

We'd Be Fools Not To

Luke 19:28-40 on Palm Sunday, 2010

This text for Palm Sunday tells us that as Jesus rode into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey, the crowd along the way “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!*” It’s true that not everybody jumped on the bandwagon. Luke tells us that a group of religious spoilsports demanded that Jesus shush the crowd. But Jesus responded, *If these were silent, the stones would shout out.*

The stones would shout out? The very stones underfoot? Clearly, praise is the order of the day, praise to God for all that God has done in the ministry of Jesus. Signs, these deeds of power are called in John’s gospel. Healings, feedings, transformations, risings, callings, sendings – *signs that something is shifting, something is changing, something new is coming!* Something deeply exciting and *compelling*. And the appropriate response is praise to God for all that God is doing.

What did that praise sound like? Did it sound like Dr. Gilkey’s 1920’s hymn we sang a little while ago – orderly and carefully crafted?

Or did it sound like the crowd yesterday when underdog, mid-major Butler University improbably defeated Kansas State yesterday, sending that unheralded team into the final four of NCAA Basketball’s March Madness? Was it wild?

Was there a moment on that first Palm Sunday before the hosannas broke out – a moment of hushed awe? I did not attend President Obama’s inauguration just fourteen months ago, but I understand that as he stepped up to the actual swearing in ceremony, a hush fell over the vast crowd as people strained to hear the words announcing that some invisible barrier had been broken and nothing in our nation would ever be the same again. Afterward the hush was broken and applause thundered!

However praise sounds, it comes from some place inside us deeper than thought. We are hard-wired for praise. Praise is the language we speak to God. Praise is how we remember who we really are and where we have come from!

We praise despite the fact that we don’t know how things are going to turn out. All we know is that something of God has been turned loose in the world. So even if our particular hopes turn out to be wrong – like those of the crowd on Palm Sunday who thought that Jesus would be a king like his ancestor David – still we cannot help but praise. Some old paradigm has blown up; something new is coming!

In South Africa these are known as “Mandela moments” in tribute to the first black president of South Africa. When Nelson Mandela became president in the early 1990’s, the world held its breath. South Africa was a bitterly divided nation and Mandela, a political activist with a long prison record during apartheid, seemed destined to watch his nation fall into civil war. But there were moments when something new broke through, leaving the nation bruised but amazed and held together by a miracle. One such moment took place in 1995. The story is depicted in Clint Eastwood’s recent film *Invictus*.

That year, for the very first time, the World Cup of the sport of rugby took place in South Africa. Now, South Africa is a rugby-mad nation with all of the passion and wild expectation we in this country associate with basketball and March madness. But the national team of South Africa, called the Springboks, stubbornly continued to represent only the white population. So at international matches when South Africa might play against England or France or New Zealand, black South Africans would protest and cheer not for their own country's team, but for the other team. White folks cheered for the home town team. Black folks cheered for the opposition. Can you imagine? In a crisis, symbols are vital but appear unmoveable.

Mandela understood the power of symbols. So he quietly worked to change the face of rugby. He began by insisting that the national team – white as it was! – begin to see itself as representing the whole nation, black and white. And then, on the big day when the World Cup began, Mandela showed up at the stadium dressed not in the formal suit-and-tie of presidents, but in the green rugby jersey of the white Springboks. No one had ever seen that jersey with a black face! The crowd was stunned. But soon they were cheering – praising! – black and white together! – their *national* team! For the first time they were a nation together!

Could they know what the future of an interracial society might hold? No! But something had shifted and the old paradigm was gone!

Deep inside us we yearn for transformation. The yearning is deep and old. Long before Palm Sunday, well over two thousand years ago, the Greek playwright Sophocles wrote:

*History says, don't hope
On this side of the grave.
But then, once in a lifetime
The longed for tidal wave
Of justice can rise up.
And hope and history rhyme.*

*So hope for the great sea change
On the far side of revenge.
Believe that a further shore
Is reachable from here.
Believe in miracles
And cures and healing wells.*

*If there is fire on the mountain
Of lightning and storm
And a god speaks from the sky
That means someone is hearing
The outcry and the birth-cry
Of new life at its term.*

We yearn for “history and hope” to rhyme. We pray for “Mandela Moments” even while we are afraid of what might come. We ask God to come *be* God and bend history to say, *Yes, we can*.

Here’s the thing. The Palm Sunday crowds have long come in for criticism. After all, when it turned out that Jesus would not become the king they expected, the same crowds will turn on Jesus and abandon him. Words like “fickle” and “hypocritical” and “foolish” have long been used to describe the crowds. But notice that Jesus does not! When the crowds are challenged by a few religious leaders, Jesus defends the crowd and says, *If they do not praise, then the very stones would shout!*

You see, Jesus knows that the story will not end on a bloody hill and a cross. Easter is coming, and God is not mocked by anything we do. No one will be condemned. No one will be unforgiven. No one “ought” to be ashamed. No one “should have known better.” No one will have to lock themselves up in secret for fear of tyrants. No one who asks for the peace that passes understanding will be denied it. No one will be left out of the kingdom!

So our praise today is right on target. In fact, we would be fools not to praise! We praise the God who holds all of us in God’s hands. We praise our God who makes Easter out of our crucifixions. We praise God who bends history to hope. We praise God and begin to say, *Yes, **we can!*** We praise because praise is what we do when we talk to our God. We praise because praise is contagious. We praise because no one sings hosanna alone for long!

Let our voice be heard, loudly declaring all the deeds of power God has done.
Praise God! For this may be the moment when history and hope begin to rhyme
– and we'd be fools not to!

Amen