

Don't Leave it to the Stones
Psalm 118:1-2, 19-26 and Luke 19:28-40
© Stacey Steck
Preached March 28, 2010 at San José, Costa Rica

Welcome to Psalm Sunday. That's right, it is Psalm, rather than Palm, Sunday. It comes around only every third year. You see, in Luke's version of the story, and only Luke's, there are no palms or branches of any kind, just the quoting of the Psalms, Psalm 118 to be precise, and some cloaks spread out on the road in front of Jesus. There are also no "hosannas" in Luke's version, the second most popular word associated with this Sunday before Easter, but we are sneaking some in during the closing song tonight, so fear not. Actually, we heard "hosannas" when we read Psalm 118, but they were disguised as the "Save us, we beseech you" they are in English. Indeed, the people who watched and cheered as Jesus entered Jerusalem that day would have been far more interested in the Psalm than the palm, since the Psalm spoke to their hopes and dreams of liberty, and the palm simply to the power of the noonday heat.

Psalm 118 has been recognized as an enthronement psalm, kind of a liturgy for the entrance into the city of king returning victorious. Perhaps knowing this tradition, the Romans who were occupying Jerusalem would frequently stage their own displays of victorious procession, especially around the time of festivals, to reinforce the idea that the populace really shouldn't get any ideas about welcoming home any kind of king but the Emperor. This, in turn, may have made those

receiving Jesus even more enthusiastic, since it was then a chance to poke Rome in the eye, but it is probably also what made the Pharisees nervous enough to tell Jesus to keep his disciples in line, to keep the ruckus to a minimum so that the Romans wouldn't feel threatened. A king to king confrontation could not mean anything good to them.

Hearing the story, we get the impression that it was getting pretty loud, after first some murmuring, then some calls for more cloaks, then maybe some whistling, then all of a sudden, "the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, saying," using some of the words of Psalm 118, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord," and using some of the words spoken to the shepherds in the fields at the time of Jesus' birth, "Peace in heaven and glory in the highest heaven." Interesting how the words and ideas of kingship run from the beginning to the end of Jesus' life. We have no way of knowing how many were there that day, but we do know what was on their minds, and why that would make the enemies of Jesus more than a little nervous. We will conveniently forget that these same wildly cheering disciples will be nowhere to be found a few days later when Jesus is executed, but for the moment, they are doing what good disciples should be doing, and that is praising God. But it is almost as if in anticipation of that coming abandonment that Jesus replies to the Pharisees, "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out." It may have been hard for anyone in the crowd

that day to imagine silent disciples, but there they were just a few days later.

I've always been intrigued by Jesus' reference to the stones, especially never having heard a stone actually speak. I had a pet rock once, but I could never get it to say anything. I spent many hours trying to teach it something, but it just sat there, not even blinking. But here is what I might suspect is true about speaking ability of stones: that they don't really get out very much, and therefore are not good conversationalists. Their social skills are really not that developed. They tend toward grunts and mumbling, and are reticent about public speaking. They are not very good spokespeople for the Almighty God. To be sure, their praise is just as beautiful in God's ears as our praise, but I'm not sure I'd rather listen to a stone than a soprano. I'm not trying to start any kind of inter-creation incident, but rocks are *really* dumb. In more ways than one...

But still, they are part of God's creation and deserve some respect, so I will give them the benefit of the doubt and say that they are probably even more faithful than we are. After all, Jesus said that in our silence, the rocks would cry out. Maybe God heard the rocks on Good Friday, when few of us were there, and none of those who were spoke up for fear that they might share the same fate as Jesus. Thanks be to God for the stones who showed no fear and who cried out for mercy for Jesus as he hung there suffering. May their voices have been a comfort to his ears. All this begs the question: are we even in the same league of faithfulness as the stones?

Maybe you've never thought about it like this, but God doesn't *need* your praise. For that matter, God probably doesn't need anything but, like the person who already has everything, it's the thought of the gift that counts. And so, we believe that God enjoys being offered a little praise, along with evidence of righteousness, justice, and compassion. But if we human beings never offered our praise, it is not that there would be no praise; it is simply that it would sound a lot different. Remember, all creation sings. All creation recognizes God. God will always have some part of creation that will shout out in glory and thanksgiving, although I think God prefers us to be a part of it, we who have been called into relationship. The trees will moan in the wind, the water will gurgle over the rocks, the animals will howl and the birds cluck and coo, and even the rocks will cry out in their own way; nothing can keep creation from giving praise to its creator. But we too are part of creation and I believe that God longs to hear our praise, even if it is not necessary.

The context of today's story speaks to our need to praise, but certainly that is not the only way we have been given to cry out. We cry out in joy, in anger, in frustration, in terror, in depression, in addiction. We cry out in concern and compassion, in solidarity and sympathy. We cry out alone and together, solo and in harmony of soprano, alto, tenor, baritone, and bass. We cry out in song and poetry. We cry out in the middle of the night, and at the rising of the sun, whenever our voices are called forth. We have been given lovely voices to speak the word of

love come down from the peace of heaven to share that peace on earth.

The silence of the disciples on the day of Jesus' death was lamentably not the last time they held their tongues. To be sure, following Easter, you couldn't shut them up; they'd tell anyone and everyone about Jesus and the power of the God who raised him from the dead. But since then, and at the cost of too many lives, the voices of Jesus' disciples have fallen silent too often, and the stones have been left to pick up our slack. Mostly, our silence has simply cost others the opportunity to share in the blessings we receive from relationship with Jesus Christ, but too often it has served our own interests at the expense of others. Despite some noticeable examples to the contrary, throughout the centuries, the church and its members have been complicit in the enslavement, suffering, and death of innumerable of God's creatures, both human and non-human. We have stood by and watched silently as millions of Jews were lead to the gas chambers, as Hutus and Tutsis slaughtered one another, as Orthodox and Catholic butchered one another and Muslims in the former Yugoslavia, as blacks were forced to use separate drinking fountains, and apartheid was the oppressive law of the land in South Africa. We have stood by silently and allowed generations to live in poverty, both in our own back yards and across the world. We have stood by silently as the tops of whole mountaintops are sheared off and dumped into West Virginia creekbeds, once the coal has been extracted from them. Those are just some of the more recent examples, and I'm sure you have your own list of atrocities that never

should have happened. Don't get me wrong, some Christians, some churches, have been there, advocating, and working, and risking their lives, but in all those cases I mentioned, where was the multitude calling for "Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven?" How could any of those events have happened for longer than even one day, when there were so many of us who could have raised our voices and put an end to it? But instead, we left it to the stones to cry out against injustice, and unfortunately, although God may have ears to hear the shouts of the stones, the powers and principalities of this world do not, and stones are much more easily ignored than loud and persistent human beings.

The multitude in Jerusalem that day scared the Pharisees, and ultimately the Romans, into action, even if the praises were simply overheard by them. The shouts of acclamation that demonstrated a greater loyalty to Jesus than either the religion or the politics of the day were a very real threat. They weren't even directly taking on the important issues of the day, and still they caused enough consternation to lead to Jesus' death. How much more powerful then must be the witness of those whose loyalty leads them to shout out not only in praise of the glory of God but also against the injustice that tarnishes that glory? What power has been given to our voices, if only we would use them! Will we use them, or will we leave it to the stones? Friends, as we go forth from the coming Easter, may the power of the resurrected Christ resurrect our voices, so we don't need to leave either the praise of God nor the call for justice to the stones. Amen.