

## **Rock Concert**

Text: Luke 19:29-40

*Preached by the Rev. Anne Robertson at Crawford Memorial UMC on March 28, 2021*

If you have been involved with the church for any length of time, you know the story. The last time Jesus enters the city of Jerusalem before his death, he does so with great fanfare. There is a multitude thronging the way, crying out words from the prophet Zechariah, declaring Jesus to be the King who comes in God's name. We know it so well that many of you may not have noticed that certain things in Luke's account of this story are different.

For one, there are no palm branches, like we find in the other Gospels. In Luke, people throw down their coats on the road, but there is nary a palm branch to be seen. It's also unique to Luke's telling of the story that no one shouts "Hosanna!" And it is Luke who identifies at least a significant portion of the crowd as a multitude of Jesus' disciples. Remember, Jesus had more than twelve disciples. There were twelve that he was closest to...his inner circle if you will. But this is one of several other passages indicating that those who counted themselves among Jesus' disciples were many, many more than just those twelve.

Luke also adds one other thing to his story that the other Gospel writers don't. Luke tells us that the Pharisees, who were the religious scholars, were upset at what these disciples were doing and they asked Jesus to tell his people to quit all the fuss. There are lots of reasons they might have said this. They might have thought what the disciples were saying was wrong—that Jesus was not the king talked about by the prophet Zechariah. They might have thought that it should have been themselves, the ones who knew the Scriptures through and through, who decided if Jesus met the criteria for that title or not rather than an obviously biased and largely uneducated crowd. They might have had political worries, afraid that the Romans who occupied their country might think that the population was out of control or might see a political threat in someone the people called King. The last time there was talk of a new King, Herod had ordered all the baby boys in Bethlehem to be slaughtered. Nobody wanted a repeat of that.

But for whatever reason, the Pharisees would have much preferred that Jesus' disciples keep their adoration to themselves, and they asked Jesus to shut them up. His response, to me, is fascinating. He doesn't tell them to take a hike. He doesn't tell them they are wrong or get into scriptural interpretations of the book of Zechariah; and he certainly doesn't do what they say. He simply tells them that their suggestion is pointless. Even if every one of the disciples did as they wished and ceased their praise, Jesus says the rocks on the ground would pick up the cry.

On the one hand, it's a figure of speech. The proclamation that Jesus comes in God's name and with God's authority is so fundamentally true that even a rock would know it and say so. But on the other hand, without going all talking rocks, we don't want to sell short the place of Creation in God's realm. The Psalms are full of imagery of trees and fields praising God. The Bible tells us that in God's new earth, the lion and the lamb will lie down together—the animals knowing and living the Spirit of God so closely that even the natural bloodshed of the food chain disappears.

Related to that, even though the rocks don't get a chance to speak in this passage, there is already a non-human miracle. You just try pulling what Jesus does here on a colt that has never been ridden! People shouting, coats on the road, a person on its back for the very first time. Anybody but Jesus would probably have been bumped off before the first step. But the donkey colt also seemed to know who was on its back, just as the rocks beneath its feet knew.

All of Creation knows its Creator. When Jesus is born, the heavens get involved and a bright star shines in just the right place to alert astrologers to something special. At Jesus' death these same rocks split open in an earthquake and the sun goes into an eclipse. Scorn the nature religions if you want, but I believe those

spiritualities are proclaiming at least one truth that Christians often forget. Paul tells us in Romans 8 that, not just people, but all of Creation groans for its redemption. And in Romans 1:20 Paul says that the natural world displays the truth about God. "Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made."

I believe both the existence of God and the nature of God are truths written in our backyards. If the church completely failed and all of the people of God everywhere were silent, Paul thinks people would still have no excuse for not knowing God, because God is obvious just from walking outside. The sanctuary that God built is not *in there*, it's *out here*. In the Church, we have largely fallen silent about the role of Creation, and I tend to view the nature-based religions as the rocks that cry out in our silence about the Earth.

In fact, I think there are a lot of rocks out there, picking up the messages of God's truth when the Church has failed to speak. When we stopped proclaiming that all of us were sinners in need of God's grace, ourselves included, and started pointing fingers and passing judgment on others, 12-step groups began to cry out the message we had forgotten. Many had to go there to experience God's healing and forgiveness in the company of those who were willing to acknowledge that they were all struggling together and to find a place where people would help each other rather than judge each other.

When the Church abandoned reaching out into the community with acts of justice and mercy, government agencies and private charities began to preach the message that the poor and the hungry and the persecuted were blessed and deserving of food, shelter, and the necessities of life. When the Church stopped proclaiming that every human being is God's child and is created "good," that truth could not be silenced and the self-help gurus picked it up to teach self-acceptance and care.

When the Church forgot that God calls us to leave behind concerns for material gain in order to free our souls, Buddhism surged forward telling us to let go of our attachments; and when we stopped teaching that our spiritual growth is based in disciplined spiritual practice, Islam and Hinduism came in and showed the way. Now that the church in the United States is so focused on its own comfort and survival, the churches in Africa, Asia, and Latin America are sending missionaries here to stand in our spiritual wilderness and cry out the Gospel of the Cross.

I read an article years ago that talked about the surge of spiritual interest in the United States. I can't tell you exactly where I read it or who wrote it, but I do remember one point that stuck with me. "This is the first time in American History," the author said, "that a spiritual revival has begun outside of organized religion." It is a veritable rock concert out there!

I spent the last thirteen years on the periphery of church life as I led the Massachusetts Bible Society. As an ecumenical organization I was invited in to churches of all denominations; and in attempting to fulfill the organization's commitment to biblical literacy, understanding, and dialogue, I was in regular engagement with the spiritual but not religious folks, agnostics, atheists, anti-theists, those of other faiths, as well as the entire spectrum of Christian belief and practice.

My takeaway from all of that was that the well-documented decline in Christian churches in the US is not the fault of Sunday morning soccer practice, the internet, bad parenting, or anything else *out there*. Our churches—across every tradition in Christian faith in this country—are declining because we have fallen silent about almost everything that matters. I discovered that the church, as a whole, creates more atheists than almost everything else combined. There are entire hashtags on social media with topics like #emptythepews and #exvangelical filled with stories about church experiences that would curl your toes. Surveys have shown that those who say they have faith don't much see what the Church could possibly have to do with it. The message of love and belonging and community has largely been left to the rocks and the sun and the stars.

In the next verse after Jesus talks about the rocks, once he gets off the donkey's colt and the crowds thin, he finds himself at a spot where he can look out over the city of Jerusalem. Jesus looks at the city and weeps, because the city is clueless about who it is that is coming to them—even though the disciples were just calling it out at the top of their lungs. As he weeps, he talks again about rocks, this time predicting the destruction of the Temple, when "not one stone will be left upon another." That happened at the hands of the Romans about 40 years after Jesus' death.

The Pharisees wanted to contain the message and tried to silence the disciples. And maybe for good reason. By the end of that week the Romans had crucified the one his disciples called King; and that violent act did act as a deterrent and silenced Jesus' disciples, who went into hiding. But the Romans made a critical error. They sealed Jesus' tomb with a rock. The Romans didn't hear what Jesus said the week before. They missed the point that the truth cannot be silenced or sealed up. If the disciples fall silent, the rocks will still do their Creator's bidding. And on Easter morning, the rocks cried out, "Christ is risen!" The disciples heard the witness of the rocks and picked up the refrain once again. And then they went out and changed the world.

It's my prayer that the rocks on the grounds of our church will have easy duty. I pray that the disciples in this place will join with the disciples of old in telling the world that God is love and in bearing living witness to that truth. I pray that here the weary will find rest, the persecuted will find safe harbor, and that those who feel threatened by a world telling them to stay silent will find both the freedom and strength of their God-given voice. God has come to the world in Jesus. God has walked miles in our shoes, including both the triumphal steps into the city and the tormented steps to an unjust execution. All to prove to the world that love will always win. The question for us as a church is whether we will join in proclaiming that message with the disciples, or whether we will leave it up to the rocks. Amen.