

Seeds and Stones

John Wilkinson

Third Presbyterian Church

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Luke 19:28-40

We are in a year of sowing. What kinds of seeds are sown this day to help us in our Holy Week journey? What kinds of seeds need to be sown in you? What seeds does our church need, our community need, our world need?

At the heart of it all will be seeds of resurrection, seeds of new life. In order to get there, to Easter, to the empty tomb, in order to get to Easter, we must go with Jesus through Good Friday. In order to get to Good Friday, he must get to Jerusalem, to the city where he will be celebrated today and soon betrayed.

Seeds of resurrection are planted well before Palm Sunday, but this day is a key plot point in the salvation story. We know the rough outline and have rehearsed it. Each of the four gospels offers a slightly different version – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Different points of emphasis relate to the overall shape of each gospel. Only Luke, which we share today, only Luke concludes the way it does.

Jesus enters the city, and though it is Palm Sunday, note that Luke offers us no palms, only cloaks thrown on the ground as a way of honoring Jesus. The crowd is shouting, we are told, “praising God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power they had seen.” That is to say, they had been following Jesus, watching him, and they were all in. “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord.”

Following him is one thing. Praising him is one thing. Calling him king is entirely another. And those in power, those who have something to lose with every added voice, every new decibel, those in power religiously and politically, are watching, and listening. They feel the threat. They see and know.

We know what is coming, what happens this week as shouts of praise turn to calls of betrayal. We know what is coming. Jesus does as well. So it might not have made a difference when the Pharisees warn Jesus. The Pharisees, surrogates for power and authority and the status quo, feel Jesus’ power growing as the crowd’s shouts amplify. And they warn him. They warn him, not so much for his own good but for their own benefit. They warn him. Teacher, order your disciples to stop. Silence this crowd now.

But because Jesus knows where this is headed, he knows that any effort to silence the crowd is a wasted effort. Had they fallen silent, it wouldn't have mattered all that much because his fate is sealed. It was sealed at his birth, before his birth, because when power is threatened it reacts.

But even as Jesus knows that silencing the crowd won't save him, he knows that silencing the crowd is a useless exercise for another, deeper, more profound reason. "Teacher, order your disciples to stop." I could, Jesus seems to say. I could. But "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out." I could, he seems to say, but even if I did, the stones that line this road, the rocks with which our buildings are built, the boulders and pebbles which so define our landscape, all would shout out. If every human voice were silenced, the stones would shout out – "peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven."

We do not know the response of the Pharisees. I presume it would have been a combination of puzzlement and acknowledgement. They only had the slightest clue as to what they were dealing with, but even the slightest clue was pretty good. They knew this voice had to be silenced in order to preserve their power, in order to maintain their authority. This voice had to be silenced, and the voices acclaiming that voice.

That's what this week is about: silence the voice. But what they didn't know is what Jesus knew, that when the human voices are silenced, resurrection will find an alternative way of becoming articulated. Resurrection will find a way of speaking out. Resurrection will find a way of finding a voice.

Even if these voices are silenced, Jesus says, the rocks will shout out, the stones will shout out, all of creation will shout out, because even though I will die on a Friday, the stone that will make every effort to keep my tomb sealed will ultimately be rolled away and love will win and life will win. If you try to silence that, you will fail. The stones would shout out.

What does that look like? We were studying this passage on Thursday in our Thursday Voices gathering. One of our participants, a retired minister, said that in the past when she has preached on this passage, she has distributed little stones at the end of worship and invited people to take them home and imagine. Imagine what these stones would say if they shouted out.

Another participant, a veteran Sunday school teacher, said that she would give stones to the children in her Sunday school class and ask them to do the same.

What does that look like? If you had a stone in your hand right now, what would it say? When you are taking a walk this afternoon in between March Madness games and you find a stone on the sidewalk and pick it up, what do you imagine it saying?

Last weekend we were in Chicago. St. James Presbyterian Church, a small neighborhood congregation on the city's north side, held its final worship service. This was the church I served immediately following seminary, and we were privileged to be at its closing service, which was bittersweet to be sure. So many memories came flooding back.

One Sunday, a Sunday school teacher came up to me after church and gave me this. (holds object) This is great, I said. And then a long pause.....what is it? Well, she said, we were sharing the Palm Sunday story, and we read the part about the stones shouting out. And we imagined what that looked like. So every kid painted a stone, and we painted one for you. How awesome is that, I thought then and think now.

What do the stones shout out? We were privileged to see Geva's production of "To Kill a Mockingbird." There is a profound moment at the conclusion of the Tom Robinson trial as Atticus wearily leaves the courtroom. The African-American observers, sitting high-up in the so-called "colored" balcony, all rise, silently. And the minister, the Rev. Sykes, tells Jem and Dill and Scout to join them, to stand, a silent witness.

The Black Lives Matter movement is about that; it is about power and authority seeking to silence voices and the voices finding ways not to be silenced in the never-ending quest for justice and reconciliation.

Our Presbyterian Brief Statement of Faith insists that one of the church's primary tasks is to "hear the voices of peoples long silenced," and we can imagine what that looks like, we who have been privileged to have a voice and we who have not. Women. Persons of color. LGBTQ friends.

"Teacher, order your disciples to stop." "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out."

Paul Hooker, who teaches at our Presbyterian seminary in Austin, has written a reflection on this passage. "'If these were silent, the stones would shout out.' I admit," Paul says, "a fascination with the question, What would they say. I cannot help wondering whether the din of our daily activity does not drown out a witness from the foundations of the earth, from the rocks of the basement of time. Do not those stones bear the very fingerprint of God? Do they not have a story to tell? What would we hear if we were still long enough to listen?"

And then a prayer: "You who dwell in the midst of things:/for a moment, for an instant, for a heartbeat/slow the processional of things/still the noise of things/until we hear the one thing

whispered/in the silence of the stones.” (Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, “Poems, Prayers, & Meditations for Holy Week,” 2016)

In the midst of the chaos of our lives, the chaos of our world, the chaos of this week, the chaos of this parade, our charge is this. Find your voice and share it. Find it and shout with joy and justice and hope, when Jesus, when love, comes to town. And encourage others to do the same, especially those whose voices are often ignored, for they have something powerful to say.

And when the power is too strong, even the power of death, so that voices are silenced, look around and listen. Listen for what the stones are saying.

In *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, Annie Dillard writes that “The silence is all there is. It is the alpha and omega; it is God’s brooding over the waters.”

So that when we are silenced, by powers without and powers within, there is a deeper silence that leads us, ultimately and finally, to voice joy and justice and hope. “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord.” Amen.