The Stones Will Cry Out
Luke 19: 29-44; Matthew 3:9.

He rode in on a young donkey. We call it the Triumphal Entry but one so different from the triumphalism of the world that we stop this day to remember and take notice.

When Julius Caesar entered Rome after the battle of Carthage—so the historian Suetonius records— there were 10,000 horses, 5,000 elephants, and 100,000 armed soldiers. And that was just the start. The parade took five days and nights to wend its way through the city. The would-be Caesars of the world love military parades.

How different this day was that began this horrid and Holy Week.

I

Jesus came riding in on a young donkey. He had staged it, yes staged it, as prophets sometimes staged their prophecies. And this one was staged as an acted-out parable, and a fulfillment of the words of Zechariah:

Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion!
Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem!
Look! Your king comes to you,
Humble and riding on a donkey.
I will banish the chariot for Ephraim
And the war-horse from Jerusalem….
And he shall command peace to the nations. (Zechariah 9:9-10)

A king, yes, but not on a stallion of war, but on the lowliness of a donkey, a servant king bringing the way of peace. Still he comes and still we miss him. Our eyes are trained on the spectacular and powerful.

Rollin Burhans was the wonderful pastor of Crescent Hill Baptist in the 1950’s, two decades before I arrived. He told me of the time he and Mrs. Burhans went to visit Washington, D.C. They had long wanted to see the White House and came there. A crowd was gathered and they joined to see what was happening. A long black limousine had driven up, and they looked through the heads in front of them to see what famous world leader was coming to visit. All they spied was a non-descript older woman walking by. They were disappointed and went on to the other sites in the Capital city. The next day when they returned, Mrs. Burhans was reading the newspaper and saw who had come from the limousine. “Look!”, she said, showing him the front-page photo. “It was Helen Keller!”, she exclaimed.

It is easy to miss Jesus somedays. We’re looking for the glitter, the power, the wealth.

II

Luke says that a “multitude of disciples” followed Jesus into Jerusalem and began to shout their praise saying:

Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!
Peace in heaven and glory in the highest heaven.

Who were these “multitude of disciples”? Crowds had begun to follow him as he made his way to Jericho where he healed blind Bartimaeus. Even more followed him on to Jerusalem including Bartimaeus himself.

Here was a ragtag group of followers who began in Galilee and had followed him here and grown into a group whose size caused fear in the watchers of the holy parade. Look at them. Jesus was the king of fishermen and tax collectors, harlots and well known sinners, the blind and crippled set free from infirmity, the bent over woman and shunned lepers now healed and brought into the family of God. Women like the Samaritan woman, wrong race, religion and gender made messengers of the gospel.

And there were the Twelve, but also the women disciples Luke identified earlier: Mary Magdalene, Joanna and Suzanna, wife of Herod’s steward, yes, the Herod who wanted him dead. How did THAT happen.? And many other women, Luke said who followed and supported Jesus out of their means. And a little later Luke described the women who had followed Jesus from Galilee who stayed with him through to the end even as the male disciples had all fled. All these were the ones who shouted their exuberant praise. We are them and they are us. We didn’t, you know, have to be here today.

Luke tells us that they laid their garments on the road before him. Not the tuxedo jackets and expensive wraps of the VIPs, but the well-worn cloaks and the fraying scarves of the poor, and they cut down palm branches from the trees and passed them around to wave like happy children at a parade.1

It was a wild and glorious day. The king of peace had come to his people. Jesus didn’t need a parade to validate his credentials. *They* needed a parade to kindle their hope. And Hope came on a young donkey.

But then a dark cloud appeared, raining on the parade, so to speak. “Tell your disciples to shut up!”, some religious leaders told him. They wanted all this praise stifled. Perhaps they were worried that this holy ruckus would spark a holy uprising against Rome and bring down Rome’s wrath on them, unsettle the status quo of the collusion of the religious leaders and Caesar.

Jesus’ words to them have rung in my ears ever since I heard them first: “If these are silent, the very stones of the earth will cry out!”

And so it has been for two thousand years, and often from the fringes of the church rather than its secure center. And on the fringes of belief itself. “If these be quiet, the very stones of the earth will cry out!”

John the Baptist faced the opposition of the religious insiders who claimed ownership of Abraham and his tribe. He said to them:

Do not presume to say to yourself, “We have Abraham as our father”; for I tell you God is able   from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. (Matthew 3:9)

And lo and behold, it began to happen! There was Saul “breathing threats and murder” against the disciples of the Lord on his way to persecute Christians, and there on the road to Damascus the Living Christ appeared to him, knocking him off his high horse, and amid blinding light and amazing grace called Saul, soon to be Paul, to be his apostle to the Gentiles. A stone had moved from his heart, and he never stopped his praise.

And there was Lydia, a successful dealer in purple cloth. Paul spoke Jesus to her, and her home became the house church for new Christians in Philippi. And there was Rhoda the housekeeper who signed up, and Phoebe, the deacon of the Church in Rome. Paul spoke of those members of early church, made up of slaves and women and the social rejects:

God, has made us the last act in the show, a spectacle to the wise. We are glad fools for Christ. (1 Corinthians 4:9)

 “If these be quiet, the very stones will cry out.”

In the Middle Ages there were women mystics who dared speak the gospel from the margins of the institutional church. Christ appeared to them, women without official credentials, in visions. Like Catherine of Sienna in Italy, and Teresa of Avila in Spain and Hildegard of Bingen in Germany! Let me tell you about her.

As a girl she had visions. After years of tussle with the male church officials, she became the Abbess of a monastery of nuns. She was a healing physician, a leader in the practice of Medieval medicine using natural medicines. She composed music still being sung today. She was a theologian, a reformer who pestered the Pope with letters. She called herself, “a small trumpet”, a “feather on the breath of God.” “If these be quiet, the very strikes will cry out.”

There was Francis, young son of a wealthy Italian businessman who protected him from the harsher conditions of life. But one day he left his opulent home and saw the suffering of the poor, and Christ said to him, “Reform my church!” He gave away his wealth and became an apostle of peace. “Preach the gospel everywhere!”, he said, then “If necessary, use words.” There are many ways to cry out the gospel, some without words!

There was Sojourner Truth, freed slave who fought for the abolition of slavery and the emancipation of women. It began when Christ appeared to her and called her. When he appeared to her, she said to him: “I both know you and don’t know you,” the most authentic and honest words I’ve heard from someone who experienced Christ.

There was a Quaker named John Woolmann who went from Quaker meeting house to meeting house, Quaker home to home, to try to convince Quakers and others to give up their slaves. He worn only white, undyed suits because dyes came from slave trade and slave workers.  “If these be silent, the stones will cry out.”

I go to our time and to India. There was a young man named Ghandi. He read the works of novelist Leo Tolstoy whose reading of the Sermon on the Mount had changed his life. Gandhi read Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount and was convinced of the way of non-violence as a way to change the world. His non-violent protest changed India. He said of Jesus’ teaching that he might have become a Christian except for the Christians.

There was a young Black man named Bayard Rustin who was converted to non-violent social change by Ghandi. He brought his convictions to the home of Martin Luther King Jr, who had begun his first Civil Rights actions. His life and home and family were being threatened by violence, and Bayard told him to put his pistol away and to stay with non-violent resistance as his path. Bayard became a leader in the Movement and planned the famous March on Washington. We don’t know much about him because he was a gay man and took an inconspicuous role because he didn’t want to be a distraction.

And how can we forget Fanny Lou Hamer, a mighty woman and another relatively unsung hero of the Movement. She was a leader in voter-registration drives in the South, and in 1963 she and her friends were arrested for sitting in a “Whites Only” section in a bus station. That night in jail she was so savagely beaten that her body never fully recovered from the injuries. Undeterred she kept on. When things would get scary and tough in a Civil Rights protest, she would begin singing, “This little light of mine, I’m gonna let it shine.” And soon everyone was singing. “If these be silent, the very stones will cry out!” Sing too!

Have you noticed how often God has raised up disciples from the most unlikely of places? Martin Luther King said that the vitality of religion often comes from the edges, not from the easy secure center. The true church is always a “Moral *Minority*!”

There was a young woman living in N.Y. City, Frances Perkins, who witnessed the horror of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire, where 146 of the garment workers trapped inside perished. She saw women jumping from windows to their deaths. She was changed, and became a labor advocate. She went on to be the Secretary of Labor in the FDR Administration, serving 12 years, longer than any other Cabinet member. Under her leadership FDR enacted social legislation which made us a better nation, including the Social Security Act.  We need a new Frances Perkins today. They are all over even, perhaps in this church. “If these are silent, the stones of the earth will cry out.”

Nature bears witness. Cut a tree down to the stump. Then saplings begin to grow. The church is that stump. Look at the stones and bricks of our modest church building. If they could talk, imagine all the stories that would be told.

IV

After the Procession into Jerusalem, Jesus went on into the city and wept over it:

Would that even today you knew the things that make for peace! But now they are hid from your eyes…. You did not know the time of your visitation. (Luke 19: 41,44)

It is so easy to miss him and his way of peace. We want easier, quicker solutions than the hard work and long way of peace. Violence is quicker; peace is in for the long haul.

But this is the way of God throughout human history, the Biblical story, and the whole story of Jesus, from the manger to the cross to Easter’s empty tomb. “If these be quiet, the stones will bring cry it out!”  A contemporary poet, Richard Wilber has joined the whole story of Jesus with Palm Sunday and Easter, a poem which has been set to music. There is a truth that will not have its mouth shut and a song that will sing forever. Here are his words, the title, “A Stable Lamp is Lighted.”

A stable lamp is lighted
whose glow shall reach the sky;
The stars shall bend their voices,
And every stone will cry.
And every stone will 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.

Yet shall he be forsaken
and yielded up die;
The sky shall groan and darken,
And every stone shall cry.
And every stone shall cry
for hearts made hard by sin;
God’s blood upon the spearhead,
God’s love refused again.

But now, as at the ending,
the low is lifted high;
The stars shall bend their voices,
And every stone shall cry.
And every stone shall cry,
in praises of the child
By whose descent among us
the worlds are reconciled.

Hosanna. Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.

Joy to the World, the Lord is Come.

1. I am indebted to Alan Culpepper for his images of the “multitude of disciples”. Luke, The New Interpreter’s Bible, vol.IX (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995),p.370.