

“Shouting Stones”

A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church

Luke 19:29-44

April 9, 2017

Palm Sunday

The peace of Christ be with you all.

When we read the Palms Sunday account from Luke, I can't help but place side by side — entering from opposite ends of Jerusalem — the Pax Romana and the Peace of Christ. The Pax Romana (the Peace of Rome) was a peace maintained by allowing areas under rule to govern themselves and backing it up with crushing force to squash any rebellion. From the west, governor Pontius Pilate entered the city, visiting from his seaside palace to ensure that there was no trouble in Jerusalem during Passover, a festival, he was well aware, celebrated deliverance from a foreign power.

And then, from the east, this scene. Jesus, on a colt. He has spent his entire ministry walking, but here he rides. Cloaks are spread and disciples are praising God with loud voices, proclaiming the deeds of power they'd seen.

From the west, horses and armor clopped and clanged. Shiny helmets shone. It was impressive. It was terrifying. From the east, a bunch of fishermen and tax collectors and sinners. From the west, the show of might and a caution to any who would stir up trouble. From the east, a royal march declaring “Caesar is not our lord” and “religion mixed with power is the opposite of the Passover story” and “the kingdom of God is at hand” and “we have seen things - deeds of power.” It was dangerous, this procession. It was treasonous.

The Pharisees see what Jesus is doing, with his donkey procurement and his triumphal entry. The Pharisees know that the cloaks and the shouts of testimony will attract attention and be met with force. They beg him to calm everyone down. To bide his time. Maybe to tell everyone to have a Pepsi. To tell his disciples not to start something. They want Jesus and company not to draw the attention of the powerful. This is not what we walked all this way for. This is going to get us all killed.

And Jesus replies: “I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out.”

Last night at the concert we held here, the director of the gospel choir from Maryville College paused between songs and asked aloud, “What's going on with all these rocks, Edgewood folks?” We have been using these stones throughout Lent to mark the path and to tell the stories of the journey to Jerusalem. If these were silent, the stones would shout out.

The stones would tell of the mighty deeds they have seen: healing and restoration and mercy.

These stones would tell of the wisdom and truth that has been shared: parables of God's refusal to give up on any of us, and of God's deep love for the forgotten and forsaken, and of God's commitment to stand beside the poor and marginalized and how God says "I'm here with them. If you want to be near me, it's your move."

These stones would tell of what they had seen and heard and what they were seeing and hearing now: the very presence of God. Julie read to us from the prophet Zechariah's oracle about the arrival of the king. I want us to remember a later Zechariah as well. Zechariah, the priest, the father of John the Baptist, who gave his own prophecy that his son would prepare the way for the savior. At the end of his prophecy, Zechariah sang:

"By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace."

Just a little bit later in Luke, we find shepherds in a field at night, encountering an angel who tells them of a birth, and then a multitude of the heavenly host saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom God favors!"

Now, at the entrance to the city, "the whole multitude" of the disciples praise God, saying, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!" Jesus laments, "If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace!...you did not recognize the time of your visitation from God."

How deeply sad it is to imagine missing out on our holy visitation. How heartbreaking to imagine that the breath of life, wisdom, truth, the sacred presence, the Lord, adonai, Elohim, El Shaddai, YHWH, HaShem, our rock and our redeemer, our shepherd, the Alpha and the Omega, Abba, wonderful counselor, Prince of Peace, the mother hen, Immanuel — our God has come to see us, and we did not recognize the time our visitation.

How sad for us, and yet it is Christ who weeps.

He weeps because they have missed the visitation. They have failed to see God before them. Jesus gives every opportunity for those who meet him to receive God. And here we are, shushing those who offer praise. Every generation seeks to silence those who speak holy words too loudly. Sometimes they are told to stop causing a scene in the streets. Sometimes they are jailed. Sometimes they are lynched. Sometimes they are assassinated. God is visiting the holy city, and the city will respond with rejection. And violence. The center of religious power, and the intersection of religious power with military might will respond with a targeted strike intended to restore the Pax Romana. Violence will beget peace. Fear will beget peace. Death will beget peace.

"As he came near and saw the city, he wept over it, saying, 'If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace!'"

Those proclamations about the presence of God — the ones from Advent and Christmas and the ones

from Palm Sunday — they all contain that pesky word: *peace*. Zechariah: “The dawn from on high will break...to guide our feet into the way of peace.” The heavenly host: “...on earth peace among those whom God favors!” The crowd: “Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!”

“I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out.” The stones shout, “peace!” But what do they mean? Perhaps you’ve seen the bumper sticker that reads, “When Jesus said, ‘Love your enemies,’ I’m pretty sure he meant don’t kill them.”

I had a friend in seminary who was a terrible cook. Yet he would try so hard. He liked to make stir-fry. He declared that stir-fry would be on the menu for dinner. He would set out to make stir-fry. If you called him while he was cooking, he would tell you he was working on a stir-fry. If you sat down at his table, he would offer you stir-fry.

But this young man did not know the things that made for stir-fry. He would cut sweet potatoes into large chunks and try to stir-fry them quickly. Alternatively, he would add cucumbers to a pan and let them get nice and well-done. He would mismatch flavors. And he would add cup upon cup of liquid to the pan and then wander off to watch cartoons. We, his alleged friends, would refer to his concoctions as “stir-boils.” He would serve up a stir-fry — a “stir-fry Romana” if you will — for it was a stir-fry in name only.

Peace is not peace if it is peace at the end of a Roman sword. Peace by intimidation and oppression and violence and crucifixion is peace in name only.

Days are tough enough without that kind of peace. We saw pictures this week of the sanctuary at Montevallo Presbyterian Church, smashed in by a fallen tree early Monday morning. Day by day, we encounter suffering in our families and friends, in our own bodies, and in our own minds. Broken relationships, work stress, and responsibilities give us a run for our money. There are more problems than solutions, it seems. There are more scary things than soothing things, we feel. Chaos abounds. Children halfway around the world, children we don’t know break our hearts when horrific violence swallows them up. Just this morning, we hear of Palm Sunday worshipers in Egypt being killed by bombs. And in the middle of all of that, we get knocked sideways as our own grief wallops us.

We yearn for peace. We ache for peace. We panic for peace, like struggling swimmers. And then the peace offered to us by Rome — and by our own leaders so many centuries later — is a peace based on swords and spears and bombs and drones and aircraft carriers. “Come, we offer peace,” they say. “Take this pruning hook and see if you can fashion something pointy out of it.”

The crowd cries for peace. Jesus weeps for lack of it. God’s very presence has come to dwell among us, putting foot upon stone, and we will reject it. We’ll reject the presence and the foot and the stones. As this week carries on, Rome will make peace with the religious leaders. The Pax Romana will be invoked, so that only one must die to stave off rebellion. The Roman peace will claim victory.

But this world does not know the things that make for peace. Ask the stones, they will tell you. First the crowd will grow silent. The stones will shout, but those who think they know peace will not listen. Then the crowd will change its tune. And the stones will still shout, but “Crucify him!” will win out. The stones have gone along this way, and they will mark the path to the hillside, and they will mark the grave. The stones will be the first witnesses to a new peace. But we are not there yet.

As the tumult of this week threatens to carry us in a thousand different directions, seek the things that make for peace. You’ll hear competing claims, but you know how to tell which are true. The peace you seek is found inscribed on your heart by the rock of your salvation. It does not tell you to be silent. It asks you to do something far more difficult: to say its name with boldness and clarity among the dizziness and cheers of a fickle crowd.