

**New St. James Presbyterian Church  
Palm Sunday  
Sunday, April 13, 2025**

**“If These Were Silent”  
Luke 19:28-40**

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Today, Palm Sunday, is unavoidably awkward. There’s always this uncertainty, this tension, as a celebration and parade herald the coming execution (Stewart). Jesus rides into Jerusalem amid joy and excitement, but Good Friday is only days away. Palm Sunday “is a day of contrasts,” as joy and triumph mingle beneath the shadow of the cross (Carter).

I’m reminded of something that happened in a previous congregation I served: the church had ordered palm branches—but when they came out of the box, they were wilted, drooping; from a distance, they looked just fine...but if you looked too closely, you realized they were shrivelling, dead. From a distance, the celebration of Palm Sunday looks like an uncomplicated parade—but as we get closer to what’s happening, we can’t help but ask: should anyone really be celebrating? Should we—like the crowd in Jerusalem—be singing loud Hosannas? Or should we fall silent before “th’approaching sacrifice” (Milman)? Should we sing with joy today—or mourn in silence?

And that question runs through our Gospel Lesson, too. As Jesus enters Jerusalem, he is greeted with joy and excitement—and with loud, expectant shouts of praise: “As [Jesus] rode along,” Luke writes, “people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. As 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” (vv. 36-37).

The crowd is excited and joyful...but it’s also putting Jesus at risk, because of the Roman occupiers. Spreading cloaks on the ground, making that path for Jesus to enter triumphantly—that was a symbolic act, a gesture fit for royalty (cf. 2 King 9:13). This was no longer just a welcome, but an “instant royal celebration” (Wright)—and that’s hazardous territory. Rome is in charge, Rome is king; even hinting otherwise is risky.

Still, maybe the Romans wouldn’t actually have spotted that particular symbolic gesture; I mean, there’s a lot to keep Roman occupiers busy, and they might not

pick up on the symbolism of thrown cloaks... Yet then that symbolic gesture becomes crystal clear as the crowd greets Jesus as their king. Luke tells us, the people were “saying, ‘Blessed is *the king* who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!’” (v. 38).

Who knows how the Romans would’ve perceived the laying of cloaks, but there’s no more ambiguity how: the people acclaim Jesus as king. And this isn’t whispered; it’s shouted in the busy streets of Jerusalem. This message is very loud—and very dangerous. Calling Jesus “king” means calling him a rebel against Roman rule; calling Jesus “king” means calling him a threat to Rome—and therefore a target for Roman violence. Calling Jesus “king” is the sort of thing that could quickly get him killed...

So why wouldn’t someone step in to put a stop to this? Why wouldn’t someone caution Jesus that this was dangerous and reckless? And in fact, someone does step in to warn Jesus—but, at least as far the Gospels are concerned, it comes from a rather unlikely source. Luke writes: “Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, ‘Teacher, order your disciples to stop’” (v. 39).

Pharisees were a popular Jewish religious movement, who—among other things—encouraged worshipping God beyond the Temple, especially through prayer and scriptural study; they had quite a lot in common with Jesus, which is partly why, in the Gospels, we often see Jesus and the Pharisees debating about the finer points of faith and religious practice. Their debates were sometimes intense—they called Jesus a blasphemer (Luke 5:21), he called them worse (Matthew 23:27)—but they always seem to have enough in common that, in the end, they’re able to continue their debates.

Unfortunately, centuries of anti-Jewish preaching and teaching have led Christians to view Pharisees as the enemies as Jesus, when in fact their outlook was closer to Jesus than really anyone else around (and that includes the disciples, who were usually pretty confused). And what’s more, the Pharisees—at least twice—demonstrated real concern for Jesus; they worried about his safety. Some chapters back in the Gospel of Luke, we read: “At that very hour, some Pharisees came and said to [Jesus], ‘Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you’” (Luke 13:31). There’s no ulterior motive; they simply cautioned Jesus about imminent danger.

Then once again, in our Gospel Lesson this morning, we find the Pharisees warning Jesus about the danger he was facing (cf. Craddock). The Pharisees saw this parade, with its rebellious political message in defiance of Rome...and they knew this could trigger a violent response from the Roman authorities. And you know what: the Pharisees were right! With the crowd acclaiming Jesus as “king” right under the nose of the Romans, this was the sort of rebellious display that would make Jesus a marked man. The Pharisees were right—and Jesus knew that, too.

And yet, when the Pharisees warn Jesus to quiet the disciples, Jesus refuses to end the celebration—no matter how dangerous it may be: “Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, ‘Teacher, order your disciples to stop.’ He answered, ‘I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out’” (v. 40; cf. Habakkuk 2:11). Notice, Jesus doesn’t tell the Pharisees that they’re mistaken, that their concerns are unfounded; and indeed, they weren’t. Instead, Jesus declares prophetically that “[i]f [the disciples] kept quiet, [then] the stones along the road would burst into cheers” (NLT).

From the perspective of the Pharisees, this party was dangerous—so, to avoid angering the Romans, the disciples should fall silent. From our perspective on Palm Sunday, this party seems out of place, days away from Good Friday—so rather than celebrate, we should fall silent, too. And yet Jesus declares—to the Pharisees and, by extension, to us—that this celebration has its place, despite the dangers then and despite the strangeness now...because, even if all the partygoers went home, then the bricks and mortar would sing for joy.

It turns out there’s joy here that runs deeper than any single celebration; this is not just a parade. A more profound joy is rising up from every corner of creation—and even the dry, dead rocks can feel it. With God’s redeeming love unfolding, with God’s promised deliverance nearing, everything quivers with expectation: all creation, from the rejoicing crowd to the stones beneath their feet—everything resonates at the nearness of God’s long-awaited salvation. Our next hymn, by the late poet Richard Wilbur, expresses it this way:

“This child through David’s city shall ride in triumph by;  
the palm shall strew its branches, and every stone shall cry.  
And every stone shall cry, through heavy, dull and dumb,  
and lie within the roadway to pave his kingdom come.”

In the memory of the church, this is a day that hastened a great sorrow; and yet, the joy of Christ’s redeeming love is so profound and real that if the crowds fell silent, the stones would sing. It turns out joy has its place and belongs today, not

despite the coming sorrow but because of it. The deeper joy of creation flows through this sorrow today, through the stunning reality that God in Christ was willing to suffer sorrow and death to redeem creation.

None of us will ever fully grasp the grace of Holy Week or the love that moved Jesus to accept the burden of the coming sacrifice. Yet even as we share in the sorrow of our Saviour, we must share also in the joyful knowledge that Christ accepted this sorrow for our sake. The question for us—and for that crowd—is: Should we fall silent or should we sing? Should we mourn or should we celebrate? And the answer is clear: the place for us today is in that noisy, reckless crowd—with all its joy and celebration. After all, if we stayed silent, the stones would sing.