

“When the Stones Cry Out”

Rev. David Gregory

April 10, 2022

Triumphal Entry (Palm Sunday)



Christ's Entry into Jerusalem
Jean-Hippolyte Flandrin

Readings

Luke 19:28-40

from the New Revised Standard Version

After he had spoken, Jesus went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem. When he had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples, saying, “Go into the village ahead of you, and as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, ‘Why are you untying it?’ just say this, ‘The Lord needs it.’” So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them. As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, “Why are you untying the colt?” They said, “The Lord needs it.” Then they brought it to Jesus; and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it. As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, saying,

“Blessed is the king
who comes in the name of the Lord!
Peace in heaven,
and glory in the highest heaven!”

Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, order your disciples to stop.” He answered, “I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out.”

David Whyte

from *Consolations: The Solace, Nourishment and Underlying Meaning of Everyday Words*

The ability to speak the truth is as much the ability to describe what it is like to stand in trepidation at this door, as it is to actually go through it and become that beautifully honest spiritual warrior, equal to all circumstances, we would like to become. Honesty is not the revealing of some foundational truth that gives us power over life or another or even the self, but a robust incarnation into the unknown unfolding vulnerability of existence, where we acknowledge how powerless we feel, how little we actually know, how afraid we are of not knowing and how astonished we are by the generous measure of loss that is conferred upon even the most average life.

In the Christian household, this is the moment each year when we enter the experience of Holy Week, an observance that may or may not resonate with you as a meaningful tradition. It's the culmination of the season of Lent or Lengthening, as the sun climbs a little higher and the light gets a little longer each day. It is a good time to reflect on our growing enlightenment, our increasing awareness of who we are and what we've come here to accomplish in these physical bodies. The season of Lent is less about giving things up and more about adding things. It has nothing to do with penance and proving our worthiness, and everything to do with opening ourselves to what we came here to receive in the first place. We were born worthy of it.

Holy Week is about identifying once again with the never-ending cycles of death and rebirth, of the resurrection we see all around us in the beauty of the wildflowers and the budding of the trees, who unbeknownst to us are adding another ring to their age while appearing absolutely still from day to day. We are part of this cycle of death and rebirth. It's a myth that we can transcend this cycle, and there's a beauty in finding our place in the grand evolutionary scheme of the earth itself.

In a very real sense, every week is holy, but this week does what all the Judeo-Christian traditions do: it gives a sense of rhythm to our inner and outer worlds, a rhythm that has been rather rudely interrupted of late (the last time we gathered in a physical room for any Holy Week observance was in 2019!). So we're here to emerge. We're here to awaken. We're here to create something old and new together. We have no palm branches—those symbols of the moment that we could hold in our hands and wave. They normally would have been ordered far in advance, and things like the waving of palm branches, things that used to happen automatically are being re-created ... or perhaps resurrected.

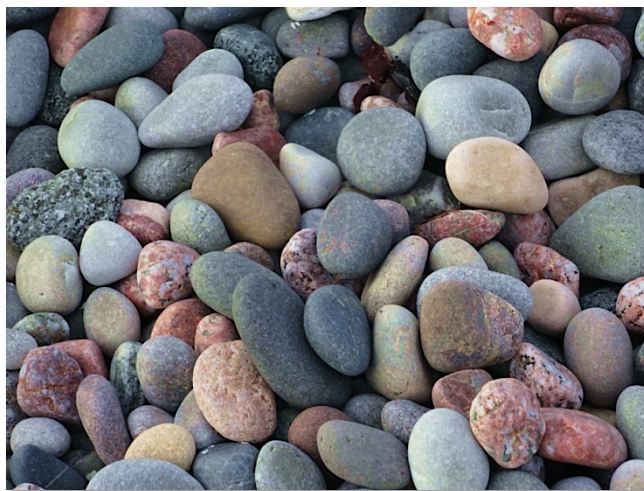
Our situation here today points out to me that the Luke passage about the triumphal entry does not include branches. It says that the throngs of people removed their cloaks and placed them in the road for Jesus and the donkey to walk upon. This was a spontaneous demonstration, with decidedly political overtones. There was not much planning here—just people reaching for whatever they had in order to show to the world their messianic hope that this insurgent among them who taught them love and peace was now assuming a position as provocateur to the Romans, who were at the same moment parading their military might on the other side of the city. Passover was a volatile time in Jerusalem, and the Romans used their show of force to remind the Jewish pilgrims to behave themselves. This is why the Pharisees admonished Jesus and his followers. It reminds me of my older son who many years ago admonished his little brother, "Be quiet! You're going to get us in trouble!"

The beginning of the original Holy Week was a coming together of immovable forces, creating a tension that reached a fever pitch between the Romans, the Jewish religious elite, and the hungry peasants from the hillsides who were exhausted by the relentless injustices of their daily lives. These were the ones crying "Hosanna," meaning: "Save us now!" "Deliver us." "Get us out of this mess!" We see in this scene a very provocative moment of honesty, clarity, and purpose. It sets the main characters on a collision course, toward an inescapable conflict, a moment of brutal honesty where everyone's cards are placed on the table. As the cloaks are thrown down, the people proclaim for all the world to hear that Jesus is the "king of the Jews," when everyone knows the king of the Jews is a petty tyrant, a puppet of Rome named Herod. In hailing Jesus, they blaspheme Caesar. And this sets in motion everything we know about the Last Week. It is a failure to yield—more precisely, a refusal to yield. Forces all around the people were begging their silence, but the desperation was so great, the injustices so cruel, and the outlook so bleak that Jesus said that if the people didn't cry out, the rocks would take over and do so. The story reveals the power of self-evident

truth. The Pharisees and Herodians could denounce the “fake news” all day long, and the truth would still be the truth. The Romans could always easily squelch it, and they often did so with public crucifixions galore, and three decades later they leveled Jerusalem almost entirely to prove their point. We have a longer view, though. As humans we have lived long enough to see the decline and fall of the Roman empire, and the rise and fall of many other tyrannies and authoritarian regimes. If the Ukrainians do not cry out, for example, the very earth will call out the cruelty and the war crimes of Russia. Mass graves are the self-evident truth that cannot ultimately be denied.

David Whyte gives us the picture of the “beautifully honest spiritual warrior,” the one who has some fear but also steps through the door of what is true. He reminds us of the vulnerability of our existence, the acknowledgment of how little we really know, and how astonished we can become in our losses. Honesty is the doorway to everything we seek. If we do not cry out, the earth will do it for us, and she actually does so quite regularly. Climate disaster has become so commonplace that we may not notice it, but we should be paying attention. We may not be living in Putin’s Russia, but there are forces all around us that beg our silence every day in the face of bigotry, injustice, and the cruelty of war. "Go to your corner and be quiet," we're told. "Keep the status quo in place," we're admonished. "This is just how things are," we're taught. Racial injustice becomes merely a “race theory,” and a black woman is forced through a gauntlet of insults and indignities at the behest of white men who make a show of force like Herod did: better not step out of line or we’ll find a way to squelch you.

We can choose to be silent or not, but the truth will never be silenced. Thank God for the stones in our world which cry out every day. In this Holy Week, let us join their chorus of truth-telling. It will not bring us into the magic of Utopia, but we’ll have the peace of mind that we threw our cloak in the road and spoke truth to power. There’s nothing much in life that can compare to that.



Stones on Columba Bay, Isle of Iona
Photo by Sandra Weil