

**First Presbyterian Church, Wausau**

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**The Stones Would Shout – March 20, 2016**

Palm Sunday is the kick-off into Holy Week. Jesus and his disciples have finally arrived near Jerusalem with the crowds of pilgrims flocking into the city for the Festival of Passover. He sent his disciples to pick up a young donkey to fulfill the prophecy of Zechariah, which says "Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey." (Zech 9:9)

So the disciples brought the colt, put their cloaks across its back, and set Jesus upon him. The trail from the Mount of Olives to Jerusalem was about two miles. As Jesus rode along, people kept throwing their cloaks in front of him on the road. When the path began to head down the hill, the disciples started praising God with shouts of joy. These disciples had been with Jesus throughout his journey and they had seen the deeds of power he had performed.

Remember when Jesus had come to his hometown synagogue back at the beginning of his ministry? There he stood up, read the passage from the scroll, and made the rather startling announcement that he had come to fulfill the words he read, words that came from the prophet Isaiah. That he had come to do perform deeds of liberation – of giving sight to the blind, good news to the poor and release to the captives. And though the folks in Nazareth had not been very receptive to his message, the disciples were witnesses to these things that took place during his ministry. They saw the healings – the blind man, the woman who was bent over, the man who was paralyzed. They observed the exorcisms, they witnessed the calming of the storm on the water, they saw him raise the daughter of Jarius from the dead, and they ate the bread and fish that fed the five thousand who had gathered around Jesus to hear him teach.

Some of them probably knew the prophecy of Zechariah. They understood the significance of the king riding into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey. And they really thought, as they headed toward Jerusalem for the Festival of the Passover, that the time for Jesus to take political power had come. They had not listened to him when he told them on three occasions that he would suffer and die. They couldn't comprehend that message. Those words seemed foolish to their ears. The Messiah wasn't supposed to die.

But for the moment, they were caught up in the excitement of this mini parade, an impromptu affair to celebrate their Lord and proclaim him king. They shouted with joy and praised God, saying "Blessed is the king, who comes in the name of the Lord!" Those words

probably turned a few heads. And then they cried out, "Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!" These words have a ring of familiarity to them. Listen again, "Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!" It seems like we've heard those words before. Or something very similar. Do those words ring a bell for you? To me, it kinda sounds like a line from the inside of a Christmas card. Peace on earth, glory to God, and you almost expect to hear the next line - goodwill to all?

And that's exactly what we have here, with a turn of phrase, suddenly Luke transports us back to Christmas Eve, when out on a lonely hillside in Bethlehem, a host of angels appeared in front of some startled shepherds and called out to them, "Glory to God in the highest, and peace on earth among those whom he favors." (Luke 2:14) Those angels spoke of the birth of a king, of a savior who would bring peace by dethroning the powerful and lifting up the oppressed. A king who would reign not by the sword, but by love. A savior who would usher in God's kingdom, a kingdom in which the poor, the downtrodden and the lowly would find themselves on top. Quite a reversal of expectation!

Those shepherds hurriedly went in search of this baby king, and found him lying in a manger, just like the angels told them. And now that baby is all grown up. The Christmas story is inevitably linked to the Easter story. The manger has always stood in the shadow of the cross. The message of the Christmas season has always been the message of Easter. A message that seems foolish to those who don't understand. But it is a theme that has run throughout Luke's gospel.

At Christmas time we find ourselves greeting each other with those words, "Peace on earth, good will to all, glory to God in the highest." As Presbyterian professor and pastor Tom Long has said, "Luke wants us to know that these words we so cheerily send to each other at Christmas come with a Good Friday price. The words sung at Jesus' birth are now marking his path to Calvary. The angels' cry of 'Glory to God in the highest! Peace on earth! Good will to all people!' was not merely a birth announcement but a set of marching orders to which Jesus was obedient throughout his life." (from *Season's Greetings*, a sermon by Thomas Long) His obedience started him on this journey, and his obedience will take him all the way to the cross.

Some Pharisees were in the crowd as Jesus and his disciples went down the road toward Jerusalem. They didn't like what they were hearing. They called out to Jesus, "Tell your disciples to be quiet! They're causing a commotion!" This was the kind of commotion that could draw the attention of the Roman authorities. During the time of the Passover, thousands of pilgrims would come into the city of Jerusalem, and the Romans were always on

alert for any type of uprising. It could be that these Pharisees were trying to be helpful, to keep Jesus from getting into trouble by the authorities.

But this is why Jesus came. Even though the disciples might not fully understand what type of king he was, Jesus was the king. And it was right for them to call out and praise God. Jesus wasn't interested in hiding his identity. The truth of God cannot be hidden. It must be proclaimed. So Jesus responded to the Pharisees, "Even if they stop, these very stones along the way will shout out!" Of course he didn't mean that literally. But the point Jesus was making is that what he was about to do would impact everything on earth. Nothing could keep the message silent. God's plan for redemption was about to find its culmination. No power on heaven or earth could stop it from happening.

This image of the rocks crying out the truth echoes other passages in the Bible of creation's involvement in redemption. Sometimes we forget that there is more to creation than just us! Isaiah gives us the image of how the reign of God's peace will look, with the bears and cows grazing together, the lion and lamb resting side by side. Other signs in creation have already occurred. A star appeared in the sky to announce the birth of Jesus. When Jesus was nailed to the cross, an eclipse darkened the sky. And at the moment of his death, an earthquake struck. These images of creation being affected by God's redemptive work remind us of how intimately tied to this earth we really are. As the Apostle Paul writes in his letter to the church in Rome, "the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God." (Rom 8:21) (From *Luke*, Fred Craddock, p.228)

Jesus wouldn't allow these Pharisees to rain on this little parade. Jesus and his disciples had been through a lot together. They were exulting in the moment, praising God and expressing their great joy. The disciples were showing dedication, loyalty and support for their teacher, their lord and their king. They didn't know it yet, because they had not really listened to Jesus' predictions of his passion, but the next few days would begin to turn ugly. Perhaps if they had really understood what was to come, they might have disbanded the parade before it even began. A storm cloud loomed on the horizon, and soon the disciples would find themselves scattering in all directions. One disciple would betray Jesus, another would deny him.

It made little sense. If Jesus really was the king, the one who would bring in God's kingdom, why would he suffer so? Why would he be crucified as a common criminal? Again, hints of this destiny were present back during the Christmas season. When Jesus was only 8 days old, his parents presented him in the Jerusalem Temple. The old priest Simeon spoke to Mary, saying "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign

that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed – and a sword will pierce your own soul, too.” (Luke 2:34) With these words, the old priest gave a mother that most horrific words she could ever hear, a warning that Mary would have to bury her own son. A conflicting sort of message – is he a king or isn't he?

The message of the cross has always been a difficult message to comprehend. It seems foolish. It doesn't make much sense. Even we Christians don't really understand fully why it had to happen, and we stumble around when we have to try to explain it to someone. But the message of the cross certainly falls in line with everything else that Jesus had to say, about the last being first, about shaming the powerful, about exalting the lowly, about a servant king, a messiah that suffers, and about a God who loves us so much that he is even willing to sacrifice his own Son on our behalf. Jesus spoke of these things throughout his ministry. Many heard this message and turned away from him. Others followed him, but didn't understand what he really meant until after the fact.

In the very next verse following our gospel lesson, when Jesus actually entered the city, he wept for Jerusalem. He wept because they did not recognize what was right there in front of them. His message of peace did not resonate with what they had expected from their messiah. They wanted the mighty conqueror not the Good Shepherd. They wanted the powerful ruler; instead they got the Prince of Peace.

Many turned away from Jesus because they thought he spoke nonsense, and his death on the cross seemed to validate their disdain. A Messiah who can't even keep himself alive? The Apostle Paul wrote, “For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God...For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles...For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.” (1 Cor 1:18, 22-23, 25)

A master who is the servant, a king who rides into town on a humble donkey, a messiah who dies. It doesn't make a lot of sense, but this is God's great story of redemption. And this is the truth that we are called to proclaim throughout the world, even though the world may scoff at what we say and consider the message to be pure foolishness. Freedom for the oppressed, release to the captives, sight to the blind. The first will be last, and the last will be first. Freedom from all forms of bondage. That is why Jesus came into the world. And we are called to be his disciples, praising God and announcing his message of hope for the hopeless.

And now the journey of Lent is coming to an end, the arrival at Jerusalem is at hand. The obedience of Jesus to his destiny is about to play out. To be continued...