

“And the Rocks Kept Silent”
Palm Sunday, April 14, 2019
Presbyterian Church in Leonia
Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler, Pastor

Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29
Luke 19:28-40

The stones were prepared to sing. They had rehearsed their song since the beginning of creation. When I read that Jesus told the Pharisees that if the multitude of disciples had not cried out their joyful praises upon Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem, “the stones would shout out.” I spent some time wondering, trying to imagine what rhythms nature offered that the stones would share if they did have to shout out. I finally figured it out. They would sing... rock music! All jokes aside, I love it that scripture testifies to the fact that all creation-- not just Jesus’ multitude of disciples, not even just humans-- were prepared to acknowledge the glory of Jesus as he entered the gates of Jerusalem.

But the rocks kept silent, because those who dared to worship Jesus sang out as he rode that colt to Jerusalem. He came down from Bethany, where he had eaten with Mary Magdalene, Martha and their brother Lazarus. He passed through the Mount of Olives, and asked his disciples to run ahead of him and find a colt that had never been ridden, and say to its masters that The Master needs it. Before Jesus was hoisted onto that colt, people offered the clothes off their backs for him to sit upon, and from there a sort of red carpet appeared-- not really red, and not really a carpet, but a pathway laid by people peeling off their clothes and laying them on the ground before Jesus. Yes, in Luke’s gospel, people throw down their clothes instead of waving palm branches, as they do in John and Matthew (and Mark’s gospel has people waving branches AND laying down their cloaks).

We see all this attention for Jesus’ entry from the east side of Jerusalem, where the Temple stood. However, on the opposite side of Jerusalem, at about the same time, the Imperial Parade with Pontius Pilate on horseback surrounded by his soldiers would have been arriving from the West, where Herod’s palace stood. Pilate was the Roman governor over Judea and the surrounding areas, and while he did not live in Jerusalem, he made his way into this ancient city each year for the Passover, since it was the holiest of weeks for the Jews. The Passover, we remember, tells the story of liberation of the Hebrews when they were captives, and in a mighty reversal, the Egyptian army that kept the Hebrews enslaved were the ones who were swallowed up by the Red Sea. So you can imagine that the Roman authorities, who were the occupying power over

Jerusalem, would get a little nervous and want to practice some crowd control in case any Jews tried to take those spiritual themes of liberation literally.

In addition, the Roman belief of the time was that the Roman Emperor was the earthly manifestation of the divine. Pontius Pilate, as representative of the Emperor, carried with him that authority, and his presence in Jerusalem helped the belief in a holy Emperor take form and shape, putting the hierarchy between Roman authorities and Jewish peasant class into place.

And yet, it was these same Jewish peasants who showed up-- not on the West side of Jerusalem where Pilate was marching in, but on the East side, where Jesus was arriving. They were so joyful! With the entry of Jesus came their hope, their salvation, their king, their God!

Now, the Pharisees tried to keep the crowds calm and orderly. It could have been to protect Jesus, and his followers, from Roman eyes and ears. Maybe it was care for their own people and even for Jesus that made them want to keep them out of trouble with the authorities.

Or maybe, since the gospels often reported the Pharisees chewing on Jesus' ideas about God and religious practice as if they thought Jesus was just a bit too extra, the Pharisees just might have thought the people were going a little bit *too* far. In Psalm 118:16, it is written, "Blessed is *the one* who comes in the name of The Lord." But the crowds surrounding Jesus changed the song; it was just by one word, but that one word made a big difference. Jesus' followers were singing, "Blessed is *the king* who comes in the name of The Lord." As strict monotheists, the Pharisees were careful about offering their allegiance before any human authority who isn't God. It was one thing to have the Roman Emperor as their king-- not their choice of ruler, but it was the hand of cards they had been dealt. However, to choose to call a man, even if he was a remarkable teacher and even prophet, a king before God might have been offering Jesus more credit than the Pharisees were comfortable giving.

And yet on he went, and he told his critics that it was no use stopping their joyful shouts, because even if the people went silent, the rocks would continue the praise.

I love how this passage includes creation in the chorus of praise for Jesus. It is a silent participant, because the people are offering the praise, but we know that nature is tuned and ready to offer its part should the need arise.

Creation is a powerful force, and bigger than our imaginations can even grasp. Did you see the image that emerged last week, a fiery ring, which was the first photographed picture of a black hole? Jesus spoke of rocks, of water, of bread and wine; but last week our imaginations were flung into a universe where there are multiple galaxies, planets yet to be discovered, stars that died years before their light has finally hit our eyes. If we travel 55 million light years away, we will reach the Messier 87 Galaxy. For several years scientists have noticed a cluster of stars showing activity, but all their movement seemed to avoid a certain dark center.

Now, I will try to explain this with some fear and trembling. You should know that my most common anxiety dream is that I am in my last semester of college, and halfway through the semester I realize I have not been going to the Astronomy class I need before I can graduate. I have to come in midway, without knowing any of the material, and somehow catch up quickly enough to pass the class to graduate. Sometimes in my dream I even tell myself, "Leah, I know you have dreamed this before but this time it is not a dream! You really do have to pass Astronomy or terrible things will happen." Needless to say, Astronomy was my most challenging class in college even though I never skipped it, but I did pass, and no one can take that class away from me!

But even *I* was dazzled with the wonder of this beautiful image of the black hole, and it sent me reading up on the black hole info I had forgotten once my astronomy final was complete.

Here is how Stephen Hawking described black holes.

A black hole has a boundary, called the event horizon. It is where gravity is just strong enough to drag light back, and prevent it escaping. Because nothing can travel faster than light, everything else will get dragged back also. Falling through the event horizon, is a bit like going over Niagara Falls in a canoe.

If you are above the falls, you can get away if you paddle fast enough, but once you are over the edge, you are lost. There's no way back. As you get nearer the falls, the current gets faster. This means it pulls harder on the front of the canoe, than the back. There's a danger that the canoe will be pulled apart. It is the same with black holes.¹

As I hold this image together with the story of Jesus entering Jerusalem, despite the joy and light that surrounds his entry, I know that what Jesus is heading towards is in many

¹ Chris York, "Stephen Hawking's Black Hole Theory Explained for Non-Physicists" in huffingtonpost.com 3/14/2018

ways like a black hole. Once he crosses that boundary into Jerusalem, it is like he has passed through the **event horizon**, and there is no way he can turn back. He knows this, I believe, as he heads towards Jerusalem. His teachings and actions throughout his ministry have brought danger upon him because he ministered with an authority that threatened the religious and political hierarchies. But his were words and actions worth offering, no matter what the cost. Even though they would cost his life, he would not have taken them back. While earlier on, he could have said some words, made alliances with all the right people, dialed it back on the healings on the Sabbath, he could have saved his life, I suspect once Jesus passed into Jerusalem, he could not change the course of things even if he wanted to.

And though today we have parades, children singing, palm branches, and an imaginary colt, we know that the next 6 days are not so joyful. In it, we will taste the last supper Jesus shares with all 12 of his disciples. In the shadows we see greed and betrayal as Judas betrays Jesus with a kiss in exchange for 30 pieces of silver. In a garden we will watch Jesus weep and pray that this cup might pass from him. We will hear the crowd that welcomed Jesus with joy today, turn into a mob of angry voices, demanding “Give us Barabbas”. We will see execution, taste Mary’s tears, and hear Jesus cry out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” as he breathes his last. We will see the silent darkness of a tomb, a black hole, where everything ceases to exist. We hear the scraping of a stone rolling to close it.

The stone. “If these were silent, the stones would shout out.”

Today, instead of listening to all the human voices out there, let’s consider something creation has to say. Stephen Hawking believed that, contrary to what most of science teaches, “black holes are not the eternal prisons they were once thought. Things can get out of a black hole,” Hawking said in a lecture, “both on the outside, and possibly to another universe. So, if you feel you are in a black hole, don’t give up. There’s a way out.”²

Imagine that! Stephen Hawking, a self-proclaimed atheist, used a black hole to preach a sermon on resurrection.

² Stephen Hawking, “Reith Lecture” for BBC Radio, 2016
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EPNGZpp6Glo#action=share>

It seems like we are light years away from Jesus' entry to Jerusalem, his death, and his resurrection. And yet, we too are compelled to join the ancient chorus, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!" And, maybe the stones are singing with us.