

Luke 19:29-39
“Hear the stones? They’re listening for you”

April 5, 2020
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Some of the Pharisees who were in the crowd said to Jesus, “Order your disciples to stop.” But Jesus said to them, “I tell you, if they stop, the stone will cry out.”

What was it that the Pharisees, these religious teachers wanted Jesus’ disciples to stop doing on that first Palm Sunday? They wanted them to stop praising. They wanted them to stop going up and down the streets of Jerusalem shouting after Jesus, “Hosanna! Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord.”

What is it, though, about praise that is so bothersome, threatening, harmful? Nothing really, unless it’s going to someone you don’t especially want to see it go to, someone you maybe don’t think deserves to get praise.

This may have been part of it for the Pharisees. As teachers themselves, they have dedicated their lives to their craft. They went to school, jumped through all the required hoops to land the best internship. They wrote the thesis paper, they earned the degree that hangs in their home office. But more than all this, they have done so believing that right teaching leads to right living. So they have talked the talk and walked the walk. Ask a Pharisee who God is and they won’t only tell you, they will show you where and with whom God hangs out on Saturday night.

When they meet Jesus, they can’t deny that he, like them, is a teacher with authority. “Teacher, order your disciples to stop.” He has a following of students, he keeps a moral code, he too walks the walk, but that walk takes him to a different place than they go to on Saturday night.

This man dines with sinners! his fellow teachers bark to one another. *This man* hangs out with lepers, gets close enough to touch them! *This man* casts out demons, he must be a demon

himself! *This man* let's his disciples pick grain on the Sabbath because they're hungry, even though they should be resting! *This man* lets the crowds shout 'Hosanna! Praise God! Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord.

"Teacher, make them stop. Tell them, this is not what the blessedness of God looks like."

I think what really got to the Pharisees was that this praise was coming from a place they'd never heard it come from before. They were used to hearing it come from within their own temples, from within their pews and pulpits. That's where praise begins, and where it belongs. But this praise was coming from the people, and they weren't in any temple or pew. They were in the streets, in their neighborhoods, in their homes. And the sound of this praise rising up from such ordinary, unexpected places turns the Pharisees' world upside down on them. They have no way to understand how it's possible for the praises of God to live so freely and fully outside in the world. It rattles their way of thinking and believing so much that they order Jesus to make it stop. But Jesus tells them, you can't stop it. Like God and grace and love, it's in the very nature of praise to be out there, to be shared, to be heard. If we try to stop it, the stones will cry out in protest, and they will take up where we have left off.

If there is good news for us in our world today, this has to be it: you can't stop praise. Though our temples and mosques and churches are all closed. Though our ballparks and playgrounds are all shut down and there are no players to cheer for. Though all our TV shows have been relegated to reruns and there are no awards to hand out for best actor and actress right now. Though all the news seems to be bad news, as long as there are rocks, there is praise, and so there is good news.

I was deeply concerned this past week, and rather shocked, to hear the rumors, which then became news, that individual states were going to be allowed to decide for themselves whether to consider religious services "essential services" in their state, which would essentially allow them to remain open to the public during this time. It raised the question for me of what is

essential to the well-being of my life, my family, my community, and my faith right now. And while I would not presume to speak for anyone else, my read on Jesus this morning is that one of the reasons the Pharisees did not care for him and his disciples is because he did not consider location essential to praise and worship. On the other hand, he did consider location essential to healing and wholeness. Read the gospels and almost anytime he meets someone who has been isolated from their community on account of being sick, after he heals them, he sends them back to their community. Because while it is one thing to have our bodies cured, healing requires being welcomed back into the fold again. Don't worry my friends, our day will come.

In the meantime, I want to share with you this morning three things that are feeling essential to my life right now, three things that are keeping me intact—mind, body, and soul.

The first thing that is keeping me afloat right now is dirt, which is nothing more than—yep, you guessed it—ground up rocks. This pile of dirt is left-over from our Ash Wednesday service this year. I brought him home from my office a couple weeks ago. That probably feels like a long time ago now, but it was only 5 weeks ago; just before all this got started. On that day, we poured out this dirt and proclaimed, “We are dust, and to dust we shall return.” That's it—nothing fancy, nothing special, just plain, brown dusty dirt. The thing I have since come to discover about dirt, though, is that it has an amazing capacity to absorb water.

It reminds me of the story of Noah. After coming through the flood—40 days and nights of hardcore downpour—he dropped the ramp on the ark and stepped out into a world where pretty much everything that was there before was totally destroyed. The houses were all rubble, the people all corpses, the trees all twigs, and the only thing that still looked the same was the dirt and rocks. It has an amazing capacity to absorb the hardness of this world, which is why I believe God used it to make us. On this Palm Sunday, the dirt and rocks remind me that we are still here because God is still here, and so we have something to shout about, to give thanks and praise for.

The second thing that is keeping me afloat these days are my poetry books. About a month ago, when I realized I was going to be working from home for a while, I ran down to my office one day with my tote bag that carries whatever books I need to have that week for sermon writing and counseling. At that time, my tote bag was filled with commentaries and books on the politics of Jesus. I turned them all in for something more useful—poetry. Among my favorites is Mary Oliver and her poem, “The Poet Thinks About The Donkey.”

On the outskirts of Jerusalem
the donkey waited.
Not especially brave, or filled with understanding,
he stood and waited.

*How horses, turned out in the meadow,
leap with delight!
How doves, released from the cages,
clatter away, splashed with sunlight!*

But the donkey, tied to a tree as usual, waited.
Then he let himself be led away.
Then he let the stranger mount him.

Never had he seen such crowds!
And I wonder if the donkey all imagined what was to happen.
Still, he was what he had always been: small, dark, obedient.

I hope, finally, he felt brave.
I hope, finally, he loved the man who rode so lightly upon him,
As he lifted one dusty hoof and stepped, as he had to, forward.¹

The donkey lifts one dusty hoof and steps, as he has to, forward. What a perfect model for the times we are in. When we cannot make the sickness and disease go away over night, when we do not know if the bank account is going to hold up, when we do not know how we will survive 1 more day of homeschooling and homeworking, when death feels like it’s right there at the door, let us walk bravely with the donkey and take just one step at a time. For remember, like

¹ From her book, Thirst, p. 44.

us, the donkey did not know what kind of world awaited him up ahead, but it was enough that he was not alone. For he had been chosen and loved by Jesus.

Finally, the third thing that is keeping me afloat today, that feels essential right now to my well-being, my faith, and my church, is my kitchen table and the bread that somehow continues to come to me so easily each day.

This was to be a Communion Sunday for us, where we would have gathered at the table of God and shared in the body and blood of Christ given for us. While we cannot do that so easily, in many ways this still is a day of communion. As you sit at your tables today, may the bread you break be common, reminding you that Jesus welcomed everybody, and especially anybody who was nobody, to share in his table and ministry with him. And may the cup you pour be full, reminding you that the forgiveness of God will always be enough.

A pile of dust, a donkey that carries a gentle Savior who comes with justice to overturn our world and reorder it in love, bread broken for you, forgiveness poured out for you—my friends, these are the gifts of God for you, the people of God.

Hosanna! Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in all the earth.

Amen.