

“Are We Silent Stones?”

Luke 19:29-40

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How many of you would agree that usually it's good to have new experiences? How many of you would agree that sometimes new experiences can be embarrassing? This happened to me recently. A couple of weeks ago, when I was looking for transportation from the airport to the hotel where the stewardship conference was being held, I called and asked the hotel if they had a shuttle. They didn't, they used Carey Transportation & Limo Service. Fine, I called, made my reservation: \$16.00 sounded reasonable. When I arrived at the airport, checked in, "James" met me at counter of Carey Transportation. When we walked to the parking lot...I fully expected to climb into a fifteen passenger van; however, James walked over and opened the door to a shiny black stretch limo! Never having ridden in a limo, I embarrassingly slid into the seat. For the next twenty minutes, along the freeway we flew, cars clearing out of our way as we took as much room as a bus. Looking out through the tinted glass, I wondered how many people in their cars were wondering who the famous, rich person in the limo was and I laughed to think wouldn't they be surprised that it was just a pastor going to a stewardship conference! As I was riding along, I thought of today, Palm Sunday...and what would it have been like, if Jesus had the "limo treatment" rather than the "donkey delivery."

The "limo treatment" available in Jesus' time was used in the "other processional" on that spring day. That other processional was the imperial processional of Pontius Pilate the governor of Judea and Samaria entering Jerusalem from the west as Jesus on his donkey was entering Jerusalem from the east. Roman governors of Judea made it a practice to be in Jerusalem for the major Jewish festivals in case there were any problems. Pilate's processional was a display of the prestigious power that ruled the Roman world through fear, oppression and violence. There aren't any pictures of it but picture it with me in your imagination through this theologian's description of it. "Imagine...a visual panoply of imperial power: cavalry on horses, foot soldiers, leather armor, helmets, weapons, banners, golden eagles mounted on poles, sun glinting on metal and gold. Sounds: the marching of feet, the creaking of leather, the clinking of bridles, the beating of drums. The swirling of dust. The eyes of the silent onlookers, some curious, some awed, some resentful."¹

Quite the contrast from the other processional, the one we are more familiar with...the one of Jesus, riding humbly on a donkey. Peasant cloaks lining the dusting road, palm branches waving in the air, shouts of Hosanna, "Save us" spontaneously springing forth from the crowd. High expectations of the fulfillment of the prophet Zechariah, "your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey... What kind of king is he, one to bring peace to the nations!" No silent onlookers here! The crowds were out of control, so much so that the Pharisees, some of the locals recruited by Rome to work with them through the Temple to keep law and order...command Jesus to order his followers to stop! To which Jesus replies... "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out!" Two very different processions...two very different crowds...which one are we in? Silent onlookers to the "limo treatment" or enthusiastic followers lining the parade route with waving palms? Parade route, of course! But perhaps there is a third possibility: are we silent stones?

Riding in that limo from the airport to the hotel, a thought hit me like a rock on the head. This year, for many reasons, it was easier, less confusing and quicker; I planned that our Palm Sunday processional would be done for us by our choir. Now, we appreciate their beautiful job, but we were watching not marching, maybe waving a tentative palm branch in praise but that's about it. And the palms are the easy part; think about our own reaction to praise. Psychologically speaking we easily praise people for behaviors, so much so that some are concerned that our children have become "praise dependent." A recent comic poked fun at this, a mother from the sidelines says, "Good job, Hammie!" The father says, "He's just stretching." The mother responds, "I know, but he did it well!" Theologically speaking however, the actual act of praising, whether it is in words or deeds makes some of us uncomfortable. What would be your response if I were to invite you all to lift your hands to the Lord like it tells us to do in the Psalms or to dance before the Lord as David did?

The attitude of praise is also difficult for some of us. At best, we will thank someone for something, but we hardly ever praise someone for who they are. That's what praise is...not thanking someone for something, but honoring someone for who they are. There's a huge difference between the two! Praise means recognizing that someone is better than you, more worthy. As the author of the book of Revelations says, "Worthy, worthy are you, O Lord. To receive all glory and honor and power and praise." With that in mind, how often have we or do we praise God? Not thank God for what God has done, but praise God for who God is! Praising God is more challenging than thanking God. Of course, we praise God in worship through songs and prayer...but how often do we embody that overflowing enthusiasm and contagious energy that catches the crowd up in a parade of praise? Not often, I'm afraid. And I've heard a lot of the reasons why; everything from, it's embarrassing to I'm Presbyterian, I like things to be done decently and in order—"thank you very much!" And today you have a new one; your pastor didn't give you the opportunity to join the processional of praise.

And perhaps we would join a parade of praise, if it meant that things for us would be remarkably better in the near future. If our lives would be significantly improved, we might take the risk of praising God if we could be certain that we would get what we want. Isn't that what those first palm wavers were doing? They were looking at Jesus as their Hope; their salvation from Roman rule. They weren't watching the imperial procession on the other side of the city. In their minds Jesus was going to be the King that overcame the oppression and freed them, and when he didn't, what did they do...they turned on him and abandoned him to the enemy. But let's not judge too quickly, for don't we do the very same thing? When things are going well with us, while we have our lives in order, all our ducks in a row so to speak, our families, our jobs, our relationships all going according to plan; we are content and calling out in our own ways, subdued perhaps but still apparent praises to God and even if not praises, thanksgiving. But when things don't go the way we want or the way we've expected we turn as quickly as that crowd and abandon God, angry that God has let us down.

The crowds on that first Palm Sunday would soon get angry but on the day Jesus was riding into Jerusalem, they were full of expectation. I'm sure there were differences of opinions on who the One riding on the donkey was and what he represented. Revolution. Change. Hope. Freedom. But unlike the crowds of the "limo treatment" processional, the crowds of the "donkey delivery" were not silent stones; each from their own perspective lifted their voices and waved their palms in praise. Unaware on that day, what the next few days would bring...but we know...betrayal, denial, death and the darkness of a tomb...and then next week...Easter glory!

This week, let us turn our hearts of stone, into stones that are no longer silent...for this is Holy Week...let us praise God for who God is and thank God for all that God has done, is doing, and will do! Amen!

1. Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week* (HarperCollins Publishers, New York, 2006)