4-13/14-19 Even the Stones Would Shout Out Rev. Amy Haines

Luke 19:28-40 Palm Sunday

When I traveled to Israel in 1997, I was less impressed with the holy shrines in Jerusalem and Bethlehem and more impressed with the natural beauty of the rural valleys of Galilee, the desert wilderness on the road to Jericho and the rocky ground near Bethlehem. Viewing the natural landscape brought the biblical stories to life in my mind, and I could picture Jesus walking where I walked. Imagine if those rocks could shout!

Years ago a pastor friend of mine traveled to England and shared that one of his favorite places to visit was Stonehenge. He spent over an hour walking around and listening to the tour of that ancient, mysterious rock formation. Imagine if those stones could talk!

Look around you at the walls of this church building…what stories could these walls share of weddings and funerals, of witness and mission, of study and worship. Imagine how many Palm Sunday processionals and Easter Services have been held within these walls. Imagine what stories these church walls could share!

But walls can’t talk. Stones can’t speak. They leave the storytelling to us.

Today, as we begin the journey of Holy Week, we share the story of what has become known as Palm Sunday, the story of Jesus’ entrance into Jerusalem. We share this story because we know what comes next. What comes next gives meaning to this grand entrance.

Once in Jerusalem, Jesus will share the Passover meal with his disciples, he will be betrayed and beaten, he will be condemned and killed. Only after the agony of the cross will come the good news of the empty tomb. That is next week’s story.

Today, we listen to and proclaim Luke’s version of Palm Sunday, which is less a triumphal entry

and more a humble beginning of a purposeful journey, a journey that will lead to the cross.

The journey of Holy Week begins with Jesus and his disciples arriving at the holy city of Jerusalem, the center of Jewish life and faith. They have come with thousands upon thousands of other faithful Jewish men bringing with them their wives and their children, their traveling animals and their sacrificial animals, gathering to celebrate the Passover festival.

This festival commemorated God’s providence and care, remembering how God saved God’s people in Egypt and led them from slavery to freedom in a new land. During the time of Jesus, as the Jews were under Roman occupation, Passover also stirred up renewed hopes and dreams for God’s long-awaited Messiah to come and grant freedom once again.

Everyone who could travel was in Jerusalem for Passover, including the religious and political leaders of the region, with their legions of military might. Mix together those leaders, Rome’s oppression, and a desire for freedom, and Passover was a tense time in the city.

In the midst of such tension and excitement came Jesus, riding to Jerusalem on the back of a donkey. Jesus did not arrive by back alley, or blend in with the crowd. Jesus arrived in such a way that the political and religious leaders took notice—and by the end of the week killed him to keep their peace.

Anyone who knew their scriptures recognized the significance of Jesus riding into the city on the back of a young and unridden colt. They knew that unridden animals were used for holy purposes just as unblemished animals were used for sacrifice. They knew that the prophet Zechariah proclaimed,

“Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem!

Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he,

humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” (9:9)

The disciples responded with honoring Jesus as they would honor royalty. They spread their cloaks on the ground. They waved palm branches, although Luke omits that part of the story.

They lifted up their voices in praise, giving thanks to God for all the wonders and powers of God

that they had seen and heard and experienced.

No longer were the disciples timid or silent. Now, with a loud voice, these followers of Jesus praised God for Jesus. Adapting a verse from the Passover liturgy found in Psalm 118,

they shouted out,

“Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!

Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!”(19:38)

Have you ever attended an Ohio State football game, especially when they win over Michigan?

Have you ever welcomed home a winning sports team? Have you ever celebrated a political victory on election night? Those rallies and games are often loud and boisterous celebrations of victory, filled with song and dance and shout, filled with school colors and patriotic banners.

Take that energy and transfer it to the disciples as Jesus entered Jerusalem and you can begin to imagine the joy of that Palm Sunday procession.

“Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!

Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!”(19:38)

The disciples praised Jesus as their king. Yet they did not fully grasp that Jesus’ understanding of king, and Jesus’ understanding of Messiah, were different than their expectations.

Jesus arrived as a suffering servant, not as a conquering hero. He offered an attitude of humility rather than an ego of superiority. While the disciples praised him for the miracles already accomplished, his greatest victory was yet to come, his victory over sin and death through the cross and empty tomb.

..Where a Roman leader would have ridden in a chariot or on a glorious stallion...

Jesus entered the city on a donkey, and a borrowed one!

Where a political leader would have been surrounded by security guards who would have kept crowds from close physical contact to prevent any personal harm to him...

Jesus was surrounded by his disciples representing many walks of life and rode into the midst of the people, almost at their height.

Where a military leader would have galloped along the road, passing the crowds with perhaps a wave of the hand or a nod of the head if there were any recognition at all...

Jesus on a donkey moved slowly with the people, accompanying the people, as well as accompanied by the people.

Where a religious leader in traditional, appropriate priestly robes would have moved sedately through the crowds surrounded by an orderly contingency of other religious leaders who would've prevented anyone who was unclean from touching him...

Jesus, dressed in his usual attire, moved humbly through the crowds, surrounded by his diverse band of disciples, not shrinking from the touch of anyone.

--Ruth Daugherty, "Issues of Leadership into the 21st Century," Viewpoint, Summer 1991, p. 2.

--Found in homileticsonline.com 4-12-92

As Jesus entered Jerusalem, the disciples shouted out:

“Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!

Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!”(19:38)

Peace and glory—we have heard this shout of praise before in the Gospel of Luke. Consider the words of the angels when Jesus was born. Consider the blessing of Simeon in the Temple when Jesus the infant was presented at 8 days old.

While the disciples shouted for peace and glory and blessing, Jesus yearned to bring peace to the world. But he understood that the world did not want his brand of peace. Since chapter 9 in the Gospel of Luke Jesus had his “face set toward Jerusalem.” (9.51) For Jesus knew what that week would bring. He knew that soon his peace would bring about death, his death, and that only through his death would there be real life offered to the world. Jesus willingly rode to his own sacrifice that day, willingly gave himself over to death to show us the truth of God’s grace.

Yet how many then, and how many now, still will not see the truth of Jesus?

How many do not see in Jesus’ death and resurrection the grace and hope and love of God,

a God who will make the impossible possible, a God who promises life after death, a God who willingly journeys with us through both the joys and the sorrows of life?

On that first Palm Sunday, the Pharisees could not see the good news of God through the life, person and ministry of Jesus. These Pharisees were the religious leaders of Jesus’ time who were more concerned with the letter of the Law than with the relationships with God and others the Law sought to guide.

The Pharisees in the Gospel of Luke were not described as the enemy who sought to oppose Jesus at every turn as much as they were described as the religious leaders who sought to keep close tabs on Jesus, fearful that he would tread beyond “safe” waters, so to speak, by teaching outside of the Jewish tradition, antagonizing the Roman leaders, or enticing the crowd to move beyond their comfort zones.

When Jesus entered Jerusalem on a donkey and the disciples broke out in song and praise, some of the Pharisees demanded that Jesus “Order his disciples to stop” their praise.

Other translations word the request as a “rebuke” of the disciples. Rebuke or order, they demanded silence.

Maybe they felt the celebration was premature. Maybe they felt praise of a new king would catch the attention of the Roman authorities. Maybe they felt the parade was too spontaneous

and feared the crowd becoming an unruly mob. Or maybe they simply did not believe the stories of healing and miracle, never considering for a moment that Jesus could really be

the long awaited Messiah.

Whatever the reason, the Pharisees demanded that the disciples stop their shouting and singing and praise of Jesus. They wanted silence, and they wanted it immediately.

Jesus responded to their demand with a surprising response:

“I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out.”

If only stones could talk!

What was Jesus thinking, saying an inanimate object would lift up his praise if all of the voices in the world were silenced? Isn’t this a bit strange?

..Was Jesus being serious? If so, he chose the deadest, least-likely-to-sing object one could think about in nature. Birds sing and so it’s not unusual to connect birdsong with the praise of God. Even trees with their clacking branches and bubbling brooks with their noisy rapids

make sounds such that the prophets in the Bible sometimes connect such natural wonders with a kind of all-creation praise of God.

But stones? They’re pretty quiet. Have you ever heard a stone sing?

When rocks and stones do make noise, it’s not usually a very happy sound. If you’re out hiking in the mountains or trekking a hiking trail at a National Park, the sound of falling rocks will properly make you take cover. The sounds of rocks are often associated only with landslides, earthquakes and other disasters.

Rocks and praise do not go naturally together in our minds. Yet Jesus says that if the praise of his disciples were muted by the Pharisees, then the stones would take up the chorus. …

perhaps this is Jesus’ reminder that his …salvation is for all creation…

-- Scott Hoezee, 3-24-13, cep.calvinseminary.edu/thisWeek

If the disciples stop their praise, creation would shout out the good news of Jesus. God’s truth cannot and will not be silenced. That fact was true in the time of Jesus and remains true today.

Nowadays, churches in communist China continue to thrive despite often being illegal and underground. The church in Vietnam is exploding in number as it offers hope to those under 25 years of age, in spite of a government that rarely recognizes the existence of the church. Even though Christians are being slaughtered in several countries in Africa in a form of religious genocide, a faithful remnant continues there to proclaim the good news of Jesus.

Rev. Helen Neinast once wrote,

“God’s redemptive power in history cannot be stopped. It is a story as old as the stones of the earth themselves, and the voices of those stones, along with the voices of the faithful, will be raised in witness to Christ’s resurrection from the dead.”

--Upper Room Disciplines, ’95, p.110

Rev. Scott Hoezee ponders:

..Small wonder that according to Matthew’s gospel, when the very Son of God breathed his last on the cross, the creation responded. Even the stones split wide open with a very loud crack. For those with ears to hear, the stones cried “Glory!”

- Scott Hoezee, 3-24-13, cep.calvinseminary.edu/thisWeek

“Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!

Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!”(19:38)

As part of God’s creation, we here today are called to join our voices in praise and witness

to all that we have seen, heard and experienced of God’s grace in our lives and God’s transforming power in the world around us.

1 Peter 2:5 declares that we are living stones who have a responsibility to lift up our praise.

“Like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood,

to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.”

Hebrews 13:15 reminds us “Through him, then, let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name.”

I once heard that ..The purpose of praise is not to be ecstatically excited … but a clear focus on (God) who is doing the mighty works.

- Robert AuBuchon “Living Stones of Praise” 2001 sermoncentral.com adapted

With such a definition, we can continue to praise no matter what our circumstance. We can continue to praise even in the face of oppression and opposition. We can continue to praise because the praise is not about what we do but about what God can and is doing through us and in spite of us.

Are you ready to offer your praise? Are you ready to share your faith story, in word and action,

in head and heart, individually and as part of the community of faith?

Earlier this year we reflected on the crowds that constantly followed Jesus and our place in those crowds. During the past five weeks in Lent we have reflected on the amazing grace of God that is always reaching out to us, throughout our lives, to guide us and call us and nurture us to follow Jesus.

Now, as we arrive at Holy Week, where do we find ourselves in the crowds of Holy Week?

Are we shouting praise or rejecting Jesus? Are we singing hosanna or yelling crucify?

Where do we find ourselves in response to Holy Week? In response to the good news

of God’s love through Jesus’ death and resurrection, do we proclaim our faith or remain silent?

Do we live by faith or by fear? Do we go about our normal business or find ways to give thanks to God that we are redeemed?

During this Holy Week, may we continue on a purposeful journey of faith. May we journey with Jesus to the table and the garden, to the courtyard and the cross, before we journey to the joy of the empty tomb. May we continue to be open to hearing, engaging and sharing this story of God’s wondrous love and God’s amazing grace. May we continue to share our stories of what we have seen and heard and experienced of Jesus in our lives. And may we continue to live by God’s peace and glory, love and peace, shown to us through Jesus’ life, death and resurrection.

“Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!

Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!”(19:38)

Amen.

--prayer of confession--