

## **The Stones Will Shout**

Luke 19:29-40

Sermon preached by Charles C. Williamson

Philadelphia Presbyterian Church

Palm/Passion Sunday, March 28, 2010

Today is Palm Sunday. And the story of Palm Sunday is such a vivid image that if you close your eyes you can almost see it happening—Jesus making what we call his triumphal entry into Jerusalem. There is Jesus humbly riding on a donkey, his disciples walking by his side. And as they make their way into the city, the disciples begin to shout and sing, spreading their cloaks before Jesus and shouting their loud Hosannas. “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord.” A crowd gathers and they join in the singing and hosanna-ing. It’s a festive celebration as Jesus enters the city.

Perhaps it was a little too noisy and festive for the Pharisees because they asked Jesus to quiet down his disciples. After all, this was the holy season of Passover, a time for remembering the bitterness of the Hebrews’ slavery in Egypt and God’s salvation, not a time for all this shouting and singing.

Or maybe there was another reason the Pharisees wanted Jesus’ followers to quiet down. They knew that during Passover, the Roman soldiers would be on high alert for any disturbance, and they would deal with it quickly and with force. Why do something to rile up the Romans? They should just keep quiet.

But Jesus responded, pointing at the disciples, “If these were silent, the stones would shout out.” And so it is: if we human beings were to shut our mouths, if we were to be mute about God’s love for the world revealed in Jesus, if we were silent, then God’s creation itself would take over and proclaim God’s praise. Even the lifeless stones would take up the refrain. The stones would shout.

It’s an interesting choice—the stones. Why not the trees? Why didn’t Jesus say that the trees would wave their outstretched arms toward heaven revealing in their colors the rhythms and cycles of God’s magnificent creation? Why not the waves and the seas—crashing and cascading in a mighty chorus of praise? Why not the sun, moon and stars—the great far-off lights observing all that goes on from their splendid height? Why did Jesus choose stones as the parts of creation that would raise their voices in praise?

That got me to thinking about the times in the Bible story when stones play a significant part. Moses brought down from Mt. Sinai the Ten Commandments on the stone tablets. Those stone tablets were treasured, sacred to the Hebrew people. Those stones reminded them of God’s covenant.

Then there was the time that Jacob, fleeing from his brother Esau, used a stone as his pillow as he slept the night. And that night he dreamed that he saw a ladder extending from earth to heaven, and the angels from heaven moving up and down the ladder. By the way, the old spiritual didn’t get it quite right. You know the song: “we are climbing Jacob’s ladder.” It’s not that we are climbing Jacob’s ladder; it’s that the angels from God are climbing down that ladder to us. It’s not that we can somehow make our way up to God; it’s that God came to us. That stone pillow reminded Jacob of God’s presence.

After their long 40-year trek through the wilderness, when the Hebrew people crossed over the Jordan River into the Promised Land, they set up some stones as a marker. From that

day on, those stones reminded the Hebrews of God's providence and care as God gave them that good land.

If the people are silent, the stones will shout, Jesus said. So if the stones would be the ones to tell about God, what might the stones say?

When I was a little kid, just about every evening in the summer all the neighborhood kids would gather down at Bobby Hall's house to play "Hide and Go Seek" in the dark. And home base was the big rock in Bobby's yard. Anyone touching that big rock was safe, no danger there. Maybe that's what the rocks might say in praise to God, the Rock of our salvation—it's safe here.

A couple of years ago Barbara and I went to Yosemite National Park. Those of you who have been there know that at Yosemite there are several awesome, breathtaking, dramatic rock faces—huge El Capitan, and Half Dome Rock, a sheer rock face that takes rock climbers three days to ascend. You see rocks like that and at once you feel very small and insignificant. You see rocks like that and you marvel at God's creation. Maybe that's what the rocks might say as they shout their praise of God—this is God's marvelous creation.

But then I started thinking back through the gospel accounts of Jesus' life, and was startled to realize how many times we find ourselves stumbling over some stone. What if these stones were to find their voices and start to speak, what would they say?

One stone comes early in the story. Immediately after he was baptized by John in the Jordan River, Jesus went into the wilderness. What might one of those stones in the wilderness have said? Maybe: "I watched Jesus agonize and make decisions for forty long days and nights, struggling with temptation. I felt his ravenous hunger as he poured out his soul to God. I wanted to become a loaf of bread for him to eat and be satisfied. I saw him struggle with temptation but not give in. I sensed his conviction and commitment to do God's will. I knew that he would not be deterred from his goal and mission in life. I was there when Jesus set out on his path to be God's anointed one, the Messiah."

As the ministry of Jesus goes on, another stone might tell another story: "I am the stone Jesus sat on when the little children came and climbed into his lap. I heard their giggling and felt their energy. I sensed Jesus' gentleness with the little ones, his playfulness, his pure enjoyment of life. I could tell that he genuinely loved and honored the children."

Later on, still another stone might have said: "I am the stone that one of the angry men picked up to stone to death the woman caught in adultery. I did not want to be the weapon that killed her. He gripped me tight, ready to take deadly aim. And then I heard Jesus speak, and the angry man loosened his grip and dropped me. I saw the angry people slowly walk away. I heard how Jesus talked to the woman—how he approached her with kindness and compassion. I could sense his love and forgiveness...and her astonishment and gratitude."

Another stone might tell the story this way: "I am the rock that Jesus knelt beside in the Garden of Gethsemane. I heard his prayer; I heard him ask God if there might be another way. But I also heard him resolve again to be faithful to God's will. I felt the tears that Jesus wept in the garden that night. When he got up to leave, my surface was wet from his tears. I could sense his agony, and yet I so admired his strength, his calmness in the face of the unknown, his faith which never faltered."

Still another stone might have testified: "I am the rock the soldiers used as a hammer to drive the nails into his hands and feet when they hung him on the cross. I have his blood on me. I saw his tormented, yet kind, eyes. I am ashamed of my role in this tragedy, and yet even so I feel forgiven and loved."

And finally there was the stone that said: “I am the stone that was rolled against the opening of his tomb to secure it from robbers. I saw his broken body lying there in the darkness, still and lifeless. I cannot really tell you what happened next. It was at once a strange, wonderful, frightening and exhilarating experience. All I can tell you is that I saw him alive again, that I felt the powerful, awesome presence of God, and that I believe nothing will ever be the same again.”

Jesus said to the Pharisees who wanted his disciples to be quiet: “I tell you, if these were silent, the very stones would cry out!” The rocks of the ages would have their say. If the stones were to shout the story, they would tell about a savior who would not let anything keep him from following the will of his heavenly Father; they would tell about a man of prayer; they would tell about a person of compassion and love. They would proclaim that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

That’s what they might say, but let us tell Christ’s story so that the stones don’t have to. Amen.✠

(Thank you to the Rev. Gina Rhea for her sermon “Singing Stones and Silent Saints” from which much of this sermon is drawn.)