



Why, Church? (Are We So Silent?)

Luke 19:28-40

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Well good morning - It's Masters Sunday! I mean, it's Palm Sunday! Either way, there will be shouts of hallelujah today.

Palm Sunday marks the beginning of the end. This is the final week in our Church calendar before the Easter celebration. But, before we can get to the mystery of the empty tomb, we must first remember the very public crucifixion.

Our guiding question in this season of Lent has been "Why, Church?" Why are we so self-obsessed, so institutionally focused, so complicity with toxic nationalism, so hungry for imperial power, and why do we have such a hard time listening to the Word of God?

Our question today picks up on the inverse of listening, as we ask, "Why, Church, are we so silent?"

Jesus has been making his way to Jerusalem. In Luke's Gospel, in chapter 9, following the transfiguration, Jesus turns his face toward Jerusalem. Everything that happens afterward – everything in the narrative text from chapter 10 through chapter 19 – is leading up to this grand entrance from the top of the Mount of Olives down into the Holy City.

The text is memorable – a story we share with joyful remembrance every year. It's a text that has led churches near and far to go to some extravagance as they join in the shouting of "Hosanna in the Highest!" I've even seen churches rent a donkey to lead a march around the church building while waving their palms to celebrate this holy entrance into Jerusalem.

Admittedly, I find our celebration of this day a bit odd. The story is set up in Luke's gospel in juxtaposition to the events that will happen the remainder of the week. Yes, there are shouts or affirmation and proclamation in this text, but, as we considered last week, this text does not stand in isolation from the rest of the story to come. But before we move beyond the entrance into Jerusalem to consider where the text is leading us, let's look at a few nuances Luke offers that set the stage for this majestic donkey ride.

Jesus hasn't even reached the Mount of Olives when he sends two disciples to go and secure the colt – a young donkey who had never been ridden. The disciples do as they were asked, and bring the colt back to Jesus who was near the cities of Bethpage and Bethany, just on the other side of the Mount of Olives from Jerusalem.

Luke offers that, as Jesus begins down the Mount of Olives, the “disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice.” In the other gospels, it says, “a large crowd” went before Jesus; but Luke indicates it wasn’t just a random gathering of people. It wasn’t an unknown crowd. This wasn’t the thousands of people who had gathered with Jesus as he fed the multitudes in Galilee. No, Luke says it is the *disciples* who are hailing Jesus as king as he enters into the Holy City.

It is those who have followed Jesus most closely who are there leading the procession down the mountain into Jerusalem. They’ve been with Jesus since the transfiguration, since he first turned his face and began his trek toward Jerusalem. They’ve been there as Jesus has named, time and again, that he was not coming to Jerusalem for some triumphant overtaking of the imperial and religious forces that held power in the city. They’ve been there with Jesus as he has named, time and again, that his trip to Jerusalem would lead to his sure and certain death.

Yet, even the most faithful of us can’t help but want Jesus to fulfill some worldly vision of what is king and empire. Though the donkey wasn’t exactly the same as the chariots or white horses used by imperial soldiers in their victory marches, this kind of triumphant entry was common within the Roman empire.ⁱ Jesus is making his way into a political city with a processional that included the disciples crying out over and over, “Blessed is the king!” “Hosanna in the highest!”

It seems the disciples are quite confident in the ensuing victory to be had by Jesus.

Yet, the shouts of proclamation for the entry of “the king” were not favored by everyone in Jerusalem. As we have seen previously, the Pharisees are never keen on Jesus making such commotion.

Perhaps to keep an eye on him, there were some Pharisees in the crowd that were monitoring this jubilant processional. As we’ve seen in the past, they’ve had some concerns with Jesus’ posturing himself as being more knowledgeable than they regarding God’s will and God’s law. And now, not only has Jesus challenged their authority in the temple and in their homes, here the disciples who follow Jesus are declaring that he is the king as he makes a processional ride into the center city of the Jewish life.

Scholar John Carroll offers that the Pharisees are likely concerned about this royal processional for two reasons.ⁱⁱ First, the Pharisees are most certainly in disagreement with the disciples. They do not want a religious proclamation being made that the king who comes in the name of the Lord has arrived, especially not as he makes his way to the Temple. But just as much, the Pharisees, and the whole of the Jewish community in Judea, are the beneficiaries of a supposed peace with Rome. For there to be a royal processional that is announcing the arrival of a new king would certainly disrupt the status quo of the Roman occupation. The Pharisees need to stop this boisterous crowd before it creates political or religious backlash.

So, the Pharisees approach Jesus and said to him, “Order your disciples to stop. ... Tell them to stop calling you king. ... Ask them to be quiet. ... If you are really their king, silence them.” And Jesus responds, “I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out.”

Jesus names, “some things simply need to be said; the disciples are expressing what is ultimately and finally true; God will provide a witness though every mouth be stopped; opposition to Christian witness cannot succeed; and the truth will come out, it cannot long be silenced.”ⁱⁱⁱ Even if these disciples were to be quieted, the earth itself would declare God’s glory.

Friends, we should take stock in what Jesus is saying. Jesus is offering that faithfulness is not a quiet activity. We have a promise to declare, and there is no sense in being silent, for even if we – God’s people of faith – are to stay quiet, the rest of God’s creation will not.

Again, this text is a transitional text. We often think of the triumphant entrance as one that stands alone in its glory. But for Luke, this text is not a stand-alone text, it is an indictment on the silence that will follow in the days ahead. As Scholar David Moessner offers, it will not be long before Jesus’ disciples flee, deny, betray, and in their silence join the ranks of the people in shrieking for Jesus’ crucifixion.^{iv}

Jesus has made the claim that there are some things that need to be said. There are some things that you can’t be silent about. Jesus himself models this attitude. As soon as the parade is over, he finds himself in the Temple flipping over tables and driving out the marketeers who have turned God’s house into a place of capitalism. There are some things that must be said.

And yet, when I look at the Church today – the broad witness of God’s people across this globe – I can’t help but wonder, where are we as the Church? Where has our confidence in the glory of God gone? Do we believe that God is working justice and peace in our midst? Do we believe that, as Christ’s disciples, we cannot be silenced when there is love and hope to proclaim?

Sadly, as a people who proclaim Christ, we have too often left the declaration of God’s glory up to the stones.

I mean, just consider: Where was the Church when Ahmaud Arbery and Brianna Taylor were murdered? Was there not justice to be demanded? ... Where was the Church when Syria was being ravaged by Russia, like Ukraine is today? Where were the cries for peace? ... Where was the Church when the 26 children were killed at Sandy Hook? Where was the cry for the sanctity of life? ... Where was the Church when the 50 were killed at the Pulse nightclub? Where was the Church to declare we are all created in God’s image? ... Where was the Church when the tent cities of DC were being bulldozed? Where was the Samaritan to offer safety and security?

And look, I’m not saying that there aren’t people in this world advocating for justice, peace, and equality, but for some reason, it’s not coming from the greater witness that is the Church – it’s not coming from our corporate identity and power. Maybe from small pockets, but not our global witness.

In fact, as I have talked with some of my colleagues around the conference in recent years, I find that more times than not, it is our church communities telling us they don’t want to talk about these things. People have left the church because there’s too much focus on racial and social equity, as if politics and social welfare don’t belong in the pulpit; as if racial equity and immigration aren’t part of the

biblical demand for peace and shalom; as if God has nothing to say about the “isms” and “phobias” that corrupt and destroy the lives of God’s created humanity; as if we have time to wait before taking seriously the stewardship of our resources and creation itself.

No, Jesus says, we cannot be silent – for we have too great a message to proclaim. And even if we – those who are covenanted with God – are to remain silent, the creation around us will cry out.

For Luke, the story of Christ in Jerusalem makes this clear. It doesn’t matter if Judas betrays Christ; it doesn’t matter if Peter denies Christ; it doesn’t matter if the disciples fall asleep in the garden; it doesn’t matter if only one of Jesus’ followers shows up at the crucifixion; it doesn’t matter if everyone else in the religious community is standing against the promise of God’s glory in Christ by crying out “crucify him.” It doesn’t matter that Jesus’ proclamation of God’s will is not a popular one in the church (not even in many a Church that calls itself Christian today).

What matters is, the will of God cannot be stopped. The love of God cannot be withheld. The glory of God cannot be contained. Just as the bush burned to declare God’s glory before Moses, just as the waters of the sea parted to provide salvation for Israel, just as the rainbow promised God’s everlasting love, just as the skies went dark in mourning as Jesus breathed his last, just as surely as the stone will refuse to keep him in nor death itself to keep him down, the glory of God will be made known.

It is right of us to ask, “Why, Church, are we so silent?”, because my friends, we have a truth that the world needs to hear. God’s glory, as witnessed in Jesus Christ, offers a promise that we cannot ignore. The celebration that is to come – that to which the shouts of hallelujah on Palm Sunday offer a precursor – is the promise that no matter how many times we have gotten it wrong, no matter how reasons we have been given to ask, “Why, Church?”, no matter how many times we have been silent before, God’s will remains true and steadfast. The covenant of God does not become null and void simply because the Church refuses to speak its truth. New life, abundant life, eternal life: these are the promises of God for all of God’s creation.

For truly, even if we are silent, the rocks will cry out. Holy is the Lord. God’s justice shall reign. Peace will be present. Life will overcome death. So let us cry out, “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!” An may we not be silent anymore. Amen.

ⁱ Justo Gonzalez. *Luke: Belief, A Theological Commentary on the Bible*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010.

ⁱⁱ John T. Carroll. *Luke: A Commentary (The New Testament Library)*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012.

ⁱⁱⁱ Fred B. Craddock. *Luke: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1990.

^{iv} David Moessner. *Feasting on the Gospel; Luke, Volume 2*. Eds. Cynthia A. Jarvis & E. Elizabeth Johnson. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014.