

April 5, 2020 (Palm Sunday) | Sanctuary worship service

Text: [Luke 19:37–40](#)

Title: Elemental Wisdom

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

Luke 19:37–40

As Jesus was... 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, saying, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!" Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, order your disciples to stop." Jesus answered, "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out."

Pittsburgh author Annie Dillard has a collection of essays titled "Teaching a Stone to Talk." In it she tells a story about a man named Larry who has a palm-sized stone he picked up on the beach—a dark gray stone cut through with a band of white—a stone that he is trying to teach to speak.¹ As unusual as this is, Dillard doesn't treat it as a joke, or even as an eccentricity. She sees Larry's work as a type of noble ritual—a chore that he has taken on for whatever reason, trying to connect with nature or call forth a miracle or simply remind himself on a daily basis that he doesn't have all the answers in a world full of wonders even greater than that of talking stones. Dillard wished him well in his endeavor.

My mother—as a Christmas gift years and years ago—gathered up common stones from our farm and had someone grind and polish them into round paperweights for my brother, sister, and me. It was palm-sized, a brown and tan speckled rock of no particular value, except that it came from a place that had been home to us for years. It couldn't talk, but it called to mind pastures and hayfields and a life I'd loved. Right now every one of you could likely name some inanimate object in your house that speaks to you—a seashell or piece of driftwood brought home from a special vacation; a gemstone now worn as favorite jewelry. For whatever reason, your stone, your tiny bit of nature speaks volumes to you.

During these days shaped by a global coronavirus outbreak, we find ourselves listening to nature in ways different from even a few weeks ago. In January and February nature was something "out there." It was gray skies, winter weather, possible snowy forecasts on the evening news. Now nature seems to be pushing in on us from all sides, mostly through an invisible virus that moves on the air and lingers on surfaces around us. Is nature trying to and tell us something? In fact, I had a wise friend ask me a similar question just last week. He asked, "What is God trying to tell us with this outbreak?" I generally try to avoid claiming to know what God is thinking and doing at any moment. But after a pause, I replied that perhaps the coronavirus crisis is reminding us that we are all connected, and that as God's children we need to start doing a better job of caring for one another right now. Lightning didn't strike the steeple after I gave that response, so for now I'm sticking with that answer.

As you have hopefully recognized by now, a verse from the gospel reading about Palm Sunday prompted these thoughts about talking stones. Jesus was riding into Jerusalem, surrounded by a cheering crowd of disciples who shouted “Hosanna; blessed is the one, this king, who comes in the name of the Lord.” These acclamations both annoyed and frightened the Pharisees, the religious leaders based in Jerusalem, so they called out to Jesus to silence his supporters. To which he replied, “No, for if they were silent, the very stones would shout out.”

The Pharisees had been monitoring Jesus for quite a while now. Back in Luke 13, they had come to Jesus to warn him away from Herod, who wanted to kill Jesus. But Jesus wasn't scared by their warning, nor trusted their false concern. They mostly wanted to protect their position within the political establishment of King Herod, Governor Pilate, and the Roman Empire. In Luke 14 the Pharisees were angry when Jesus healed someone on the Sabbath. In Luke 15 and 16 they grumbled because he spent too much time with sinners. In Luke 17 they couldn't believe it when Jesus declared that the Kingdom of God is in our midst. In Luke 18 Jesus used the Pharisees as an example of people rich in self-pride and poor in humility. And now, in Luke 19, again the Pharisees tried to derail Jesus' ministry, hoping to protect an unjust status quo by silencing this disruptive preacher and his noisy disciples. But they wouldn't succeed. Something deeper, more elemental was involved in this Palm Sunday proclamation. Something even the stones knew and were ready to proclaim if the people ever fell silent.

The beginning of all wisdom is knowing that we simply do not know everything. Socrates taught that long ago, and philosophers and ethicists through the ages have reinforced this truth. A friend and former professor of mine, Dan Maguire, repeated the wisdom of I Corinthians 13 when he reminds us that “reality is bigger than our minds, so that we know only in part.”² We have, at best, partial knowledge of the world. That is why so much of human endeavor is trying to break the silence that descends upon us from the huge reality surrounding us. We send up rockets and satellites and focus telescopes on distant quasars. We climb the highest mountains and explore the ocean depths. In Annie Dillard's essay about her friend Larry, she said that the cathedral and the physics lab are similar in that both are ways to say to the universe: “Hello? Talk to me.”³

I don't believe God caused the COVID-19 pandemic, nor do I know exactly what God is hoping we will learn from this health crisis. But I do believe that God's message is out there and is worth taking seriously. Too often Palm Sunday is thought of as a simple parade—a festive event we like to re-create with kids waving palm branches around church sanctuaries. In our souls, we know there is more to the story than that, but we move on—we get distracted—we praise Jesus on Palm Sunday and look forward to doing it again on Easter Sunday. But there is more reality here—more truth here—than we usually take to heart. Maybe we need those Jerusalem stones to speak up so that we'll really listen to what God is saying, see what Christ is doing, and trust what the Spirit set in motion on Palm Sunday.

Think of it this way. In the beginning God created all that is—somehow, mysteriously, cosmically, wonderfully. This creation is God-centered even as it is also human-accommodating. We are part of creation, beloved children of creation, but we are not the entire story of creation. Sorry to break the news to you. There are elements of God's plan in all earth's elements—air, water, fire, soil, plant and animal, fish and fowl. And by their elemental lives, their being, they too shout for joy to their Creator, Redeemer, and sustaining Holy Spirit.

We too are part of God's creative plan, for which it is right for us to sing our praises and shout "Hosanna." But God's plan hasn't been designed to protect the status quo or preserve human privilege. In fact, it is designed to bring change – to fix what is distorted, to correct where there is injustice, to shelter and protect where there is violence, to wipe away tears and comfort where there is despair. This work of change and realignment required a divine-human actor, a Messiah whose culminating work stretched from Palm Sunday through Easter. Creation sings forth a song of praise, which we join in as part of the chorus: "Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord." Why was this shouted on Palm Sunday? Because in Jesus' triumphal entry, healing, love, mercy, justice, grace, life, even life eternal now came back to the forefront of all creation. It all came back into focus and by grace came back into our hearts.

Richard Rohr, in his daily meditation from a few days ago, put it best in one short sentence: *Life is not about us, but we are about life.* We are about life with God and God's creation. We are about life with Christ and Christ's redemption. We are about life with the Holy Spirit who transforms, transcends and turns us around to see what we need to see and do what must be done. That's why we join the elemental celebration of Palm Sunday. That's why we shout "Hosanna." And if we were silent, the rocks and stones themselves would cry out for joy.

AMEN

¹ Annie Dillard, Teaching a Stone to Talk, 1982, pp. 85-86

² Daniel Maguire, The Moral Core of Judaism and Christianity, p. 271

³ Dillard, p. 89.