

“The Stones Would Shout”
a sermon by Kyndall Rae Rothaus
concerning Luke 19:28-40
for Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco
on April 14, 2019

This past week at Mt. Carmel Spiritual Centre in Niagara Falls, Canada, there was one icon hanging in my room, and it happened to be an icon of Jesus’ procession into Jerusalem riding on a donkey. I was struck by how noisy the scene was: people everywhere laying coats on the ground for Jesus. What stood out to me most were the children, some of whom were climbing up into the trees to retrieve palm branches. I guess I’d never thought about where they got the branches. At Lake Shore we just order ours. But for Jesus someone had to climb the trees, and they needed able-bodied limbs and knees, and so in the icon it was children climbing up to get the palms for themselves and the grown-ups. Without the enthusiasm of children, could the day have possibly been the same? I’m also imagining the spontaneity of it all. One person—one child, perhaps—had the idea to wave a palm branch, and it caught on, spreading through the masses. Have you ever been a part of a large group where something catches on—a song, wave, something—and suddenly everyone is caught up in the moment? There is a palpable energy to moments like that.

Of course, there are always some people in every crowd who hold back and do not participate, who miss out on the power of belonging to the group. In Jesus’ case it is the Pharisees. They don’t just sit out; they try to stop it. “Jesus, order your disciples to stop!” they say, and it is easy enough to understand why. The people are hollering out that Jesus is king, which is a dangerous, scandalous thing to proclaim. Meanwhile, on the other side of town, there was another procession taking place—Pilate’s military procession. Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem was more than an ancient Macy’s parade; it was quite political. It was protest. It was a declaration of God as king.

I am reminded of this past week’s event at Baylor. On one part of campus there was a speech by an anti-LGBTQ polarizing “religious” figure. On another part of campus was a Love Feast proclaiming a very different kind of God. That was like a small-scale version of what was happening that day we now refer to as—perhaps too innocuously—Palm Sunday.

My favorite part of the story is Jesus’ reply to the Pharisees after they tell him to shut it all down. He answers, “If these were silent, the stones would shout out.” I am reminded of the prophet Habakkuk, who said in response to injustice in his own day:

*“Woe to him who builds his house
by unjust gain,
setting his nest on high
to escape the clutches of ruin!
You have plotted the ruin
of many peoples,
shaming your own house,*

*forfeiting your own life.
The stones of the wall
will cry out,
and the beams of the woodwork
will echo it.”¹*

The stones will cry, he said, and the beams will echo it! These seemingly inanimate objects are alive with protest. I am reminded of Cain and Abel. How Cain murders Abel, but then acts as if he doesn't know where his brother has gone: “Am I my brother's keeper?” But God replies:

*“Listen:
your brother's blood
cries out
(to me!)
from the ground
the ground which gaped
wide its mouth
to swallow the blood of your brother
which dripped from your hands”²*

The very ground has a mouth, and on behalf of Abel, the ground cries out. I am reminded how Jesus chooses to ride in on a donkey, and how in biblical lore, the donkey is an animal known to speak up when needed.³ How in the book of Numbers, Balaam's donkey first communicates silently, then when Balaam doesn't get it, the donkey literally talks out loud to stop Balaam from going down a reckless path. I am reminded that creation itself is in cahoots with its Creator, crying loudly on behalf of the wronged. As the Apostle Paul puts it, “the whole earth has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth.”⁴ I am reminded that even if we are silent, God's good earth is not.

One gets the eerie sense that there is at work in the world an underlying current of truth and justice that works to restore all things, a current that cannot be silenced for this is God's world. No matter who thwarts the way of truth and justice and kindness, *something* will rise up in dissent, because God created a world that cannot be mute in the face of injustice. When human beings fall silent, other voices will come out from the woodwork to speak the truth, to decry cruelty and oppression. Stones, wood, dirt, blood—all around us the earth erupts in protest. We may remain deaf and oblivious, but God hears every sound, and when earth rages, the heavens are moved.

Perhaps Jesus rides in on a donkey as a way to say to the downtrodden and the oppressed who pressed in around him, “I belong with you.” He rode in on a lowly donkey so the lowly would know, *Here is a guy who wants to be with us*. These were the people without a voice, the silenced and the shushed. And for one short day in history, their voices rang out loud and clear

¹ Habakkuk 2:9-11

² My paraphrase of Genesis 4:10, though I followed pretty closely to the text.

³ Numbers 22:21-39.

⁴ Romans 8:22.

and defiant, “Hosanna! Hosanna! Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!” This was their king, and they were proud to proclaim it.

Jesus had been hearing things long before the masses spoke up; that is, since the beginning of violence, Jesus had heard the creaking and cracking of the earth under the weight of injustice. If the religious leaders had paid much attention to old Habakkuk, they would have been less perplexed by Jesus’ baffling belief in the rocks, but as it were, they scratched their heads and walked away not knowing what Jesus knew: that the people crying “Hosanna! Our King Comes!” were not singing a new song, but were joining the echo of the woodbeams, entering the chorus of the stones and the ground and Abel’s blood, adding their voices to the choir that has been singing the truth since the world began.

And it is on the wave of this melody that Jesus will dismount his donkey, stride into the temple, and drive out the money-changers.⁵ I imagine he walked into that place with the sounds of his people and the songs of the stones reverberating in his ears, begging him to set things right and confront every Cain.

There is an infectious energy to the Palm procession and the temple purging that feels like it cannot be stopped. The people have found their voices; their leader has unloosed his fervor. The next thing that happens is Jesus starts teaching in the temple every day, and the chief priests and leaders try to kill him, but “they could not find any way to do it, because all the people hung on his words.”⁶ There’s no stopping him, no shutting down the people who follow him, no silencing of the stones. Only, those of us who know the rest of the story know to feel a little wary of all this raging success . . .

In just a few short days, Jesus will be captured by the soldiers and stand his trial, and the adoring crowd will go back to being who they were before: silenced slaves without a voice. Perhaps they will protest his death in their own subtle ways, like the women who follow Jesus all the way to the hill with tears in their eyes, beating their breasts, or the two Mary’s who will not leave his side, following him even to the tomb. But by and large, the only voices that ring out on that fateful Friday are the ones shouting, “Crucify, crucify!” Imagine the horror of the Hosanna-crying crowd as they watched their dreams slipping away. They did not know how to fight back, how to speak up, and the words that rang out around them, “Crucify, crucify!” drowned out their hopes, filled them with dread and they wept and they wept until their Savior was dead, salvation no more, with despair in its stead.

It is a gut-wrenching turn of events when the celebrated Savior with the gumption to purge the temple ends up beaten and bruised and silenced, just like the silenced ones he’d come to care for. It must have seemed to the people like the very end of all their hopes, a complete and total loss. He hung from that tree and the world fell silent, the people struck mute in terror and disbelief and loss . . . Yet, not all was quiet.

⁵ Luke 19:45-47

⁶ Luke 19:47

In the Gospel of Matthew, when Jesus breathes his last, the earth shakes and the rocks split.⁷ Was the earth splitting open that day in order to receive the blood of our Savior as it mixed with the spilt blood of all the Abels before him? Were the rocks splitting in agony or in protest or in both? Did they emit a terrible sound when they cracked open? Could God the Parent stand to listen? Did God's own voice join the wail?

It was a dark and terrible hour indeed, but did the earth know it couldn't possibly be the end? Having been around for ages, could the stones could sense that even now, in the darkest hour, Jesus was altering the course of things? He wasn't giving in or giving up, he was giving himself into the suffering, entering death freely in audacious solidarity with the broken.

As we enter Holy Week this year, I am reflecting on stones, contemplating God's creation and my small part in it. This week I am resting in the knowledge that there is an unseen reality upholding God's justice and love, whether I hear anything about it. This week I am considering my voice, how I might join the harmony of earth and rocks, of donkeys and palm branches and babbling children. I wonder, would you dare to join us? Amen.

⁷ Matthew 27:51