

“PICTURE THIS!”
John 20:19-31; Acts 5:27-32
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I'm not sure how long the parade that welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem lasted. The gospel of Luke depicts it as a rather simple event: a borrowed colt, the disciples and Pharisees walking along, a few cloaks placed in the road. But in Luke there are no hosannas or palms, but just a simple parade of friends and acquaintances. A reference in the book of Acts tells us that the Mount of Olives is roughly a half mile outside of Jerusalem, so it would seem that this might have been a pretty short parade, perhaps an hour or so. And yet, that hour played a huge role in ushering in the last days of Jesus. Obviously it wasn't the duration of the event that mattered. As Luke would tell it this so-called parade stayed pretty well under the radar, so what exactly happened here to make this event so important?

Maybe it was the sheer simplicity of the event that brought attention to Jesus. An explanation offered by Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan¹ is that at the same time that the Jesus procession was entering Jerusalem from the East, Pilate was likewise entering from the West. Their similarly timed entrance was the only point of similarity in their respective processions, however. Borg and Crossan suggest that Pilate's procession was a show of imperial power—complete with horses, chariots, and gleaming armor—everything that would impart an image of strength and might. Jesus, however, enters in a manner that details exactly what type of leader he is—that is, not a man who comes to show off the strength of his army, but a prophet who enters to a chorus proclaiming the glory of God. If Borg and Crossan are correct, the parades that enter Jerusalem that day offered two distinct visions of power: the power of the empire vs. the power of God's peace. Perhaps the soldiers who patrolled the Eastern edge of Jerusalem told the story of the strange little parade that Jesus led and that was enough to concern the authorities?! Maybe that little parade served notice to the empire that those who would follow Jesus could not and would not ever announce their allegiance to Caesar?! Whether the procession around Jesus coincided with a similar event for Pilate or not, something about the way that Jesus entered into Jerusalem served as a final straw of sorts. That half-mile journey set those who had, up to that moment tolerated Jesus, abuzz, and set in motion the events that would lead to the cross.

But no matter what it was about Jesus' entry into Jerusalem that set the rest of the story in motion I find myself fascinated by the two statements that Jesus offers as his procession into Jerusalem occurs. First, when he “requisitions” that colt he simply tells the disciples to reply to any who inquire about their taking it, that “The Lord needs it.” And second, in response to the Pharisees' embarrassment about the disciples' wild and joyous words of adoration, Jesus simply responds, “I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out.” These statements, found in the midst of this story we know so well, are invitations, imbedded for us as we worship, at the beginning of this Holy Week and every day of our life.

To help uncover what I mean let me share a poem by Ann Weeks—entitled “Between Parades.”

“We’re good at planning!
Give us a task force and a project
and we’re off and running!
No trouble at all!
Going to the village and finding the colt,
even negotiating with the owners
is right down our alley.
And how we love a parade!
In a frenzy of celebration
we gladly focus on Jesus
and generously throw our coats and palms in his path.
And we can shout praise loudly enough to make the Pharisees complain. It’s all so
good! It’s between parades that we don’t do so well.
From Sunday to Sunday we forget our hosannas.
Between parades the stones will have to shout
because we don’t.”²

When Jesus notes, about the colt, “The Lord needs it.” I cannot help but wonder what else the Lord needs...and I find myself returning, a little out of season, as the Little Drummer Boy, wondering what I have to offer today? And I don’t think I am alone, because what I think we struggle with as Christians is our ability to stay the course when often we just feel over-whelmed by what it means to be a follower of Jesus. The disciples are in a unique place. “Get me a colt,” he says, and so they do. But for us, the question about what the Lord needs is much more challenging, maybe because the needs of the Lord are everywhere we look. It is dizzying really: care for the body of Christ, heal the sick, feed the hungry, tend the earth, visit the lonely, serve our neighbor, join the committee, call your congressional delegation, work at the shelter, buy the “right” products, and on and on it goes. What we wouldn’t do to simply fulfill a request for a colt! But instead, we end up stunned or paralyzed even, and we don’t know what to do next.

But the paralysis that we encounter as Drummer Boys and Girls/Disciples is a paralysis of our own making, I think. Because we can name the needs of the Lord and we know what needs to be done; but all too often we are reticent to give ourselves credit enough for being able to handle the responsibilities of our faith. And then we lose our way, when we just can’t look anymore because the needs of the Lord seem too great.

But while Weeks rightfully critiques us for our desire to skip the pain of this week and instead skip merrily onto the pomp and circumstance of Easter, I find something hopeful in Jesus’ statement that the stones will shout out, even if the disciples—ancient or contemporary—can’t or don’t. Jesus’s statement about the stones was simply a rebuke of the Pharisees, who couldn’t see beyond their own religiosity to understand the friendship, love, and commitment to God that was being poured out as the “Jesus parade” entered into Jerusalem. Jesus was telling the Pharisees that the momentum was

unstoppable...and it was—for better or for worse!

And while we know where that momentum will take us over the next few days, the promise of the stones speaking out is the Good News. The stones that lined the road into Jerusalem have been kicked and shaped by the travelers who walked that road. They have been shaped by Jesus, by the religious devotion of the Pharisees, and by the disciples too! In the stones there is a muscle memory of a sort. And for us, with our sometimes battered and bewildered faith, we sometimes rely on muscle memory to get us through. Perhaps the stones would shout out the story of Jesus' welcome and forgiveness for the woman at the well, perhaps they would shout the story of Zaccheus, the parable of the lost sheep, or maybe it would be the story of a few loaves and a few fish made to feed 5,000. No matter what story the stones would tell it would be our story, THE story that transforms us and gives us hope, even as our world spins out of control this week (and every week perhaps!)

So the notion of the stones speaking was an announcement of momentum...that this story will, could not, be stopped. Not that week...or ever...not through the horrors of the crusades, the spread of plagues and the effects of famine, not by the death chambers of Auschwitz, not by earthquakes, tsunamis, or fires. Even in the midst of those horrors there is the blessing of muscle memory found in the stones. Whether we are paralyzed and made mute by the sheer volume of God's need or human depravity or natural disaster, the stones offer us two promises. First, those stones promise that we won't find ourselves alone because others have walked this path before. And they promise that following Jesus doesn't depend solely on us. If we can't do it, for whatever reason, the stones will echo with the truth of God's peace until we are ready and able once again to proclaim the Good News.

So join in the parade...join with all the disciples and friends throughout history; walk with Jesus in this moment of elation, and into the rest of it too! And if you have to look away or shield your eyes, know that the stones will guide your next steps! Thanks be to God! Amen.

¹Borg, Marcus and Crossman, John Dominic, The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus's Final Days in Jerusalem, HarperCollins, New York, New York, 2006.

²Weeks, Ann, Kneeling in Jerusalem, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 1993