

The Rocks are Gonna Cry Out!
Luke 19:28-40; Luke 22:45-53

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There is the potential for liturgical whiplash on Palm Sunday. If you want to know what I mean, look at the hymns that we are singing today – it starts out well enough, if you want a happy tune, *All Glory, Laud and Honor*... it's majestic. I am convinced that every Presbyterian Church in the United States is probably singing this hymn today – did you know it's an old hymn text from Charlemagne's court? We've been singing these very words for more than a thousand years and there's not a question what is meant by them – glory, laud and honor. The music sounds like what we sing. It marches and soars. It's trumpets and tympanis all the way.

But now look at our last hymn, *When I Survey the Wondrous Cross*. It's more legato – more contemplative – cellos and violas, the bows lingering over the notes.

That's the story of the last week of Jesus' life for you – hosannas at the start and requiem at the last.

What happens in between?

It's no great mystery that most revolutions start off with a great deal of fervor. Think back on the history of populist movements through the years... Our own American Revolution began with the rather robust Declaration of Independence, John Hancock's outsized signature and all. But of course, it wasn't long before it was Valley Forge in the winter.

The French revolution – liberte, egalite, fraternite – until of course, the fraternite disintegrated. The students built the barricades, but then nobody joined them.

It was all red sashes and storming the winter palace for the Bolsheviks, but it ended rather quietly seventy-odd years later with the stroke of a pen.

We humans do love us a good parade, don't we? Pardon me for the impulsive use of the reflexive here, I know it's bad grammar, but when you want to point it all back to yourself, nothing else will quite do, no?

I mean, who doesn't enjoy a celebration? If we don't have something to celebrate, we'll make something up from time to time to keep it interesting.

I did a simple search this week, just out of curiosity, to see what people consider the most useless holiday. You wouldn't believe the bile that has accumulated around Valentine's day – I really thought it would arbor day or cheese day or something like that, national underwater basket-weaving day – but no, the antipathy that exists toward Valentine's day is breathtaking!

The general consensus is it is a made up celebration.

And the general belief around it is that we'll fall into anything to keep the peace, to make sure things run smoothly, to avoid the dog-house – as long as it doesn't cost us too much.

I realize this is making it sound like I have a rather gloomy view of humankind or at least of made-up holidays, but it does just seem a little convenient that the week starts off so well and by Thursday it's looking bad, and before we know it, it's noontime on Friday, the sky's turned black, Jesus is hanging from a tree and soon bound for a stone-cold tomb.

What happened?

You'll forgive me if I seem a bit pessimistic about humankind when we got from the parade to the cortege in such short order.

What happened here?

It seems at a glance like so much mob-mentality run amok, but its actually a little more nuanced than that.

For starters, in Luke's version of the gospel, it's no mob that gathers around Jesus to crown him king – it's his own disciples. They go and get the colt. They put him on the back of it, they surround him on his ride into town.

The word is that folks joined into the celebration, throwing cloaks on the road. No one actually says, "Hosanna" in Luke.

And there is nothing to indicate that the folks who called for Jesus' crucifixion were the ones who threw their clothes in the street. We have every reason to think that they just went back to their business. Parade's over, nothing to see here, move it along, folks.

And I will give you a true confession in this moment. This is exactly the moment in the writing of this sermon where I realized that I have absolutely no inspiration on what to say about the story of the passion.

I can tell you what the various Gospel writers were trying to do as they told it.

I can relate to you the signs that its all going to go downhill in a hurry.

I can share with you the experience of being deeply moved by the celebration of the sacrament this Thursday night as we gather around table – just like the family we are – to remember what Jesus commanded us to remember.

I can grieve with you on Friday when we read scriptures and sing hymns and look squarely at the result of human sin.

But I can't get excited about what happens in between. I can't explain it to any of our satisfaction.

No, I can't explain it, but I have observed through the years one corollary, though, that once something starts to go bad, it goes bad fast.

I'm astonished perpetually once the tipping point has occurred.

Haven't you seen that happen?

I mean, my word, if we need anything more than politicians with twitter accounts to prove that, we aren't paying attention!

It seems sometimes that once something starts going downhill, it snowballs.

How long had it been snowballing for Jesus?

Well, we know that he was nearly flung off a cliff once after a sermon he preached...

We know that he was chased out of town for destruction of property once after a healing provoked a livestock stampede.

We know that he had the bad sense, just a few minutes before getting up on the donkey to wave a coin with Caesar's image on it under someone's nose and say, "If you want to worship an idol, give the idol the coins with his picture on them."

Opening your mouth can get you in so much trouble!

And once the trouble starts...

But it started off so well. Everybody loves a parade.

All glory, laud and honor, to thee redeemer king!

And next thing we know... surveying the wondrous cross.

Do you want me to make sense of it for you?

I can't.

I mean, I can tell you what happened. But explain it?

But there's a lot that we see that is hard to explain, isn't there?

Isn't that true of so much of what we encounter that is hard to make sense of?

Car accident, one person walks away, the other doesn't. We can look at the cars and see what happened, but explain it?

Same chemo protocol, remission in one patient, not so for the other. We know what the medicine does, the processes of the body, but explain it? Good luck.

Two parents, same gene-pool, one child will thrive, the other will struggle all her life.

We can map the genome, but explain it?

Two revolutionaries go to town, a big parade breaks out around the one, and the other is rotting in jail, but what a difference five days makes – one is dead and the other is freed.

We can tell what happened... but explain it?

I don't think so.

The theological answer is sin, of course. But explain it?

That's what's so unsatisfying about Palm Sunday – it starts off so well. But we know how it ends – we don't even have to wait until Friday to find out.

We know that it's going to spiral out of control. We know that Jesus is going to go to the Garden and pray and when he gets there, before the night is over his betrayer will show up and kiss him on the cheek.

We know that he's going "to suffer under Pontius Pilate."

We know that he's going "to be crucified, dead and buried."

There's no mystery there!

We'll get to that other part next week, but in the meantime, what's there to do?

It is enough to leave us with nothing to say, isn't it?

That's where we have to remember that this isn't a real-time account. Luke didn't write it down as it was happening. He put pen to paper later, after a while.

He has one little line that makes me wonder if he wondered the same things. I wonder whether Luke knew there would be times when our words we be stifled.

Do you suppose Luke ever grappled with the knowledge that he knew how the story turns out in the end?

Do you suppose Luke ever got to the point where he'd heard the Palm Sunday story so much that he just wanted to interrupt it, "Yes, but we know where this is going..."

I have to wonder whether Luke knew there would be times when our voices would fail because of the one line Luke included.

When the Pharisees told him to get his followers to shut up - who knows why they wanted them to pipe down, Jesus uttered these words, "If they keep quiet, the stones would cry out."

What an odd thing to say.

Rocks don't have voices!

I remember a piece of music I sang when I was in seminary, the words went something like this, "Lord, I keep so busy praising my Jesus, I ain't got time to die. Lord, I keep so busy working for the kingdom, ain't got time to die. Cause when I'm healing the sick, I'm praising my Jesus, when I'm feeding the poor, I'm praising my Jesus. 'Cause if I don't praise him, the rocks are gonna cry out, 'Glory and honor, glory and honor,' I ain't got time to die.

Because, do you know what?

When we have nothing to say, the work of God will still speak for itself.

Even when we can't explain it, the work of God is *always* that of redemption. Even when it looks hopeless, the work of God is for redemption!

And even when we *know what is coming*, we can still work for redemption.

Did you know that?

It's never too late to be working for redemption.

It's never too late to work for redemption even if it's for a lost cause.

There's that great line in Gone with the Wind where Rhett Butler turns to Scarlett as he's leaving the join the ruined army, "I have a weakness for lost causes, once they're really lost."

That's God's way, after all, never to give up on lost causes, even when they're really lost.

Of course, we know what's coming. We know what's coming all week.

And we know that in the end, there is life. Even when the cause can't get any more lost than dead, God never stops working for redemption.

So, I guess there's some singing to be done – or else the rocks will take up the song for us.

"When I'm feeding the poor, I'm praising my Jesus. When I'm healing the sick, I'm praising my Jesus, when I'm working for the kingdom, I'm praising my Jesus, because if I don't praise him, the rocks are gonna cry out, 'glory and honor!'"

There's some singing to do – even when the cause is good and thoroughly lost. Hosanna, loud hosanna, the little children sang...

It's starting off so well... what could possibly go wrong?

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.