

LENT IN PLAIN SIGHT: STONES THAT SHOUT

Luke 19:28-40

April 10, 2022

Sweet hosannas, indeed. I've missed this day done this way. The last two Palm Sundays have consisted of a very small group of staff waving fake palm branches in an empty sanctuary. We have missed this day done this way. The pageantry, the parade, the palms, the power of it all.

Since I was a small child, Palm Sunday has been one of those days on the church calendar that simply makes sense. *Of course* the residents of Jerusalem would line the streets to welcome Jesus to their town. *Of course* they would shout with excitement as he rode through the gates. *Of course* they would spread their cloaks in front of him and clear the way for his entrance. *Of course they would.* Jesus receives a royal welcome into the holy city, and this is precisely as it should have been. Luke—alone among the gospel writers—says that those people in the streets were praising God for the mighty deeds of *power* that they had seen from Jesus. I think this is what I have always loved so much about Palm Sunday: the *power*. The power of this passionate parade of palms.

Now, to be clear, it was all intentional. Jesus had it all planned from the beginning. The village. The path. The donkey. Signs and symbols meant to provoke, to paint a very particular picture of power. Even the timing was carefully chosen. On the eve of the Passover festival, the city teeming with excitement, Jesus chooses to come into Jerusalem on the back of a colt, just as the prophet Zechariah had predicted the Messiah would come.

What did it mean? What would it mean? The crowd recognized immediately what Jesus was claiming. They thought they knew what came next. It would be an uprising against Rome. The revolt

had begun. Their savior had come. And so, they tear the branches from the trees and the coats from their backs, and they shout praise to God and to Jesus himself for those deeds of power. They give voice to hope. Could this gentle teacher, this healer, this storyteller, this prophet from Nazareth, be the long-awaited Messiah who would restore the fortunes of the Jews in Rome? The one who would turn the world around? It is this desperate hope that leads them to turn in their Bibles to the ancient royal psalm reserved for the arrival of the king: "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!" Their cries echo the multitude of angels who sing to shepherds on a hillside announcing the birth of the Messiah: "Glory to God in highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom God favors!"

This moment, frozen in time, is the high point of Jesus' popular appeal. Just think where he could have gone from here. The wind and a crowd at his back. The drama might have unfolded this way: Imagine Jesus rides that donkey all the way to the palace where he seizes the throne, ends the oppression of the Jews under the booted heel of Rome, and brings all unjust suffering to an end. Imagine. Or consider this: Jesus rides that donkey to the temple, taking his place as Lord, establishing the heavenly kingdom on earth. Every knee bows; every tongue confesses. All that is wrong is made right again. This is the earnest hope of the shouting disciples. And if we're honest, it is the way you and I would write the scene. But this day is not about you and not about me. It is about Jesus. Jesus, whose birth in a barn began a life centered on service and humility. Jesus, who over and over again refused to accept power on human terms. Jesus, who spoke of a different kingdom, a kingdom

beyond us and deep within us, a kingdom where the last are first, those who serve are set aside, where humility is the mark of greatness. We know so well the hope of the disciples because it is our hope, too. That by the power of God unleashed in the world, all would be made as we want it to be. But this is not how the story goes. This is not how the story goes because the power we proclaim this day does *not belong to us* and will not arrive on our terms.

A different plan. A deeper power.

Just when we think we have God figured out, just when we think we have put the pieces together... A turn, a surprise, an unexpected moment. Do you remember how Luke's gospel starts? Far from Jerusalem, far from Rome, a powerless peasant girl in a small, rural town receives a surprising visit from God's own messenger. The message is this: She will give birth to a son. That son will be great. He will reign over the house of his ancestors. His kingdom will never end. And that sounds like *power*.

But Mary's response to Gabriel is even more revelatory. She praises God with a song she learned in Sunday school. It is her grandmother Hannah's song. "God has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly." At the outset of the gospel, we are put on notice that this king will privilege power of a different sort.

The story continues. After his baptism, Jesus is driven into the wilderness, where his ministry begins with forty days of fasting and prayer—those days we observe during Lent each year. There, Jesus is tempted in the wilderness, tempted with power. The tempter shows Jesus the kingdoms of the world and offers him authority over them all. The power of domination. The temptation to control. All Jesus need do is bow down, but he refuses. A different plan. A deeper power. We should have known by now.

And on Palm Sunday, as in the world at this very moment in time, we witness divergent perceptions of power colliding. The Roman Governor—Pontius Pilate, puppet and pawn of the emperor—arrives

to maintain order at the festival of Passover. He comes with horses, chariots, soldiers, trumpets, flags waving. A show of force to keep the subjects in line. And Jesus of Nazareth rides a borrowed donkey down from the Mount of Olives. A peasant procession precedes him. Pilate projects the power of force. Jesus embodies the power of peace.

Some religious leaders see that coming collision, and so they aim to avert it. They demand that Jesus tell his disciples to cease and desist this embarrassing and potentially dangerous display. "Order your disciples to stop!" they said. In that moment, these two understandings of power that have been at odds since the gospel began finally meet. The call of the religious leaders is unambiguous. Look, Jesus, we appreciate your preaching, your focus on the kingdom of God, but that is a metaphor, a dream, a distant hope. Rome has the weapons, the armor, the tanks. They own the crosses. Time to accept the inevitable. It's all over. They have the power. Order your disciples to stop!

What if he had done it? What if Jesus had silenced those voices of desperate hope? What if he had turned that donkey around and headed for the safety of home? What if he had called the whole thing off? Just think of all the suffering he could have avoided. No pain of betrayal. No sham trial. No sentence to execution. No cross.

If he wasn't going to take the throne, if he wasn't going to rain down holy fire from heaven, if he wasn't going to release the full force of divine power, he could have simply stopped.

What if he had done it? Well, we might have accepted the inevitable. We might have been tempted to believe that power is domination. That might makes right. That if you can, you should. We might have accepted that the kingdom of God was more fairy tale than truth, more myth than reality, that love and grace are no match for tanks and chariots, that the way things are is the way things must always be. We might have believed that silence in the face of injustice is acceptable, even wise.

Order your disciples to stop! But they cannot stop. We cannot stop. We cannot leave the praising to the stones, though they, too, would shout the glory of God. We cannot stop because the story does not end here. We cannot stop because disciples refuse to be silenced by fear or shut down by force. We cannot stop because the power at work this week is greater and deeper and more profound than every display of might or act of aggression. There is a different plan. There is a deeper power.

How does this redefinition of power impact our lives? It means, among other things, that we use the power we have on behalf of those who suffer. *That we use the power we have on behalf of those who suffer.* It means choosing the way of servanthood, not self-advancement. You see, if the power of God is clearest on the cross, then faithful living means setting self aside in sacrifice for others. It means that the deepest power at work in the world is the power of love. As a community of faith endowed with this deeper power, we live into God's different plan. We cannot stop. We cannot leave the praising to the stones because the power of God is at work within us, through us.

Look for the signs of it this week. Listen for the voices that speak of it. Join the parade that proclaims it. But for the sake of all of us, do not heed the call of fear symbolized by those leaders who command silence. Not today and not ever. Do not stop. Do not stop committing your lives to Jesus Christ and his path of peace. Do not stop pursuing a path of virtue and sacrifice. Do not stop growing in faith. Do not stop shouting praise. Do not stop, for God's power is alive in you. So, alongside the crowds who waved branches, let us tell the world about the power of God, and let us not be silent.

It won't be easy. When Jesus reaches the holy city, he does not shout with joy. He weeps in pain. Why? He knows what is coming: not just the cross waiting for him, but this endless cycle of violence that we are still trapped in. His tears reflect our inclination to love power more than peace. Still, we are drawn to dramatic displays of force. Still, the subtle seeds of

peace planted within us are nearly invisible, hidden from our eyes. Still, we ignore suffering that does not directly impact us. Still, we grow impatient with the slow work of compassion. Still, grace frustrates us. Still, Jesus weeps.

This week, the road will be hard. We will walk the streets of Jerusalem as the tide begins to turn against this prophet. We will witness a trial filled with corruption, injustice, abuse of power. We will climb a hill called Golgotha where this parade might have ended, where the whole world thought it did end—in the violence of a cross, the cry of abandonment, the darkness at high noon, the silence of a borrowed tomb. Accept the inevitable. It's over. They won.

Except. A different plan, a deeper power. Except. Only the suffering one can save us.

As we gather in worship this week, silence will seem stronger than speech. But even now the stones are clearing their throats for songs of praise only days away. You should clear yours as well; for as certain as the sun will rise next Sunday morning, those stones will shout praise to the one who overcomes death's dominion. And just wait. We will, too. Amen.