

The Church of the Pilgrimage
Rev. Dr. Helen Nablo
April 9, 2017 – Palm Sunday

Luke 19-29-48

As he approached Bethphage and Bethany at the hill called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples, saying to them, “Go to the village ahead of you, and as you enter it, you will find a colt tied there, which no one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, ‘Why are you untying it?’ say, ‘The Lord needs it.’” Those who were sent ahead went and found it just as he had told them. As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, “Why are you untying the colt?” They replied, “The Lord needs it.” They brought it to Jesus, threw their cloaks on the colt and put Jesus on it. As he went along, people spread their cloaks on the road. When he came near the place where the road goes down the Mount of Olives, the whole crowd of disciples began joyfully to praise God in loud voices for all the miracles they had seen: “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!” “Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!” Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Jesus, “Teacher, rebuke your disciples!” “I tell you,” he replied, “if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out.” As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it and said, “If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace—but now it is hidden from your eyes. The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognize the time of God’s coming to you.” When Jesus entered the temple courts, he began to drive out those who were selling. “It is written,” he said to them, “‘My house will be a house of prayer’; but you have made it ‘a den of robbers.’” Every day he was teaching at the temple. But the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the leaders among the people were trying to kill him. Yet they could not find any way to do it, because all the people hung on his words.

Rock Speak

As many of you know, my husband Mike has a new retirement project – he is an artist with a medium in stone. And you know, I think our house may be being overtaken. They are in our basement -- rocks from Plymouth Beach, rocks from Nantasket Beach, and rocks from places far away that first arrived on our front steps in little – and not so little – cardboard mailing boxes. There are rocks on our mantle – a whole succession of meditative crosses. There are rocks on our kitchen island, a box of newly fashioned ornamental crosses, in shades of red, brown, violet, green and blue. So the rocks have taken up residence with us. I have even found rocks in the dishwasher.

Maybe you like rocks too. Maybe you collect them, or have a favorite rock somewhere out in nature. A rock in the middle of a stream you used to lie on. A rock in a backyard you used to climb. A red rock somewhere out west you once took a glorious photo of. In a few weeks, when we head to my brother’s wedding

out west, we'll have a day in Sedona, a place of gorgeous red rocks. Rocks have an appeal: solid, ancient, they seem to speak to the eternal.

When the disciples began praising Jesus a little too loudly, the Pharisees told Jesus to settle them down, make them stop. And Jesus has a response: "If these were silent, I tell you, the very stones would shout out." It isn't that surprising that Jesus would say that. He was always talking about things in nature: lilies, birds, fig trees, sheep, soil and seed. He was good at teaching using the things around him, good with metaphor, with imaginative words. But in what Jesus says about the rocks today, he wasn't just playing around with words. Palm Sunday is so much bigger than that.

Yesterday I googled talking rocks, specifically this particular passage. I found some pretty dull interpretations. We are meant to praise God. It is our nature to praise God. And if we don't we are denying our nature. Okay there's a truth there, but it sounds like a lot of "should" to me. I see Jesus words (as his life) as being a lot more lively than that!

So I'm choosing instead to harken back to last weekend's women's retreat on the Cape, when in the midst of the driving rain we huddled in front of a DVD player to watch John O'Donohue sharing a Celtic Pilgrimage. The video was all about John O'Donohue, a Celtic theologian sharing his childhood places in the barren yet beautiful landscape of Ireland. There were great field outcroppings of rock where O'Donohue walked, sat and reflected. There were great huge cliffs of rock that met the sea, where O'Donohue stood facing the ocean, reflecting. "The landscape speaks to us if we have ears to listen" he said. At his prompting, people on this Celtic Pilgrimage laid down on the rock cliffs, hung their heads over the ledge looking to the sea below....and listened.

And what did the landscape, the rocky ground and the roaring ocean speak of? Of winter turning to spring, of how even in the bleakest of days there are signs of winter breaking up, slowly giving over its time to a new time. They spoke of gratitude for wide open spaces, for time to think, and for a place to call home. I had been afraid people would not like this DVD. It was slow, and perhaps ponderous. But everyone *loved* it. The landscape was precious to John O'Donohue and of course, we all have landscapes that are precious to us too.

In our trip to the Holy Land this past Fall, we saw a landscape unlike anything around coastal New England. There were trees of all varieties, varieties you don't see around here. There was a lot of sand. And there was a lot of rock. There were fields that look like the main crop was rocks, rocks pushing on up out of the earth. We too have trees, and sand and rock, but it was put together differently there. And the landscape seemed to speak there too.

So if the rocks that Jesus saw along the road on his way to Jerusalem were speaking to us today What would they say? In an age of "alternative facts", would they cry out

for a greater honesty, for truth-telling in all places -- in government, in churches, in families, in human hearts? Would they cry out for compassion and understanding for those who suffer with mental health issues, with addiction, with being a refugee? Would they cry out the rage and despair of the poor?

Once a woman I knew traveled to Haiti and she brought me back a little gift. It was a wooden bell. It had within it a wooden clapper, that in reality made no real noise. Carved in this bell – remember now, this came from Haiti – were these words: No one hears the cries of the poor or the sound of a wooden bell.

I found the words devastating. Later I wondered where she found this strange gift. Was it in a roadside gift shop, sitting amidst postcards, shell necklaces and sunglasses? Or had some artisan from a cooperative community fashioned it, in order to make an important claim and in hopes precisely that some North American woman would bring it home and give it to her pastor, to remind her what Jesus was really about?

So Jesus comes riding into Jerusalem. His time has come and he has come to the city that kills the prophets, the city that wrangles about everything, the place that does not know the things that make for peace. The Pharisees know he speaks a lot about the poor and disenfranchised, that he paid attention to those that others ignored. They know that people are calling him King of Kings, praising him perhaps in expectation of some big reversal of fortune. They say to his disciples be quiet. Jesus, what you are about makes us nervous. And what you have to say, we don't want to hear it. We don't want any more trouble from you or your disciples. But Jesus affirms the appropriateness of the disciples' praise, saying, I tell you if these were quiet, even the very stones would cry out.

What is Jesus saying? There is something unstoppable about Jesus, or rather, about the God, the true God, that Jesus has come to convey. For in his life, in his teaching in Galilee and in his coming to Jerusalem, Jesus faithfully and courageously represented the nonviolent and loving heart of God and this determination of Jesus – to show this God, and not a partisan, warrior God is what we celebrate today on Palm Sunday.

Did you notice? There are no palms and no hosannas in Luke's gospel, for these would be the trappings of a royal procession, a symbol of power and prestige. In Luke's gospel there are cloaks put on the ground. The cloaks were in most people's case the only outer garment they had. They were laying them down, a way to honor Jesus who rides in not on a horse, (again a feature of kings and princes and military might) but on a donkey. It is a humble, subdued entrance for one who comes in the name of peace, wiping away a tear for the people who will not listen because their image of God is too fixated on a God who will pick up their cause, champion their cause, wipe out all opposition in the name of their cause.

This is not the image of God Jesus came to portray. He came humble, and riding on the donkey. Hear the way theologian Brian MacLaren puts it: "In Christ God is supreme, but not in the old discarded paradigm of supremacy: God is the supreme healer, the supreme love, the supreme life-giver who Self-empties in gracious love for us all. The king of kings and Lord of Lords is the servant of all and friend of sinners." (*The Great Spiritual Migration*, p. 92)

So what would the rocks shout out? Maybe it is the same words, the same encouragement that was spoken at Jesus baptism This is my Son. Listen to him! Or maybe the rocks would say this: Here is something new. Here is power for, and power with -- not power over. Here, good people, is something new. Can you embrace it?

And maybe the rocks would cry out in anguish. Because people do not listen – not then, not now. Some years ago the great writer Walker Percy called Christianity "a failed religion". Why? Because Jesus came showing us a new face of God and we tried to reconcile it with the old vision of God that it challenged -- the old vision being that tribal God, the God who is the God of us, but not them. You know that kind of thinking: God must be powerful, all powerful. God must want to smite our enemies, because well, they are our enemies and God is *our* God. "For the world to migrate away from violence, Brian MacLaren says, our God must migrate away from violence." Like an image in a mirror, our God concept reflects back to us the image of what we aspire to become." (*The Great Spiritual Migration*, p. 94)

Can we hear the rocks crying out to our world today? They are shouting that God never does a victory dance when people are killed, when the politics of retaliation is yet again engaged, when violence only begets more violence. I don't know about you but this week I've been wondering: Why do people seem more "presidential" when air strikes are called for? Would they appear "presidential" if they fed the hungry and advocated for the poor, worked to turn swords into plowshares, and spears into pruning hooks?

The rocks cry out that in Jesus a new way is possible. Where there appears to be no way, God will make a way.

The rocks cry out still.

As we, this Holy week, follow Jesus to the cross, will we listen and heed their call?

Amen.