

## And Every Stone Shall Cry!

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I know few words more thrilling than these words of Jesus: “If these be silent the very stones will cry out!” The sounds of the gospel will go on forever. The setting was Jesus’ Palm Sunday entrance into Jerusalem.

### I

Let me set the stage. The text starts almost like a scene from a spy novel as Jesus secretly prepares for his entry into Jerusalem.

The staging area was near Bethany at a place called the Mount of Olives. From its top you could look out and see the whole city of Jerusalem getting ready for the Passover Festival when multiple thousands would flock to the city for the observance.

“Go into the village”, he told two of his disciples. “You will find a colt tied on which no one has ridden. Untie it and bring it to me. If anyone asks you, why are you untying it, tell them, The Lord has need of it.” And so it happened.

They got the colt, and laying their garments on it, they placed him on the donkey.

As he descended from the Mount of Olives into the deep valley and up to the Eastern Gate of the city, people began to throng around him. This was the route, Jewish tradition said, that the Messiah would take when he came. Matthew's gospel tells us that Jesus' entrance was carefully prepared to fulfill the prophecy of Zechariah:

Behold your king is coming to you, humble and mounted on a donkey.

A donkey? This is not how a *real* king rode into a city.

When Julius Caesar entered Rome after the battle of Carthage—so the Roman historian Suetonius records—there were 10,000 horses, 5,000 elephants, and 100,000 uniformed soldiers. The parade took five days and nights to wend its way through the city. That's how kings do it.

As our readers' choir has shown us, Pilate, the Roman governor had already entered Jerusalem from the west in the full regalia of imperial power, horses, chariots, gleaming armor and shining weapons. He had moved in to keep order in the city during Passover when the Hebrew people remembered and celebrated how God had delivered them from Pharaoh. Messianic hopes abounded, and there was in some corners talk about insurrection against Rome.

But here came Jesus on a lowly donkey, not as a victorious warrior but a king of peace, in simple clothes, unprotected by armor and weapons.

The people, however, knew their scriptures. Here comes the true king of Israel, the Messiah, humble and riding on a donkey.

People began to throw their garments on the road and cut palm branches to strew them on his way. The text says that a “whole multitude of the disciples began to rejoice and praise God with a loud voice for all the mighty works that they had seen.”

The multitude had begun with Jesus in Galilee and grown as they neared Jerusalem. They had seen and heard of the mighty works God had worked through Jesus. We’ve seen them as we’ve traveled through Luke, miracle after miracle, healings, demons cast out, hungry people fed, lives transformed. Women were in the multitude, starting with those Jesus had called to follow, and people who had been healed, like the blind man in Jericho, Jesus had just healed who decided to join the throng.

## II

The crowd cried out in loud voices: “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord. Peace in heaven and glory in the highest.” Words like those of

the angels to the shepherds at Jesus' birth. They sang Hosanna of the top of their lungs.

Their exuberance drew the attention of the onlookers, onlookers who had a vested interest in keeping things quiet—and doing things “decently and in good order”, as Presbyterians like to say.

You may have heard the story about the old-time Baptist who went to England and attended an Anglican church. In mid-sermon he bellowed out “Amen”. Then a loud “Praise God!” Then after the choral anthem, an “Amen. Praise Jesus!” People were squirming and looking out of the sides of their eyes with alarm. An usher came down the aisle in morning coat and carnation and motioned to the man to follow him to the Narthex.

There he told the man he was disturbing the worshippers and then said, “We don't do that here!” the visitor responded with surprise and no little righteous indignation: “What do you mean? I've got *religion*.” The usher replied, “Sir, that may be, but you didn't get it here!”

When the Pharisees heard the disciples whooping it up and singing their Hosannas, they told Jesus to stifle their praise. It reminds me of King David entering Jerusalem in front of the ark of the Lord, stripped down to his gym

shorts dancing before the Lord with all his might. His wife Michal was not pleased. It was unseemly—and a little out of control.

Were the Pharisees playing Michal to this upstart son of David and his ecstatic, dancing, singing, shouting band of disciples? Or was there more at stake? They had a stake in the status quo and in maintaining the fragile peace with the Roman Imperium. Here the disciples were hailing the true king of Israel and singing “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord.” It would not take much to ignite a rebellion and bring down the terrible swift sword of Rome.

So they told Jesus to shut his disciples up! And Jesus said, “If these be silent the very stones of the earth will cry out!”

### III

Remember when earlier in Luke John the Baptist said, “From these stones God is able to raise up children to Abraham?” (Luke 3:8) All through Luke children have been raised up to Abraham. Elizabeth and Zechariah, fourteen year-old Mary who sang her praise to God: “My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.” And the woman of the city forgiven and now anointing Jesus’ feet. Lepers healed and rejoicing. And the woman bent over for 18 years, and demoniac delivered from his legion of demons, and the Roman centurion, a Gentile, of whom Jesus said, “Not even in Israel have I seen such

faith!” From these stones! And the women called a disciples now following him to Jerusalem. And Zaccheus whose heart of stone was turned into a heart of compassion and a heart of praise.

If these be silent, the very stones of the earth will cry out.

#### IV

The preacher/scholar Paul Scherer said, “There is a truth that will not have its mouth shut.”

I think of the early Christian martyrs whose spilled blood became the seed-bed of the church as it grew and grew despite persecution.

I think of early Baptists who were persecuted for their dissent against Church/State union but who paved the way for the religious liberty we enjoy today.

I think of Dietrich Bonhoeffer who spoke truth about the Nazi regime and was executed by Hitler but whose voice guides us today.

I think of Martin Luther King Jr., slain by an assassins bullet in Memphis but whose voice still rings out!

And I think of songs, songs upon songs, which have stirred out hearts to praise and action.

Like James Weldon Johnson whose words have formed what is regarded as the black National Anthem:

Lift every voice and sing,

Til earth and heaven ring,

Ring with the harmonies of liberty;

let our rejoicing rise high as the listening skies,

Let it resound loud as the rolling sea

Sing a song full of the faith that the dark night has taught us.

Sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us;

Facing the rising sun of our new day begun

Let us march on till victory is won.

And I think of battered and bleeding civil rights workers singing, “This little light of mine, I’m gonna let it shine,” and “We shall overcome.”

Do you know the hymn written by an American Baptist pastor in the 19<sup>th</sup> century which has been a favorite of Quakers today? “How can I keep from Singing”:

My life flows on in endless song

Above life's lamentation

I hear the sweet tho' far off hymn

That hails the new creation.

Thro' all the tumult and the strife

I hear the music ringing;

It finds an echo in my soul—

How can I keep from singing?

Or the black spiritual:

Over my head I hear music in the air

There must be a God somewhere

If these be silent even the stones will cry out!

V

How much praise has come from these red bricks since Grace Baptist Church was built? How many songs, anthems, hymns? They still echo in the air. And words of praise in sermon and in prayers? Even the stones will cry out. Some

days our praise is in the form of acts of compassion. As St. Francis is reported to have said: “Preach the gospel everywhere. If necessary, use words.” Fifth Street, Habitat, Meals on Wheels, Yokefellows. The Theology of the hammer, the apron, the embrace.

If these be silent, the very stones will cry out.

And as Phyllis reminded me yesterday, we must not forget creation’s praise. The flowers praise God and the horses in their gait and the dogs as they run. And the music of mountain streams. Does not the Grand Canyon sing God’s praise? Will we join in?

### Conclusion

A favorite poem of mine, by Richard Wilbur has been set to music. It is in the Episcopal hymn book. It begins at Christmas and ends with Easter: “A Stable Light is Lighted”

A stable lamp is lighted

Whose glow shall reach the sky;

The stars shall bend their voices

And every stone shall cry

And every stone shall cry

And straw like gold shall shine

A barn shall harbor heaven

A stall become a shrine

This child through David's city

Shall ride in triumph by;

The palm shall strew its branches

And every stone shall cry

And every stone shall cry

Though heavy, dull and dumb

And lie within the roadway

To pave his kingdom come

If these be silent, he said, the very stones will cry out.

Today, good disciples, we have lifted palms and sung our praise. "Hosanna, blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord." This Holy Week we will see the

world do its worst, and Jesus slain. But on Sunday, a stone will be moved from the mouth of the cave and alleluias will ring out throughout the world.

How can we keep from singing?