

Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by The Reverend Gail L. Miller, Pastor

March 28, 2010 Palm Sunday

Luke 19:29-40

Palms – Rocks – Wood – Lilies

There are no palms, or Hosanna's! Did you notice? In our Palm Sunday lesson – no palms and no shouting *Hosanna!* All the usual other stuff – crowds, the baby donkey, the coats on the road, the shouting – but no palms. All the others have them – Matthew, Mark and John. But not Luke. Instead he has some thing they don't have. Stones.

Here's the setting: When Jesus came in to Jerusalem, riding on the foal of a donkey, going to what he knew was his death, the crowds came out to greet him – a multitude – the Greek word there is actually *plethora*.

I wonder if it was as big as that multitude on the hillside where 5,000 were fed (not counting women and children). However many there were, there were a lot of people who joined that procession, going down the mountain toward the city. And as they went they began to sing, from memory, without a hymnal and without a bulletin - they sang, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord," Psalm 118. And then they borrowed the song of the angels, "Peace in heaven and glory in the highest heaven."

And this made the Pharisees nervous. Certainly they knew who Jesus was and all the controversy that seemed to travel with him. Perhaps they were sympathetic and were afraid that if he drew too much attention he'd get into real trouble. Perhaps they saw him as a threat to their authority and wanted him to keep quiet, maintain the status quo, rather than stir things up.

We don't know – and really it doesn't matter. Because even if the Pharisees could push the mute button on the crowds following Jesus, *the stones themselves would cry out* (v. 40).

Wow! It will help us to hear the sound of the stones if we know the fuller meaning of the word "cry out." A few of the other places in the Bible that we see this word are:

A woman crying in childbirth

The possessed having a seizure

Jesus crying out in on the cross in the moment he died

It really means "scream or shriek," like the cry of a nightmare. This is the sound when the stones cry out. And what would they say, I wonder....

Poet Laureate Richard Wilbur has written a poem which uses this line, "every stone shall cry" repeatedly as he takes us from the stable and cradle of Christ's birth through to his cross. It is often sung to at Christmas, but the concluding verse reminds us of the reason for Christ's coming that led to Good Friday. It is entitled, *A Christmas Hymn*.

A stable-lamp is lighted
Whose glow shall wake 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.

Yet he shall be forsaken,
And yielded up to die;
The sky shall groan and darken,
And every stone shall cry.
And every stone shall cry
For stony hearts of men:
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.

(*A Christmas Hymn* by Richard Wilbur, *New and Collected Poems*, 1988, Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1988.)

Stones do speak; they tell a story. The Palm Sunday story of the stones crying out is a story which uses both articulate words – "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!" – and actions and symbols – palms, cloaks, a donkey, stones – to communicate a message with and without words.

The stones have a story to tell – of Jesus "the Word of God made flesh, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). And those of us who follow Jesus also tell his story with both words and actions.

Frank McCourt, the author of *Angela's Ashes*, has more recently told the story of his young adulthood, *'Tis: A Memoir*. As a young man, McCourt was a soldier stationed in Europe not long after World War II. One day he was on laundry assignment, an assignment that took him, of all

places, to Dachau, one of the most notorious concentration camps of the Nazis, which was now empty except for where the laundry for nearby military camps was being done.

One of the other soldiers, Rappaport, was Jewish and, in great distress, refused to enter the camp. McCourt went in, and as he looked at the ovens and thought of "what went in there," he wondered if he should touch them, and whether "it's proper to say a Catholic prayer in the presence of the Jewish dead. If I were killed by the English would I mind if the likes of Rappaport touched my tombstone and prayed in Hebrew?"

No, I wouldn't mind after priests telling us that all prayers that are unselfish and not for ourselves reach God's ears....I don't know if it's proper to say the Our Father touching the door of an oven but it seems harmless enough and it's what I say hoping the Jewish dead will understand my ignorance" (Frank McCourt, *Tis: A Memoir*).

The stones of Dachau cry out and Frank McCourt's clumsy but heartfelt theologizing at the mass graves of innocents surely touches the heart of God. It draws us back again, ironically, to why Jesus died, to be the face of a compassionate God who lets nothing come between us and the love that holds us every day of our lives, not just during Holy Week, not just when we're in church, not just when we're praying or feeling particularly holy ourselves.

This week, as we stumble toward Jerusalem, we can rely on God's grace to carry us every step of the way. On this Palm Sunday, (with or without palms), in this one moment, we can make a way for Jesus, we can throw our cloaks on the ground and sing our songs of praise, and trust the unknown future to the God who works good in every circumstance and in every holy week of our lives.

And on Thursday about half of us will gather here in this room again. It will be a lot darker though – as we ponder Jesus' last night with his disciples and receive the Lord's Supper. We will also follow Jesus through the pain of Friday and all the events that lead up to his death. And then we will sit in darkness together. And for a brief time, I think that yes, even the stones will be silent with grief.

I wish you all could be here, but many of us have kids going to bed at about the same time we're getting going. It doesn't seem quite right to go from *All Glory, Laud and Honor* to *Christ, the Lord Is Risen Today*, without also going with Jesus into the valley, into the garden, and on to the foot of the cross.

So if you can't get to church – any church – on Thursday or Friday, take a moment at home to remind yourselves and your kids that Friday is "the sad day" when Jesus died. The joy of Easter will be that much greater for remembering why we are so happy on Easter.

I try to never forget that the Risen Christ of Easter is the crucified Jesus of Good Friday. The Risen Christ of Easter still bears the marks of the nails that killed him. Because when I am happy and healthy and well fed, I want a God without a cross, a God who will prop up my life and maintain the things I want, and not cause me too much a trouble, a nice God who dwells in sunlight and doesn't trouble my conscience or demand too much of me. Just God in his place.

But we forget that God's place is on the cross. As Protestants, we like our empty cross...I like our empty cross. But the danger is that we forget that for a day, God hung there.

The hymn we will sing after the sermon does a good job of connecting Palm Sunday with Easter Sunday. (It's called *He Died Upon the Lonely Tree*, and the words are printed and we've chosen a familiar tune to go with the words.) © 2001 Richard L. Floyd

He died upon the lonely tree
forsaken by his God.
and yet his death means all to me
and saves me by his blood.

The world will never know his worth
the wise will never see,
But those forsaken, broken, bowed,
will recognize that tree.

And know that there God's love does reign
and conquers sin and death;
Thwarts hate and evil, comforts pain,
gives hope while there is breath.

The nations grasp at wealth and power
while wars like tempests toss,
But finally in God's good hour,
they'll know him in his cross

Then wars will cease and weapons fall,
and fear will melt away.
For Christ will be their all in all,
from day to endless day.

With the stones and the stars we honor the one despised and rejected by the wisdom and the power of the world. In spite of the warning of the Pharisees we testify, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest heavens."

Don't be too quick to exchange your palms for lilies. Remember the stones and the wood as well.

Because even without the palms and the Hosanna's, Palm Sunday is a time when God will not be silent. Because God's unmistakable message of love for the world cannot ever be silenced. Because, even if no one tells the story, sings the praise, cries in love for others then the very stones will speak, and praise, and let others know the lengths to which God's love will go.

And it will go as far as the cross. Amen.