

When the People Went Silent

Luke 19:28-40

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March 28, 2010

Luke 19:28-40 (NRSV) – read in the beginning of the service

28After he had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem. 29When he had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples, 30saying, “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. 31If anyone asks you, ‘Why are you untying it?’ just say this, ‘The Lord needs it.’” 32So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them. 33As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, “Why are you untying the colt?” 34They said, “The Lord needs it.” 35Then they brought it to Jesus; and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it. 36As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. 37As 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, 38saying, “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!” 39Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, order your disciples to stop.” 40He answered, “I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out.”

MUSIC – NOW IS THE TIME

We just enacted the traditional telling of Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem – a boisterous crowd waving palms and shouting and singing Hosanna to Jesus processing on a colt. Before our enactment, though, we read the story of this event according to Luke, and you might have noticed that Luke tells the story a little differently than our traditions. No palms. No boisterous masses. No shouting and singing Hosanna. Luke offers a particular rendering of the procession story – one that is small, strange, and symbolic.

The procession is quite unimpressive, Jesus riding on a colt, with twelve disciples racing to get cloaks in front of him repeatedly, all the while shouting joyfully, “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord.” Imagine what this sight must have been for the busy city-folk watching this little bit of street theater unfold. You’re power-walking down Michigan Avenue, when across the street you see a strange drama headed the other way, twelve vagrant people dressed in tie-die T-shirts reading “You Go Jesus!” and “He’s the One!”, putting their coats on the ground in front of another vagrant on horseback. They scurry from behind the horse, having grabbed a coat, to in front of the horse, laying down their coat again, and you start to hear their shouts, “You rock, man, you’re the king!” The rest of us streetwalkers would remark to ourselves, “now there’s something you don’t see everyday,” and we’d wonder what their cult or odd bandit cause might be.

Jewish observers who saw this small strange street play, did not receive it as innocuous and weird, they knew this display was subversive. This play was a small strange package carrying a load of dynamite. Riding in on an unriden colt, to shouts of “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord,” this is staged drama straight out of the prophet Zechariah, who said the messiah, the anointed and chosen one to restore the greatness of Israel, would enter the city in this way and usher forth a new kingship, a new priesthood, and an era of reform, overthrow, and justice. So this is a staging of the messiah, a new king, but this royal procession comes into town with no weapons or adornment, this is no warrior king. This royal rider is not an image of dominion and glory, but an image of one who rejects domination, this is not a power-monger, but a liberator. This pregnant moment was politically and socially subversive street theater, marking God’s revolution against Roman power, religious establishment power, and social order. Small drama, large revolutionary symbols.

The Pharisees, priests and scholars of the temple, understand the revolutionary content of this little play, and say to Jesus, “Teacher, order your disciples to stop this nonsense.” Stop or else, the threat seems to follow, this is a city of great religious and political power, and great willingness to protect that power. And yet

the response Jesus offers is telling of all the events that will follow, known as the passion story, “if these disciples were silent, the stones would shout out,” I can’t stop this, this is not a human event in motion by the shouts of a few humans, this is a God event in motion by the creator of the earth, and these shouts are just the mouthpiece of a God coming forth to shake the earth and be heard with every fiber of God’s being, even the stones would shout out the will of God, if these followers went silent.

And that is pretty much how the story of Christ’s passion goes. The clubhouse procession gets met by marches of a different sort, the march of the temple and the religious powers who were threatened by a new preacher, and the march of the Roman government who were threatened by a new community mobilizer. The voices of city power rose, and the voices of God’s revolution went silent.

The passion story, the story of when the faithful went silent, begins with good intentions. When Jesus warns the disciples that things are about to get hot, Peter exclaims, “Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death!” But Jesus knows differently.

Jesus: I tell you, Peter, the cock will not crow this day, until you have denied three times that you know me.

The descent into death begins when they go to pray, and while Jesus receives strength from an angel, he finds the others asleep, exhausted from their grieving.

Jesus: Why are you sleeping? Get up and pray that you may not come into the time of trial.

While he was speaking to them, a band of people approached him, including Judas, who gave him a kiss, which Jesus knew was more than just a kiss, it was a signal for the authorities.

Jesus: Judas, is it with a kiss that you are betraying the Son of Man?

And when the authorities flexed their muscles to arrest him, the Prince of Peace replied,

Jesus: Have you come out with swords and clubs as if I were a bandit? When I was with you day after day in the temple, you did not lay hands on me. But this is your hour, and the power of darkness!

Jesus was arrested and taken to the priests. Peter followed them, at a distance. And as he waited just outside, a servant girl outside claimed she had seen Peter with Jesus, “you’re one of them,” she said. No, I’m not, replied Peter, which he repeated to two other servants. Three denials, just as Jesus had said.

Meanwhile, Jesus was meeting the religious heat inside. Soldiers were taunting him. Finally the priests said, “if you are the messiah, tell us,” and Jesus replied,

Jesus: If I tell you, you will not believe; and if I question you, you will not answer. But from now on the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the power of God. You say that I am the Son of God.

They asked, are you then, the son of God?

Jesus: You say that I am.

And so they found him guilty by his own admission, and took him to Pilate the local governor, accusing him of perverting their nation, forbidding homage to the emperor, and saying that he is the Messiah, a king. Pilate asked him, are you the king of the Jews?

Jesus: You say so.

Pilate found no basis for an accusation, but the crowd around insisted, saying he stirs up the people by teaching throughout Judea. No one, not Pilate or Herod, could find guilt in him, and so Pilate planned to release him. But the crowd shouted "Away with this fellow, this agitator, release the murderer Barabbas instead!" "Crucify him!" And their voices prevailed. So Pilate gave his verdict that their demand should be granted. He handed Jesus over as they wished.

MUSIC - HE WAS DESPISED

They took Jesus away to be crucified. A great number of the people followed him, and among them were women who were beating their breasts and wailing for him. But Jesus turned to them and said,

Jesus: Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children.

Weep for yourselves and your children. The small strange shout of support for Jesus riding in on the colt went silent. The embodiment of God on earth had come, with power, showing a new way of love and compassion, ushering in a new day of justice and peace, and the groundswell of belief that Jesus had built, quickly vanished.

The passion of Christ is a story about a failed revolution, a revolution against all the things that bear down on justice and peace. The systems and institutions that would get in the way of God's love and compassion, but also the things about each of us that get in the way of God's love and compassion, a revolution against the ways we hold God back, the moments when we go silent. It is a revolution against our attempts to sculpt our own savior god, one who would do all the work, one whom we can follow at a distance, when it is convenient, when it isn't risky, or when the benefit to me seems clear. But in this story, the revolution failed to change people, failed to change even the faithful, failed to change the world into the promised place of peace.

But where the story does not fail is as a revelation, a revelation of the truth, that although this human story of failure and silence seems inevitable, the will of God has something else in store. A rising. A rising that invites the possibility that the story of a broken world can and will be told differently, and it begins to change when we start to notice our own moments of silence.

Revealed in Jesus' procession into Jerusalem is just how cosmic, just how divine, just how scripted, just how strange, just how revolutionary, just how world changing God's revelation in Jesus Christ will be. Underneath it all, this staged passion play, is that in its final act, in the coming kingdom to which it all points, you and I and everyone else will have a role to play, bearing witness to God's relentless, subversive love that will never be destroyed, that will never be silenced. Every player in the Jesus cause went silent during that holy week, even Christ himself, and we're left staring at a silent, motionless stage play, nothing left to hear from except the mourners. And, of course, the stones.

MUSIC - MARY'S SONG