



What the Stones Remember

Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsohn on Palm Sunday

It may seem strange to be here on Palm Sunday, and to have the story end where it just did. What normally happens on Palm Sunday is that after we wave our palm branches to remember Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, we come inside and hear every step of the rest of the story: Jesus' last supper with his disciples, his betrayal and arrest, his crucifixion and death. But we stopped early, this year. In a way it is as if we have been carried along in the great river of the story and our tradition and we are now caught on a branch, and the water is pouring around us trying to move us forward, but we have stopped here, prematurely, it might seem.

Perhaps it seems this way because those of us steeped in our tradition do know the story so well. But the disciples did not know, which is ironic given how much Jesus had tried to warn them. They didn't seem to realize they were in a vast current so much bigger than themselves, one that was leading inexorably to those events we now remember every Holy Week. This year, we decided to do things a little bit differently in order to enter into the story and experience it as if in real time, as Jesus and his disciples did.

On this day so long ago, all the disciples knew was a sense of amazement and awe. Their Teacher was finally being recognized in a significant way by the crowds as he entered Jerusalem triumphantly. Scholars tell us it was no accident that Jesus entered the city on a colt from the east that day, for apparently the very same day, Pontius Pilate was entering the city from the west, on a horse, in a ritual Roman display of power. The comparison was unmistakable. Surely the disciples and the crowds wondered if Jesus might be a true alternative to their hated imperial oppressors. Surely it seemed as if the whole world was moving toward Jesus' ascent into power. There is a feel of inevitability in the whole story, even down to the details of how Jesus sent his disciples to get a colt from unknown people who just let them, exactly as predicted without a hitch. When the Pharisees objected to what seemed an ostentatious display of power, Jesus said that if he were to silence the crowds, even the stones would shout out. No force on earth, apparently, could stop what was happening. Even if the scholars couldn't figure it out, everyday people and even the rocks could recognize that there was something about Jesus that was very significant.

The sense of inevitability continued later in the week as they were preparing to celebrate the Passover. Jesus sent disciples ahead to find the place they would celebrate, just as he had sent them to find the colt, and again everything happens smoothly in an almost eerie way, just as he had predicted it would. So they ate their Passover meal together. And then the great currents carrying them toward what they hoped was a positive sea change in their destiny, turned on a dime. It had seemed that Jesus was the obvious hopeful alternative to Rome, which he in fact was and is, but not how they thought. ..

And so the current of Roman power, and the current of Jesus, and the Great Story of God working through the Jewish people all combined and moved with great force, not toward a throne, but toward Golgotha.

There are times in the life of the world we also can have a sense of the inexorable, of great movements of change happening that are beyond our control and that are leading us we do not know where. Sometimes climate change can feel like that. Sometimes our nation's political situation can feel like that. Sometimes we feel it in our personal lives, watching ourselves or people we love caught in a flow that has its own insistent momentum. Just like the disciples on Palm Sunday, we do not know where things will take us. We can be so wrong about what we imagine is possible.

As often happens when I zoom way in to a story in scripture to prepare for preaching, one detail of this story stood out to me. Jesus said to the Pharisees, if the crowds were silent, the stones would cry out. The thing is, even though the crowd turned out to be fickle in their attitude toward Jesus with terrible results, they were not wrong in what they were seeing, even if they didn't quite understand it. In my imagination, on that Palm Sunday, they experienced a liminal moment, a moment when the Celts would say the veils between the worlds were thin. They saw something in Jesus that was powerful, important, and more significant than they could understand. And they were right. Even though they forgot just a few days later, in my imagination, the stones did not. They knew all along. They still do.

I'm sure many of you are familiar with the great fantasy trilogy *The Lord of the Rings* by J.R.R. Tolkien. There is a scene in it in which the elf Legolas, who is somewhere between 500 and 3000 years old, speaks about a part of the country where Elves had dwelt long ago. He says that "the trees and the grass do not now remember the Elves. Only I hear the stones lament them..."¹ There is an imagination that the stones are the eldest and also have the longest memory. This last summer I went up to the Boundary Waters and learned that much of the beautiful exposed ledgerock there is from the Precambrian era—the earliest part of the earth's history. There are boulders in Ely that are 2.7 billion years old. For me personally, there is something about being in the presence of the most ancient creatures in the natural world—these rocks that saw glaciers scrape the land to the bone many times, over thousands of centuries—that makes me think differently about what is true, and what seems momentous today. Years ago, I visited the Grand Canyon, and I remember seeing all the way to the bottom of it—literally a mile deep—and being told that every step into the Grand Canyon represents 20,000 years of erosion. So in one step, all of recorded human history as we know it is gone, and our species itself vanishes in ten steps, with a mile further to walk. I felt relieved that all the problems I thought to be so huge were so utterly insignificant in the face of the vast beauty that is the Grand Canyon. I have heard the story of an inmate in the concentration camps in Europe in WWII, who looked up and saw, in the night sky, a single star that was so remote and so beautiful, that it gave her comfort—because nothing that happened here could ever touch it.

¹ J.R.R. Tolkien, *Fellowship of the Ring*, chapter 3: "The Ring Goes South."

For me, the still point in today's vast epic tale from scripture—the story of Jesus in triumph, in glory, yet being swept by all the currents of divine and human will toward Calvary—is the knowledge of the stones. Now I know Jesus probably didn't mean they literally remembered. But in the Ojibwe language, their pronouns refer not to male and female objects, but to animate and inanimate objects—and in the Ojibwe imagination, it isn't just oak trees and people and mosquitos who are animate, but also snow and drums and rocks. So perhaps in the field of mythic wisdom beyond what we currently understand, the stones did know. They would never forget who and what Jesus is, whether the crowds celebrated or hated him, whether Rome adopted Christianity or abandoned it, no matter what happens to Christendom or St. John's or the world.

It seems that in the deepest memory of ancient creation, there is the recognition of what is true, what is important. Just as a parent never forgets the goodness of her newborn child, no matter what the child does as an adult, creation knows. Deeper than the currents of human history is the essential light embodied in Christ. It is the light that belongs to all people, indeed to all things, as the first chapter of John's gospel describes. This light was the first reality created, before the light of sun and moon and stars. This light will outlast whatever we can do to one another and to this planet, whether for great good or for great ill.

So this week, we will be swept up into the river of Holy Week that leads through terrible suffering and betrayal, to death. We know how it ends, but we don't avoid the story just to get to the happy parts. How will you walk through Holy Week? What seems inevitable or beyond your control in your own life, those forces that march forward no matter what you do?

As we hold these stories together, let the same mind be in us that was in Christ Jesus, as the author of Philippians urges us. If in our community and faith there has been any consolation from love, any encouragement, any compassion, then let us adopt the mind of Christ as we walk through this ancient story and whatever is happening in our lives today. Let us remember what was, what is, and what ever shall be, world without end, the thing that the stones do not forget even if we sometimes do. Jesus embodied the breathtaking radiance of divine light, as we are also meant to do, come what may. Nothing can take the light of Christ away from you. How will this impact the way we walk in this world? Have courage, and let us be on our way. **Amen.**