

This is going to be a rather eventful and varied Palm Sunday morning, isn't it? By the time you leave here in a couple hours, you will have heard JOYFUL sing, you will have waved your palm branch in a recollection of Jesus's entry in Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, you will have heard Sweet Chaos dulcimers play and sing, you'll have witnessed the Holy Baptism of two children, you'll have sung hymns, heard Scripture, prayed prayers, listened to a sermon, and to top it all off—you'll have eaten pancakes, sausage, and fruit! Lots going on, right? Might be a little confused or noisy at times, all of which puts us in the proper mindset to experience the original Palm Sunday. This was most certainly an eventful and varied day in the life of Jesus and his followers, and it also was probably confused and noisy at times.

Let's briefly review the set up for this noisy occurrence in the Gospel of Luke. It's the week of Passover, a festival that draws Jews from all over to the capital City of Jerusalem and the Temple that stands therein. Accordingly, large and fervent crowds gathered in Jerusalem, many of them looking to rebel against the heavy oppression of Roman rule. In order to quell any thoughts of rebellion, the Romans had taken to putting on a military display of might at the time of the Passover; a pageant, a parade of sorts. Roman officials and soldiers entered from the West gate, riding steeds, carrying weapons, and generally making a statement about their power and strength. Any Jewish peasant fermenting with thoughts of rebellion might look upon that display of might and decide it was easier to just keep quiet. The Roman characteristics of efficiency, organization, and armed enforcement were there for all to see with no subtlety whatsoever.

In contrast to that, then, is this spontaneous gathering of peasants and children, forming around Jesus. They aren't carrying any weapons, they are bearing no arms, but they are waving palm branches and throwing about their cloaks. There are no imperial officials on impressive steeds, but there *is* an itinerant carpenter-preacher on a young donkey, heading up the parade. This ragtag assortment of people comes from the East, rather than the West, and they shout no slogans of war, but rather words of praise. We read: "the whole multitude began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, saying, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!"

Both processions gather around a center of power, and yet they stand in stark contrast to one another; one represents the rule of force, the other the rule of God. And those caught up in the loud celebration surrounding Jesus are making so much noise, that the pharisees become fearful. That Roman parade is near at hand; the last thing they want is for Jesus and his followers to give those Romans a reason to make a show of force to quiet them down. “Teacher, order your disciples to stop”, they urgently tell Jesus. Causing Jesus to respond so compellingly: “If these were silent, the stones would shout out.” Forceful words about the praise of God. God *will* be praised, Jesus insists, if not by human voices, then by nature, including the stones themselves! Try as we might, humanity *cannot* smother, stifle, or still the praise of God.

What might it have been like if we were present on this first Palm Sunday? What kind of ruckus might we have heard? I personally imagine it as being somewhat like our coffee hour each Sunday, when we’re all talking loudly to one another simultaneously. But, 2000 years ago on this morning, we likely would have heard the pounding of running feet. The muffled clacking of the donkey’s hooves on cloaks spread on the road. People shouting and singing praises to God. Joyful noise, for sure! That’s the commotion the Pharisees want to silence; their request to Jesus is what prompts Him to proclaim that *nothing* stops God from being praised; even the stones shout out God’s goodness.

These words make so vivid an impression, because they are incongruous. Stones don’t shout out, do they? Which might be a good thing, given how many rocks and stones make up the coast of our inland sea of Lake Superior along this North Shore! Can you imagine the cacophony, the sheer volume of sound, that *all* of those rocks and stones would create if they shouted or sang? We’d never get a wink of sleep at night. But, why does Christ claim that stones have voices? Perhaps they do after all. As North Shore dwellers, we can consider ourselves well versed in certain natural elements: we know about water; we know about wind; we know about rocks and stones. *And* we know the sound the waves make when they crash the rocky shoreline or lap up gently on it. We know the sound of the water pulsing up and back again through the stones on the rock beaches. And those sounds *are* like music to our ears. Jesus was right. Stones do sing. The very rocks and stones find voices to sing their Creator’s praise.

Stones, like so many natural elements, can be used to build up or to tear down. We can, for instance, use stones to build a structure of some kind, or we can pick them up and throw them at someone. In fact, stoning was a form of execution, wasn't it? Jesus stops a group of men from stoning to death a woman caught in adultery. The apostle Stephen is martyred by a crowd that stones him to death. Stones are associated with death in another way; many of us may be aware of the Jewish tradition of placing stones, rather than flowers, at a graveside. This can seem a little disconcerting, but I found this explanation on a Jewish website online: "Stones have a special character in Judaism. In the Bible, an altar is no more than a pile of stones, but it is on an altar that one offers to God. The stone upon which Abraham takes his son to be sacrificed is considered to be the foundation stone of the world. The most sacred shrine in Judaism, after all, is a pile of stones — the Western Wall. That is why today one rarely sees flowers on the graves in traditional Jewish cemeteries. Instead there are stones, small and large, piled without pattern on the grave, as though a community were being haphazardly built." And the author points out that while flowers are an apt symbol of the beauty and brevity of life, stones are symbolic of that which lasts, which does not die; they speak of the permanence of memory and of God.

Here is what we might overlook in this Palm Sunday story---the proximity of a cemetery to the parade. The route Jesus and his followers take leads them down the Mount of Olives. And what is one of the features along that ancient path? An ancient Hebrew cemetery. So old, that it existed for perhaps as long as 1000 years prior to this original Palm Sunday, which was about 2000 years ago. Imagine the antiquity of this cemetery, which exists to this day. You know we tend to sequester cemeteries away from activity, perhaps a reflection of our general denial of death. But, death was seen more realistically as a part of life in ancient cultures, and so the path that this joyful, noisy parade is on leads them right past a place of death and memory. This cemetery today contains over 150,000 graves, many of them marked with stones of memory. When Jesus makes reference to stones shouting out, He may have had in mind some of those stones placed in memory for the dead in the cemetery right alongside their procession. Even stones that commemorate death shout out God's praise. Which is a way that this Palm Sunday text foreshadows the Holy Week to come, where Christ's death will happen, and He will be laid in a tomb sealed with a huge *stone*. A *stone* that will be miraculously rolled away

from an empty tomb in the early morning hours of Easter Sunday. But that's getting ahead of the story. Right now we are in the midst of the noisy, happy entry of Jesus into Jerusalem, where the praise of God is so heartfelt and *necessary*, that if it was stilled, the stones would shout out. No power on earth can silence the song of praise to God from God's creation. That is a powerful claim of faith. No human or otherworldly evil can prevent it; God will be praised.

We are a part of that praise song to God. As we sing our hymns, we become part of a resistance movement to evil and death. Our praise to God defies sin, hatred, and violence. Our songs of praise are powerful and significant, because they are a part of the song the entire cosmos sings—a song declaring that love wins. Do not underestimate the importance of *your* voice raised in praise of God, in proclamation of a Gospel message that good triumphs over evil. We are assured in this lesson that, powerful though those forces of evil may seem to be, they do not prevail. God is praised, one way or another; God's praise cannot be silenced. However and whenever we are a part of that living chorus of praise, we are blest. As we enter Holy Week, we are walking with Christ towards crucifixion and resurrection. This is the most sacred week of the Christian church year. Perhaps we might cultivate an awareness of how God is being praised, by all creation. And maybe we can be aware of making *our* voices heard—lifted up on behalf of others, lifted up in praise of God. Amen.