

SERMON?: “The Sound of Stones”

First United Church, Waterloo – Palm Sunday, April 10, 2022

PRAYER: “Wondrous God, could it be that Shakespeare was right that there are sermons in stones? Let’s imagine. Let’s listen. Speak your Word and let our faith be deepened.” Amen

It must have been quite the scene that original Palm Sunday, don’t you think?

A spectrum of arousal.

Jesus, his disciples, and a crowd of adults and children on parade waving palm branches, dropping some cloaks on the pathway were joined by others inside the walls who were roused into celebration and excitement.

Here in the midst of all that was someone who may just be “the hope of all the years”; one who would somehow bring about their liberation.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, the High Priest and members of the Sanhedrin – a designated inner council of religious authorities comprised of Pharisees and Sadducees – who, along with numbers of their colleagues, pressed down hard on their fear button.

Indeed, if this donkey-riding fool really was one “who comes in the name of our God”, then, who are they? Such a one threatened their authority, their permitted field of control.

And besides, gathered crowds of Jewish citizens would get suspicious attention from the Roman authorities who had political governance.

True enough, there would have been some wandering and observant Roman soldiers in the vicinity, eyes wide open, hearts and minds churning like a National Guard on alert. And in the middle of all that, there would have been some local citizens aroused to curiosity. And maybe a few who paid no attention at all.

If you have listened to, or better witnessed a stage or movie production of Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice’s “Jesus Christ Superstar”, you have some kind of imagined picture of that day.

It happens in and around the song “Hosanna, hosanna, sanna, sanna, ho”.

Fairly faithful to the biblical story, the musical includes an exchange between Caiaphas, the High Priest, and Jesus, interspersed with variations in the refrain.

“Tell the rabble to be quiet, we anticipate a riot. This common crowd is much too loud.

Tell the mob who sing your song that they are fools and they are wrong.

They are a curse. They should disperse.”

“Why waste your breath moaning at the crowd. Nothing can be done to stop the shouting.

If every tongue was stilled the noise would still continue.

The rocks and stones themselves would start to sing!”

Do you wonder, as I have sometimes wondered, what the rocks and stones would have shouted and sung about?

Stone 1

I was there that day, I'm still there today, about two meters inside the Sheep Gate.

It takes a long time to wear down a stone.

The Sheep Gate is on northeast side of the old city.

It passes by the Pool of Bethesda (where Jesus once healed a crippled person);
and leads directly into the precincts of the Great Temple.

It also gives access to the Antonia fortress, where the Roman garrison has quarters.

It was built by Herod the Great to "protect" the Temple.

Yeah, right, you know what that also means.

If you want to enter Jerusalem from the village of Bethany across the Kidron valley
on the Mount of Olives to the east, the Sheep Gate is one of the nearest points of access.

How delightful, what a treat, how different and promising it was
when that palm-waving parade of people with Jesus in the middle passed over me.

Not at all what I was used to.

What I was used to was the Roman army, and the ruling governor tromping through.

Oh yes, they loved to go on parade, just to remind everyone who was in control.

I often bore the brunt of the impact of heavy-footed soldiers.

Sometimes they would pound the pavement with their shields or spears.

Then came the clomp and clout of horses' hooves followed by crunch of chariot wheels.

Through the Sheep Gate they would come, announcing yet another military victory,
or calling all citizens to some festival of adoration for the Emperor.

They'd make a circle tour of the Temple precincts then head off through the rest of town
until they wound up at the Governor's palace over on the far west side.

People showed up and cheered – because they were forced to, afraid not to.

That's how top-down, heavy handed power works – by shows of strength and threat,
by keeping those who have minimal or no power under foot.

What a contrast – that Jesus parade was.

Just the slow, soft patter of bare feet or sandalled feet,
and the light, skipping hops of children's feet. A happy dance, a joy-filled procession.

The soft brush-strokes of palm leaves and the occasional cloak.

And in the middle, the steady, unpretentious clippety-clop of donkey hooves.

Humility hung in the air. It was the sound of a peace march.

The crowd hailed him as a Ruler, a God-sent Deliverer.

How strange that he should pass through the Holy city non-violently.

How does one manage to rule that way?

The song settles within me nonetheless: "Blessed is the One who comes!

Hosanna, hey sanna, sanna, sanna, ho!"

Stone 2

I heard it too, that Palm parade long ago. It meandered over me in the Temple precincts. That's the open exterior courtyard where non-Jews could gather in the vicinity of holy space. That's where Jews who came to worship at festival times passed through as they made their way into the inner courts of the Temple. Here and there, on occasion, there might be a young girl selling flowers, a craftsperson selling useful objects made of wood, or cloth, or woven cords; and always a few beggars with their backs to the outer wall. Every day they show up for a while. Often, they leave of their own accord. Sometimes the Roman soldiers escort them out; or the religious authorities have them removed. Out in the streets of the old city beyond the Temple area, there are lots of sellers. Goods are marketed on almost every street and alley. Fair trades are made. Buyers bargain for their purchases. It's apparently quite fun. I sometimes overhear the reports of purchasers who found a good deal. Unlike what else was going on that day when Jesus rode by. Flanked along the length of the wall where the entrances to the Temple were, a raucous bunch of sellers had tables and cages laden with grains and doves and pigeons and even sheep and oxen. Jews arriving for worship had to buy them so they could make the appropriate sacrifices. And ... they had to buy them with special coins minted by some Temple authorities: rich Sadducees who were operating their own private banking enterprise. Outside along with the hawkers of grain and animals for sacrifice, money-changers took in shekels and denarii at inflated exchange rates. And there wasn't much bargaining with the sellers, worshippers paid the going rate, more than fair-market value. Scam artists, the whole rotten lot of them! For moment, I heard the singing stop, felt the donkey's hooves standing still upon me. I'm pretty sure Jesus paused to take notice. Later that day, after the parade was over, he came back angry and upset. "Get out! Get out!" he shouted as he overturned their tables, set the animals free, and drove them all out. That's as close to violent as he got, but it was a righteous anger. I'm still here almost two thousand years later, but the Temple itself is gone. Only one outer wall is left where Jews still offer prayers and moments of worship. There is no more an altar where animals are sacrificed. I understand that somehow Jesus caught on with other groups of followers through the ages; that they have holy spaces where they remember him and seek to learn from him; that they still sing his praises; that they seek to treat others kindly and with fairness. That song of long ago is still within me: "Blessed is the One who comes ... *Hosanna, hey sanna, sanna, sanna, ho! Sanna, hey sanna, hosanna!*"

Stone 3

There are times one simply doesn't forget.
Like that time when the Jesus parade passed over me too
outside the Temple area, on the street that leads back towards the Antonia fortress:
Richob Dawida. It begins as a narrow passage then later opens up on a larger plaza.
There's a large pavement near the fortress where public trials sometimes take place.
All the excitement and joy of that palm parade
were underscored by other, more sombre moods also hanging in the air.
That didn't really surprise me.
I've witnessed all kinds of pleasant and unpleasant happenings on this street.
Same goes for other streets in this city.
Often at night, sometimes in broad daylight, trouble erupts, pain happens.
There can be blood: wounds open up during fist fights, stabbings take place,
innocent and not-so innocent pedestrians get gashed by broken glass,
"criminals of the state" are forced by Roman soldiers
to drag the cross-beam of their own crucifix along this laneway after they've been lashed.
And I have heard the death-cry from within the Temple.
There was a slab of marble beneath the Holy of Holies that once was white so I heard.
I heard it became progressively beet red from the blood flow and spatter
that fell upon it from young bulls and bleating lambs that got sacrificed.
I've still got some old stains in me from blood shed ages ago.
So yes, that parade passed by. I joined in singing, "Blessed is the One who comes!
"Hosanna, hey sanna, sanna, sanna, ho!"
I came to sing it more softly, on the edge of mournfully
because there was also the smell of danger and hints of bloodlust in the air that day.
Somethings didn't bode well.
I understand the High Priest tore into Jesus verbally that day.
I heard what happened later in the week.
Some passers-by said Jesus sweated blood praying on a rock in Gethsemane garden.
Further down this street, Jesus was on trial on that pavement.
Further down this street, many of that same crowd grew cool and crowed about crucifixion.
Further down this street and round a corner, he was on parade again,
beaten, stripped, and lashed, dragging his own cross-beam
along what became known as the *Via Dolorosa*, the Way of Sorrows.
And beyond this street, through the Damascus Gate, he made his way
to one gosh-ugly piece of rock called Golgotha, the Place of the Skull.
I heard a report that the High Priest and High Council convinced the Roman governor
that it was expedient.
Little did they know.
Somehow, Jesus did become a Liberator. "*Hosanna! Hey, sanna, sanna, sanna, ho!*"
The song goes on.

