

## “Even the Stones Will Cry Out”

It was Palm Sunday and little Johnny had to stay home with grandma because he had a sore throat. When the family returned home from church, the older brother, Jimmy, was holding a palm branch. When Johnny asked what it was for his brother told him, “People held these over Jesus’ head as he came by.” “Wouldn’t you know it,” Johnny fumed, “the ONE Sunday I don’t go to church and Jesus shows up!”

Well, Jesus has definitely shown up today, as evidenced in OUR palm branches this morning, although not in quite the same way or for the same reason he entered the city of Jerusalem over 2000 years ago. Even so, today is a day to celebrate! And a close look at Scripture will help us see why and also what this story means for us today!

I chose Luke’s account of Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem because it is different from the other Gospel stories. Matthew and Mark tell us that the *whole crowd* heralds Jesus as king as he rides into town on the back of a donkey. And we know that they shouted “Hosanna!” In Hebrew, the word means “save, we pray!” I can’t help but wonder if the people of that day really *knew* what they were shouting. It seems hard to believe that they could have, when many of them would be shouting “Crucify Him!” only five days later.

However, as **Luke** tells the story, it is only Jesus’ *followers* who are there to greet him. Luke says, “the whole multitude of *disciples* began to praise God.” To me this implies that, since it was only Jesus’ followers who heralded him, they may not have been a part of the crowd that turned on him later in the week. And that thought gives me a little more faith in Jesus’ friends.

And only Luke reports the remarks of the Pharisees, Jesus' own people, but also some of his most public and verbal critics. Since the Pharisees are usually picking an argument with Jesus, it is no wonder that they ask him to silence his friends. But you would think that, just this once, they couldn't let Jesus have his day in the sun.

But when I thought about it, the Pharisees were probably concerned for their own hides. Jesus was causing more and more political disturbances. Maybe they didn't want the people to cause an uproar and upset the Romans, which would have had negative consequences for them as leaders of the Jews. On the other hand, being a positive person who tries to see the glass half full, I would like to think that the Pharisees were genuinely concerned for Jesus' safety. Since he was a Jew by birth, maybe they were trying to protect him. But even I will admit that this is an unlikely scenario. So it is more believable that they were simply continuing to act out of their disbelief that a carpenter's son from Nazareth could actually be their long awaited Messiah.

But the real reason that I chose this version of the Palm Sunday event is because of Jesus' reply. He said, "If my disciples are silent then even the stones will cry out!" At first read, the implications of this statement seemed so obvious I just skimmed over it without a thought. But the Holy Spirit kept sending me back there and I knew it was for a reason. What DID Jesus mean by this hyperbole?

The obvious reason for this statement and the one that first came to mind is that Jesus is calling US to be his stones. He is saying that, even if his disciples desert him, betray him and won't help him carry the cross that he knows he must bear in the days to come, he has faith that we, as his future followers, will still shout "Hosanna!" when he enters our lives. Jesus Christ, save us! Jesus must have had hope in his heart that even if

his friends betrayed him THAT day, years later his disciples would still remember who we are and to whom we belong and take the time to praise him for God's presence in our lives.

Jesus may have been remembering Jeremiah, the Old Testament prophet whose words we just heard. Jeremiah came into his profession very unwillingly. When God called him to be a prophet he replied, "Sorry God, but I'm not really interested in THAT job!" God's answer was, "Before I formed you in your mother's womb, I appointed you to be a prophet to the nations." In other words, "Tough buddy, you're stuck with it!"

Jeremiah had a very rough time of it on the job. In fact, hardly anyone believed him or listened to what he had to say. Ultimately, he was so tortured, mistrusted and ridiculed in his work that he became known as the "weeping prophet". Finally, tired of all the abuse that his call to prophecy brought him, he decided that he had had enough and declared to the Lord, "I will not mention you or speak your name any more." But as hard as Jeremiah tried to live up to his threat, he found that he could not keep silent about his devotion to God and declared in our Scripture this morning, "There is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I am weary with holding it in and I cannot!"

Perhaps as Jesus entered Jerusalem and heard the complaints of the Pharisees and saw into the future that the welcome cries would soon turn to demands for his death, he was remembering Jeremiah. And perhaps Jesus was holding on to the belief that, those of us whose lives have really been touched by our relationship with him will not be able to keep silent any more than Jeremiah could.

Another thought that I had was that Jesus was referring to the literal stones of the earth. Now we all know that stones are inanimate objects. But if the stones represent the

earth, maybe Jesus meant that the very creation will shout that the King of the World has come to ride among us in glory. This is an easy analogy to follow in spring when everything is on the verge of budding. Even with the nuisance of the pollen, we DO live in a beautiful part of the world and, for me, it only takes one glance out of the window to be reminded of the majesty and power of my King.

And creation speaks to us all the time. When we live through the gray days of winter, we too hold on to the promise of spring. When we are tired of the rainy days that often accompany spring, we can believe that the sun will shine again because we know it is the way that God ordered the earth.

I was reminded of this beautiful plan that God has for creation when I recalled the story behind a single plant on the coffee table in our den. When I was an Interim minister at Pickens Presbyterian, the secretary there gave me a very small peace lily – just one bloom with about four stalks of green leaves in a little plastic square container. Evidently my reputation for being a plant killer had not traveled all the way to Pickens County.

Because of previous experiences with my black thumb, I was really worried about the inevitable death which was to follow. So I consulted my mother, who can keep Christmas cactuses blooming all year long. She informed me that I just didn't give my plants enough attention and that maybe I should name my plant and talk to it a little. Seriously? Sometimes I am too busy to talk to my husband. However, I dutifully named her Lily and spoke to her when she started to lie down on the table so I could douse her quickly before anyone noticed. And it worked because during the year she even grew and I had to move her to a bigger pot.

Ultimately Pickens called a pastor and I took Lily to her new home, my other office at Presbyterian Community. There, I promptly forgot about her, even though she was at eye level, right in front of me, when I sat at my desk.

Thank goodness for Jody. Jody is a housekeeper at Presbyterian Community who loves all things living – people, animals and plants. She has 12 dogs and as many bird feeders surrounding her trailer and about a hundred plants inside. She finally got so tired of asking me when I was going to "water the baby" that she made it her personal mission to keep Lily alive. But one week, Jody went on vacation!

The day of her return, the Lord brought my full attention to Lily who had wilted down the sides of the pot like the brim of a floppy sun bonnet. Trying to cover up my crime as quickly as possible, I carried the plant like a wounded soldier to the ladies room and practically drowned the poor thing. But do you know that, within the hour and before Jody got around to check on her, the plant had experienced resurrection and I dodged a severe scolding.

The near death experience of my much loved plant, which now lives on our coffee table, reminds me that God has a plan for all creation. And maybe that's what Jesus meant when he said, "Even the stones will shout out!" Because I don't really know how anyone can drive through this part of the country and think that all of this beauty just happened. Maybe Jesus knew that, even if the people let him down, the rest of God's world would always be sounding out with God's glory!

But finally the Holy Spirit brought me this thought: since Jesus IS God and knew what he was about to face in the time that we now call Holy Week, what if He really

meant the STONE will shout out. Of course I mean THE stone. The stone that blocked the entrance to the tomb.

I have always loved Lent more than Advent, although I suspect I am in the minority. One reason is that it is devoid of all the commercialism that has become associated with Christ's birth. And in the years when I am REALLY intentional about observing the week leading up to Easter, the joy of the empty tomb means so much more to me.

Many of you have heard me say, a few years ago I was privileged to travel to the Holy Land with my husband and 30 other friends from this Presbytery. It was such a life-changing experience that I just can't read about Jesus' earthly time without being transported there myself. One sunny morning, we actually walked down the hill that Jesus descended when he rode into Jerusalem on that donkey, and followed what is now called the Via Dolorosa, or way of suffering that highlights the places Jesus visited on his last week on earth.

We sat in the Garden of Gethsemane next to the same ancient olive trees where Jesus' wept and asked God to take the cup away. What a gift for me to be still be able to see these places so vividly. Being in the Holy Land was like receiving a new Bible, enabling me to better understand the implication behind the words that Jesus cried on the cross. And his suffering and death are an even more powerful reminder of the depth of God's love for me. But even if you have never been there, I believe the Holy Spirit will bless you with the same joy if you can spend time this week visiting the Scriptures in a quiet place each day with the hope of experiencing Holy Week in our own way.

You see, I think too many of us are in a hurry, to get from one parade to the next. We want to shout “Hosanna” with one breath and then “He is Risen!” in the very next. In a way, we want to hurry the stones. But THE stone did not cry out until Easter Morning! And so perhaps this is the ONE week in which we should be silent.

Because indeed, we are different from those disciples who accompanied Jesus that day. As they waved their palm braches in triumph, they had no idea what was about to unfold. And if we take the slow but painful stroll through the coming week, we can really feel the pain, the despair, the fear and the loss that they felt on Good Friday. It may even help us understand why few of them really *could* be stones who cried out, even on that first Easter Day.

But friends, you and I are Easter people who live on THIS SIDE OF THE TOMB! And because we have the sure and certain hope that Christ’s early disciples could not grasp, we understand when THE stone cries out the Good News, it will tell us all that death could not consume our Lord.

So it is my prayer that we will not only follow Jesus in his procession into Jerusalem but also down the Via Dolorosa and up the hill of Calvary. And when we do, we will have an even greater understanding of the stone when it shouts, “I have been rolled away by the one who conquered death on your behalf!” And then and ONLY THEN may we all cry out Hosanna! Hallelujah! Amen!

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April 9, 2017