecart. The Roman soldiers undoubtedly were not far away, ready to squelch any hint of insurrection. They were used to putting down rebellions --- by force, if necessary. Scholars tell us that during Jesus' earthly life it is estimated that there were at least sixty armed rebellions against the Roman occupational forces! People waving palm branches and shouting was a threat not only to the delicate arrangement between the Jewish officials and the Roman Empire, it was potentially a threat to Rome itself, especially since people were shouting that there was a new king in town! And so the Pharisees, sensing a threat to the status

quo and perceiving possible blasphemy on the part of Jesus and his followers, stop the parade in its tracks and say, *“Teacher, order your disciples to stop!”*

Hearing this demand, Jesus replies, *“I tell you, if I told these people to be quiet, and they were silent, the very stones would shout out!”* Don’t you suppose that when Jesus said “If these were silent, the stones would shout out,” the whole crowd erupted in a great explosion of whistling and applause and sorts of noise?! There’s something about Jesus that can make even a rock want to shout!

I love cartoon animation where inanimate objects are made to speak. Walt Disney can make, not only animals and birds talk, but also spoons and forks and anything else he takes a notion to put a mouth on! He can give most anything a voice. Disney wasn’t the first to cause inanimate objects to speak. Way back in the Old Testament, the Psalmist talks about trees clapping their hands for joy, hills that skip and dance, ocean waves that cry out, and mountains that shout. The Bible teaches that everything that God created can sing --- even stones and rocks!

Every time I take a walk in the woods I am impressed by how loud nature is. I have never understood folks who go out into the wilderness seeking some “peace and quiet.” Nature is alive with sound! Long before daylight, the creatures begin calling to one another. Throughout the night, there are various cries, rustling and scuttling in the woods. We are told that even the deep waters of the oceans are alive with all sorts of sounds. The Bible tells us that *“the heavens are telling the glory of God.”* God made everything in the universe to sing, to speak up, to testify to God’s power and majesty.

Those who want to keep a lid on things, those who have a stake in the status quo and the present order, always try to keep things quiet. They don’t like noise and commotion. *“Tell your disciples to stop!”* When Jesus entered Jerusalem, he was entering the town as a king, a new ruler and an adversary who threatened the throne. The children, as well as the powerless in that society, the least and the lowest began to praise and shout, “Hosanna,” something that really threatened the powers that be. “Be quiet!” said the authorities. Jesus replies, *“If you silence them, even the stones will shout out!”*

Can rocks speak? Can stones testify? Last summer when I was in Boston to speak for the National Preaching Series at Boston University, our family walked the historic Freedom Trail. On that red brick trail through the city of Boston are several cemeteries dating back to pre-revolutionary times. In the famous Old Granary Burial Ground on the Boston Common are buried such notables as Samuel Adams, Paul Revere and other heroes of our nation’s past, including Mother Goose. Overlooking the Boston harbor, across from Old North Church is the Copp’s Hill Burial Ground in which there are buried some of the less famous. But the tombstones in that cemetery also have a story to tell. We noted how young many of the people in that burial ground were when they died; how many children; how many women who died in childbirth. Those stones spoke to us that afternoon, reminding us that life in the days of colonial America was difficult, that disease claimed far more victims than it does today. Rarely did we see a stone marking the life of someone who was more than 50 or 60 years old. I repeat, the stones in that cemetery spoke to us that hot August afternoon.

We have all heard the saying, “If these walls could talk!” I submit that they do! These walls speak to us. These stones have a story to tell. This building proclaims to every person who drives or walks or rides the bus down Lee Road that there were some people here in the 1920’s who loved God and who gave generously and sacrificially to build a great cathedral in Cleveland Heights. These stones speak of permanence. The walls are 18 inches thick! The

massive doors are 6 inches thick! The windows speak to us as well. They tell a story --- each of them --- about the Bible, about people of faith.

The little paving stones of our parking lots tell a story, too! Did you know that? I have had people say, “Anytime of the day, your parking lot is always full! What is going on at your church?” This winter with basketball and all our other activities, finding a parking space became a problem. Yes, these parking lots shout out that something wonderful is happening at Church of the Saviour!

If we are silent, the very stones will tell the people of the community that there is an active Christian congregation on Lee Road between Bradford and Monmouth. When dirt started moving for the new addition, again, the earth itself began to proclaim the glory of God. Our new space with its state of the art facilities for children and its warm, open, inspiring Great Hall sends a message all its own. From the street one can see our playground on the roof, reminding everyone who passes by that we value children here. Indeed, we not only want to provide for the children of this community, we want them to be safe and secure as they play together.

The cornerstone of the original building came from the same quarry near Jerusalem where the stones for Solomon’s Temple were cut. Did you know that? The cornerstone for the new addition is much more modest. But the chief cornerstone is not in this building or that one. The chief cornerstone is Jesus Christ himself, the stone that the builders rejected (Psalm 118:22). This “stone” has been shouting out, calling, beckoning, since he first walked those dusty roads of Galilee in the first century. He has been attracting followers ever since the folks lined the streets of Jerusalem on the first Palm Sunday. Are we listening? Are we following? Or are we listening instead to those voices who are ordering his disciples to stop?

My friends, we face a political situation today much the same as the disciples of Jesus faced when the Pharisees took offense long ago. There are those who would like us to stop witnessing, stop trying to be change agents in the world, stop asking the question, “What would Jesus do?” They would like to see us religious folks be quiet, behave ourselves, mind our own business. But if we listen to this rock, this Jesus, this cornerstone, we really can’t do that. That’s why I say that Palm Sunday is one of the most political Sundays of the year. Because we simply can’t follow Jesus and keep quiet! If we do, the very stones will shout out!

Jesus tells us to love God, to love one another, to love the stranger in our midst, and to love our enemies. Jesus did not ask us to judge one another, to persecute one another, to exploit one another, to indoctrinate one another, to ignore, oppress, harass or kill one another --- even in God’s name. Jesus told us to do one thing: love one another.

The worldly structures of power (political, social, economic) have a strong investment in stopping us from loving one another because love leads to all kinds of crazy choices like not participating in the accumulation of material things that exploit vulnerable workers, leaving huge carbon footprints and toxic waste, and using resources such as clean water and open land for nonessentials. Love leads us to speak up for those who cannot speak on their own behalf. Love causes us to care for the most vulnerable among us. In other words, love changes the world as we know it. Is it any wonder that the powers that be cry out, “Jesus, order your disciples to stop!”?

Today is more than just a day when we remember an historical event. Today is more than a celebration. Palm Sunday forces us to face the confrontation in our hearts between our attachment to the world and our decision to be disciples of the one who calls us --- you and me -- - to be love incarnate. Today is the day when we are called to pay attention to the subliminal demands of the culture around us: “*Teacher, order your disciples to stop!*” Today is the day on

which we choose whether or not we will, in fact, stop, or whether we will keep walking the way of the cross with Jesus who refuses to stop and who refuses to stop us, knowing that God's truth will ultimately prevail. If we don't take a stand, the very stones will proclaim God's love.

Yes, these stones have a message for us today. I can almost hear them saying, "Follow Jesus. Follow Jesus." Follow him through Jerusalem to the cross and to the tomb and to the new life, the resurrection life that he is offering to you and to me and to all humanity. May we listen to the stones, and follow Jesus, this day and every day.

Prayer: O God, just as you came to Jerusalem long ago, so we sense you are coming into our city today with your message of love. Help us to heed your call and to follow you, not just on Palm Sunday, but even on Thursday and Friday and Saturday when the going gets rough. Let us not heed the voices of our time commanding us to be quiet, but shout the glad news of salvation, knowing that it may lead us to the cross. This we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

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