“The Stones are Shouting”

Rev. David Gregory

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Palm Sunday

First reading

Marcus Borg in *The Last Week*

Jesus entered Jerusalem from the east in a procession riding on a donkey cheered by his followers. At the same time, a Roman imperial procession of troops and cavalry entered the city from the west, headed by Pilate. Their purpose was to reinforce the Roman garrison stationed near the temple for the season of Passover, when tens (hundreds?) of thousands of Jewish pilgrims filled the city. The contrast between Jesus’ entry and the imperial entry sounds the central conflict that unfolds during the rest of the week. Jesus’ mode of entry was symbolic, signifying that the kingdom of which he spoke was a kingdom of peace. According to the prophet Zechariah, the king entering Jerusalem on a donkey was to banish the weapons of war from the land and speak peace to the nations. The kingdom of Rome on the other hand was based on violence and the threat of violence. It is clear Jesus pre-arranged this way of entering the city. In modern language, it was a planned political demonstration.

Second reading

Luke 19:29-40, from the Common English Bible

As Jesus came to Bethphage and Bethany on the Mount of Olives, he gave two disciples a task. He said, “Go into the village over there. When you enter it, you will find tied up there a colt that no one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks, ‘Why are you untying it?’ just say, ‘Its master needs it.’”

Those who had been sent found it exactly as he had said. As they were untying the colt, its owners said to them, “Why are you untying the colt?” They replied, “Its master needs it.” They brought it to Jesus, threw their clothes on the colt, and lifted Jesus onto it. As Jesus rode along, they spread their clothes on the road.

As Jesus approached the road leading down from the Mount of Olives, the whole throng of his disciples began rejoicing. They praised God with a loud voice because of all the mighty things they had seen. They said,

“Blessings on the king who comes in the name of the Lord.
Peace in heaven and glory in the highest heavens.”

Some of the Pharisees from the crowd said to Jesus, “Teacher, scold your disciples! Tell them to stop!” He answered “I tell you, if they were silent, the stones would shout.”
They say that practice makes perfect. Where spirituality is concerned, I would shy away from the word “perfect,” but during the last six weeks, we’ve certainly been practicing. We’ve been finding our ground, securing our foundations, and then building upon them. It’s not that these things don’t happen at any other time of the year, but in the roots of our tradition there are times like Advent and Lent, which are the fine tuning. Remember fine tuning? For those of you too young to remember, fine tuning sort of went out with the rotary telephone. Televisions once had dials with numbers representing twelve or thirteen channels. Three or four of them would lead you to an actual TV station, and if the antenna on your TV or on the top of your house wasn’t aimed exactly right, the picture could be snowy. On the outside of this dial there was another dial, allowing you to fine tune the frequency, and hopefully get a clearer, less obstructed picture. We’ve been on a journey together of fine tuning, and as we enter this holy week, it is my hope that things are much clearer for us than they were when we started.

The story of Jesus and his so-called triumphal entry into Jerusalem has often been dramatized for us, occasionally in the movies, but more often by children waving palm branches on the Sunday before Easter. It is an episode that appears in all four gospel portraits. This morning we have it as told by Luke, who doesn’t mention any palm branches at all. He just talks about all of the cloaks that were strewn in the path. If we only had Luke, then I guess we’d call this Cloak Sunday, which would change the tone of it entirely. Throwing our jackets on the floor seems a lot less exciting, somehow.

One of the most important features of this story isn’t found in the Bible at all, but it comes to us from other sources, which tell us more about Pontius Pilate, the Roman prefect ruling over Judea for a ten-year period, including the public ministry and execution of Jesus of Nazareth. Every year leading into Passover, Pilate would ride into the western gate of the city of Jerusalem in a show of military power. The Romans saw this parade as a reminder for the thousands of Jews congregating for Passover, that they shouldn’t have any bright ideas about creating an uprising. This show of raw Roman power was meant to quell any unrest that might happen, and there were plenty of the Jewish elite who were ready and willing to assist the Romans in keeping the peace. Jesus and his followers were not part of that elite. Theirs was a poor people’s campaign across the countryside, a gathering storm of desperate people looking for someone to take up their cause. It was becoming increasingly clear to them that Jesus could be their Messiah. (In Luke we don’t hear the cries of “Hosanna” that we hear in other gospels, but “Hosanna” simply means “Save us now, and make it snappy” (my paraphrase).)

The Hebrew prophet Zechariah had said that a king would enter Jerusalem riding on a donkey to banish the weapons of war and establish a kingdom of peace. The kingdom of Rome, on the other hand, was ruled by threats, intimidation, and violence. The contrast could not be clearer: Pilate coming in from the west with power and pageantry, threatening retaliation for ill behavior, and Jesus riding in from the east on a donkey, stepping on a carpet of whatever people could find to throw down there, and inciting the exact ill behavior Pilate was trying to check. Soon after entering Jerusalem, Jesus did the unthinkable. He made his way into the temple courts where sacrificial animals were being bought and sold, and went into an angry tirade, letting animals loose and overturning all of the cashier stations, creating mayhem and astonishment. One can imagine the temple priests being horrified at the scene. The Romans are just outside the door waiting to see any hint of uprising, and Jesus is creating one right before their eyes. It’s almost like it was planned or something....
This is why Marcus Borg and John Crosson, along with many other scholars have said that this was no random event. It was a planned political demonstration, a blatant provocation on the part of Jesus to trigger the Jews and possibly the Romans, into seeing that this insurgency was real, that the situation had become intolerable, and that a peaceable kingdom was worth struggling for. And it is very possible that this once obscure rabbi from the hills of Galilee would never have been killed without this direct provocation. During the trial, it was Pilate himself who could find no real threat or fault in this man. Even that was not enough to stop his crucifixion from happening. This, then, is the central conflict that builds to a climax every year at this time, when we recount and recreate the scene with the one who made a scene. No more hiding, no more secrecy, no more limitations on the public’s right to know.

The Pharisees are at the scene begging Jesus to tell his followers to stop and be quiet. They remind me of my son Brian, who used to be overheard saying to his younger brother Ben, “Shut up! You’re going to get us in trouble.” Interestingly, once the Pharisees express this final fearful thought, they are not heard from again. It is their last act before becoming irrelevant. Jesus turns to them and says, “If my friends become quiet, the stones along the road will cry out.” This is how desperate these people really are. They are so connected with their ground that the stones are feeling their pain. And something has to give.

The parallels with our own time are unmistakable, and that’s because the evolution of humanity is not without its periodic setbacks. In my lifetime I have seen great strides toward peace, justice, and equality that have been pushed back by wars, assassinations, and the politics of demonization. Once in a while, like when the Berlin Wall came down, or when Neil Armstrong set his foot upon the moon, it feels as though we are really getting somewhere ... until the pushback shows up, and it always does.

The evolutionary spiral is not always easy to see, but it is real. We’re part of it here this morning. We are looking for, we are planning for, we are striving for a different world — one in which the nations of the world are committed to peace with one another, where justice reigns, and love wins. We are striving for a world characterized by human dignity, where diversity is respected and loved, and where the best ideals of all religions are honored and protected, and where their adherents are never made to be the dreaded “other.” There is still a kingdom of peace waiting in the wings. It is always there. There is still a kingdom of power and violence, and it is always pushing back. And that is why we’re here this week, once again telling the same story. The story of this holy week is one of crucifixion and resurrection. It is one of sadness and unbridled joy. It is one of light and shadow, love and fear. Life is all of those things. Let us never lose sight of where it is we are actually going. It may not always be plain or evident, but we shall overcome, someday.