***SINGING STONES***

John C. Peterson

Covenant Presbyterian Church, Staunton, VA

April 13, 2025

Texts: Psalm 118:1, 22-25 and Luke 19:28-48

Last month marked the 60th anniversary of the Selma-to-Mongomery March for voting rights in Alabama. That parade of protestors took place just two weeks after the tragic events of “Bloody Sunday” when a group of Black activists, John Lewis among them, tried to make that march from Selma and were severely beaten by an all-white gang of state troopers and sheriff’s deputies as they tried to cross the bridge spanning the Alabama River. The violent images from that assault proved a turning point in the civil rights movement. As I read an article about those marches early this week, I found myself thinking about similarities and differences between those civil rights marches and the parade we remember this Palm Sunday as Jesus rides into Jerusalem.

Both were planned events. The civil rights leaders were determined to make that march to the Alabama statehouse to draw attention to discrimination in voting rights that Black people were experiencing in Alabama as racist leaders defied the Civil Rights Act. The Black leaders knew the march was risky, but it was a risk they were willing to take in pursuit of the right to vote and equal treatment under the law. Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem that Palm Sunday was also planned. After walking everywhere he went across Galilee, teaching and preaching and healing along the way, Jesus decides to ride into Jerusalem.

“*Go into the village and as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden. Unite it and bring it here*,” he tells his disciples. He even gives them a code word so that when the owners ask, “*Why are you untying the colt?*” they can respond, “*The Lord needs it*.” (Wink, wink. Nudge, nudge.) And the owners let them take it.

This entry into Jerusalem is not a spontaneous event. Jesus is planning an entry that will evoke remembrance of that prophecy of Zechariah:

*Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey...*

Without declaring himself king, Jesus evokes a prophetic royal image as he enters the holy city. In so doing he sets in motion the series of events that will lead to his crucifixion. He knows that path lies ahead, yet he rides on.

In Selma those who marched on found the streets lined by supporters who cheered them. They were not alone in their pursuit of civil rights! Along the road, men, women, and children encouraged them, though some just watched, and some cowered in fear of the retribution that might come. As Martin Luther King, Jr. told the crowd:

“*There are no broad highways that lead us easily and inevitably to quick solutions. But we must keep going*.”[[1]](#endnote-1)

There were no broad highways toward easy acceptance of Jesus as the Messiah either. His healings convinced some, but not all. His teachings convinced others, but some doubted. His raising of Lazarus led many to believe in him, but not all. As he rode down that narrow, twisting road running down from the Mount of Olives and up to the Holy City, some but not all believed in him. The road was lined with a multitude of disciples, Luke says. People were praising God with loud voices and spreading their cloaks on the road as they did for kings. “*Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!*” many of them shouted. “*Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven*.” The shouts quote the 118th Psalm, but with one notable twist – the psalm says, “*Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord!*” In Luke’s telling, the people substitute ***king*** for ***One***, “*Blessed is the* ***King*** *who comes in the name of the Lord,*” making explicit what was inferred by Jesus’ ride on the back of the donkey: Jesus was entering Jerusalem as a king!

In that claim is apparent one of the principal differences between this Palm Sunday parade and that march from Selma. The focus in that march in Alabama was a cause – voting rights; the focus on this Palm Sunday parade was a person – Jesus. No one person was bigger than the cause in the struggle for civil rights; one person ***was*** the cause for the disciples along the road to Jerusalem. Jesus bore all their hopes and dreams as the Messiah for whom they had been waiting; he was the One who came in the name of the Lord to save God’s people. It was no wonder that the Pharisees urged Jesus to silence the cheering crowd, for not only did the leaders regard as blasphemy any suggestion that Jesus might be the Messiah, they also feared attracting too much Roman attention with the boisterous shouts about a king. Rome tolerated the Jews pretty well; they allowed them to practice their religion and let the chief priests and scribes maintain a certain amount of authority over their people, as long as they did not rock the boat. This parade risked rocking the boat!

Jesus’ response to the Pharisees confirmed that this event was too big to be stopped. “I tell you, if these people were silent, the stones would sing out,” he said. Now I am fairly certain he was not referring to the Rolling Stones when he said that, though Mick Jagger is pretty old! Jesus was declaring that this revelation of his identity as king was divinely ordained. Even if the people fell silent, the pavers themselves would carry on the shouts of praise directed to God! Jesus comes to redeem humanity – Yes! But he comes for something more: to redeem all creation. The stones themselves would bear witness to that good news! The colt that had never been ridden bears witness to that good news as he allows Jesus to climb upon his back and make that holy ride into the city without complaint! Jesus comes for all creation – to make all things new – not just us!

We embrace this ride, this parade, this event as the disciples along the road did – as a joyous, hope-filled sign! We wave the palms that Luke never mentions and shout hosanna with cheerful voices. Perhaps Jesus was joyful too, for a while. But as he neared the city his joy was overwhelmed with tears of sorrow, not only for what lay ahead for him, but for what lay ahead for the city. “*If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace!*” he whispered. If only the city would welcome him with open arms, if only they understood his message, if only they embraced the good news he offered about a different kind of salvation – not from Roman rule, but from sin and death, from despair and fear! If only they would repent, change their ways, and find in his coming the things that make for peace – a way of loving God and neighbor that could change their lives. If only…

Those who first heard Luke’s gospel late in the first century, decades after Jesus’ death and resurrection, knew what those along the streets on Palm Sunday did not know – that Jerusalem would not welcome him or embrace his way or recognize in him the things that make for peace. By the time they heard Luke’s account of this Palm Sunday, they knew that Jerusalem had been smashed into submission, the Temple destroyed, and the stones scattered. There would be no singing stones in that day, for Jerusalem had rejected the things that make for peace – and so there was no peace. And Jesus wept!

Two thousand years later Jesus is still weeping for Jerusalem, for they still do not recognize the things that make for peace. The conflict with Palestinians rages on. Gaza has been reduced to rubble by Israeli Defense Forces intent on rooting out Hamas even if it means bombing hospitals and schools and killing thousands of children in the process in retribution for the brazen October attack that killed over 1,000 innocent Israelis. Three religions that claim faith in the same God, the God of Abraham, continue to live in conflict with one another in a city which is holy to all three. The history of Jerusalem across these two thousand years is a history of violent struggle. Jesus weeps for they do not yet recognize the things that make for peace, the things that he taught:

*Love your neighbor as yourself.*

*Forgive as you have been forgiven.*

*Turn the other cheek.*

*Blessed are the peacemakers.*

And instead of singing, the shattered stones bear mute witness to the destruction.

If Jesus does indeed weep for Jerusalem this day, then he surely also weeps for Ukraine – for the pain, suffering, and ongoing violence in that brutal war. If we could only recognize Christ in our midst in the faces of brothers and sisters who are more like us than unlike us, if we could only seek peace as ardently as we wage war, if we could only follow humbly the king who rides on the donkey instead of saddling up the steeds that race into battle, perhaps we might stem the flow of tears from Jesus’ eyes and find the peace that he promises.

If Jesus does indeed weep for Jerusalem and Ukraine this day, then he also weeps for the cities in our nation. He weeps for the poor who struggle to survive day to day. He weeps for immigrants who are treated as enemies and now live in fear, for refugees who have no safe place to call home, for the anger and hate that find expression in violence and threats of violence. He weeps for lives lost and hopes drowned and kindness abandoned. He weeps for our leaders’ embrace of power and bullying and violence as tools for security. He weeps because we still do not recognize the things that make for peace

In Richmond, there is a statue for slavery reconciliation with the inscription:

*Acknowledge and forgive the past.*

*Embrace the present.*

*Shape a future of reconciliation and justice.*

Jesus weeps because those words are not yet a reality in our state capital or our nation. Jesus weeps for all our cities that do not yet know the things that make for peace. Andrew Young, the civil rights activist and former mayor of Atlanta, recalls Jesus’ words that a city on a hill cannot be hid and writes:

*A city must cultivate those values that have brought us together to one place and enable us to live in unity despite our differences and our boundless desire for freedom. Violence, crime, and drugs are fundamentally spiritual problems. They represent society’s failure to share meaning, impart skills, and transmit community values. Indeed, all cities must address the very question of life’s meaning and impart a vision of life together, both for the present and for the future.[[2]](#endnote-2)*

In other words, we must learn to recognize and practice the things that make for peace in our cities, our towns, our neighborhoods, our homes, our lives. Those are the things of which Jesus told us: love of neighbors, forgiveness, self-sacrifice, grace. If we could just recognize and practice those things that make for peace, then we might help to dry the tears of the king who comes in the name of the Lord to cheers of “*Peace in heaven and glory in the highest heaven*!” He is the one who weeps for Jerusalem and for us, the one who rides into Jerusalem to die for us. And so, we join our voices to the stones that sing: Hosanna! Lord, have mercy upon us all! Amen

1. “Courage Over Injustice”, Christine Harrison, *Southern Poverty Law Center Report*, Spring 2025, p.3 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Andrew Young, “The City on the Hill: Reflections from a Former Mayor,” Id at p.56 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)