

**Upon This Rock:
Stones Cry Out**

Luke 19:29-40

Courageously we speak his name.

A sermon preached by
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There is power in a personal recommendation. If someone you know, trust, or admire recommends some product or experience, you might be more likely to try it or buy it. That's why almost every product has a spokesperson. Every business entity from Amazon to Zoom has consumer reviews talking about the quality or usefulness of whatever they are selling. And we read those reviews, right? They say word of mouth is the best advertising, and I believe it. There is power in a personal recommendation.

When it comes to spiritual matters, the personal recommendation of a believer is the most effective form of evangelism. I'm sure people were influenced by the band of disciples who walked down the street in front of Jesus in Jerusalem on the first Palm Sunday. They were singing his praises: "*Blessings on the king who comes in the name of the Lord. Peace in heaven and glory in the highest heavens.*"¹ I'm sure the crowd grew as he got closer to Jerusalem; twelve guys making a ruckus wouldn't have drawn that much attention. But Luke describes it as a "multitude." It was enough to draw the criticism of some Pharisees in the crowd. Before the week was over, it was enough to get Jesus killed.

We are pretty familiar with the story of the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem--the procurement of the donkey, the parade down the hill into Jerusalem, the shouts of praise. This is the most blatant political challenge that Jesus ever made, as he enacted the prophecy of Zechariah, who said the Messiah would enter Jerusalem on a donkey. Yet it was also a different kind of royal procession. Messiah though he was, he was still coming on a donkey. It was humble, and it was peaceful.

In his telling of the story, Luke actually downplays the political message. He doesn't quote Zechariah, as Matthew does, and nobody mentions King David. Luke was writing to a Gentile audience, and they wouldn't have understood the Jewish background so much. Luke leaves out the palms, too, as Matthew does. It's just clothing spread out in front of Jesus. It's the Gospel of John that mentions palms. Palms were usually more associated with the Jewish festival of Booths, which happened in the fall of the year.

What Luke does include that nobody else does is the criticism of the Pharisees, and that brings us to the “stony” part of our Scripture. As the group of disciples (or crowd, if you prefer) was rocking down the street, shouting words of praise to the king, the Pharisees got very concerned. The last thing they needed was for the Romans, who were in Jerusalem in full force for the Passover festival, to get wind of this pretender to the throne of Israel. There would be collateral damage to all the city if the Romans decided to subdue a perceived rebellion. So they said, “*Teacher, scold your disciples! Tell them to stop!*”² And forgive Jesus for being a little bit elated by the parade and the shouts of praise and the good will of the people. He said, “*I tell you, if they were silent, the stones would shout.*”³

As we focus today on the triumphal entry and the stones crying out, I want you to hear two words. The first is **WITNESS**. The disciples are making a witness to Jesus, the King come from God, the One who brings the peace and glory of heaven to earth. If the human voices were silenced, the creation itself would sing his praise.

As Dr. Fred Craddock commented on this passage, “Some things must be said.”⁴ Christianity is built on personal recommendations. Followers of Jesus tell others about him. Disciples share the Gospel. One of the most important things we can do as we live out our discipleship is to learn how to tell our faith story, how to make a personal recommendation of Jesus. (At this point, let me plug the study Roy Beth is doing after Easter called “Know Your Story, Share Your Story.” It’s worth three short sessions to fine tune your recommendation.)

Sometimes our witness comes at a great personal cost. In the early centuries of the church, telling about Jesus sometimes cost a witness his or her life. In some parts of the world, it is still that way. Short of death, sharing your faith can bring hostility, prejudice, resistance, and oppression. During this Women’s History month, let me say that women have often borne the cross of prejudice as they have tried to share the good news of Jesus. Widespread examples of women pastors are a fairly recent phenomenon, even in the Methodist churches, because for centuries women were denied the ability to pursue the call of God. It’s still that way

in some churches. Every female preacher I know can tell you stories of prejudice, hostility, inappropriate behavior, and double standards that have put up barriers to their witness.

The early Wesleyan movement had some remarkable examples of women preachers. Of course, the mother of all Methodism was Susanna Wesley, John and Charles Wesley's mother. Susanna was a great teacher and preacher, but never had a pulpit. She brought her children up in the faith, giving her daughters education equal to her sons. When her pastor husband Samuel was away, Susanna nurtured the congregation by holding Bible studies in her kitchen. Sometimes over 200 people crammed into the rectory at Epworth to hear Susanna's teaching. When Susanna died, John called her a "preacher of righteousness," just like her father, husband, and sons were. She definitely influenced John Wesley's attitude toward women preachers.

Another lesser-known but equally powerful witness was Mary Bosanquet. She risked estrangement from her family to share the Gospel among the Methodists. She was the first woman given permission by John Wesley to preach in the Methodist societies. Later she married the Rev. John Fletcher, and they became the first "clergy couple" in Methodism. Listen to just a little of the power of her witness: "I know the power of God which I felt when standing [preaching] on the horseblock in the street at Huddersfeld; but at the same time I am conscious how ridiculous I must appear in the eyes of many for so doing. Therefore, if some persons consider me an impudent woman, and represent me as such, I cannot blame them."

Some criticized Bosanquet Fletcher and said she should become a Quaker, because the Quakers already allowed women to preach. Mary responded, "I think the Spirit of the Lord is more at work among the Methodists; and while I see this, though they were to toss me about as a football, I would stick to them like a leech. Besides, I do nothing but what Mr. Wesley approves; and as to reproach thrown by some on me, what have I to do with it, but quietly go forward saying, I will be still more vile, if my Lord requires it. Indeed, for none but thee, my Lord, would I take up this sore cross. But thou hast done more for me. O do thy own will

upon me in all things! Only make me what thou wouldst have me to be! Only make me holy, and then lead me as thou wilt!”⁵ Despite the obstacles in her way, Mary Bosanquet Fletcher went quietly forward and made a witness for Christ.

Making a witness takes courage, and that is the other word I want you to remember today: **COURAGE**. There is much being written on courage today, since we need so much of it in our present circumstance. One of my friends and teachers Dr. Gil Rendle recently wrote a book called *Quietly Courageous*. In it he defined courage as maintaining a sense of purpose in the midst of anxiety. We wouldn't know anything about anxiety in us and around us, would we? For Rendle, courage is not about being bombastic, militaristic, or dramatic, not necessarily mustering a multitude to follow your lead. Rather courage is steady and faithful progress toward a goal, never losing sight of the purpose of the pursuit.

In his book, Gil tells a *midrash*, a Jewish story told to fill in and complement the Scriptures. It seems that as the Hebrews were escaping from slavery in Egypt, they came to the Red Sea, and the water wouldn't part. Pharaoh and his army were bearing down on them, and the sea was blocking their escape. So like a good church organization, they called a committee meeting to discuss the situation. The chief of each tribe of the Israelites sat down and argued about what could be done. Finally in frustration, Nashon, the son of one of the tribal chiefs, got up and walked into the sea. He stepped in the water, and nothing happened. He got up to his knees; nothing happened. Up to his waist, then to his shoulders, nothing happened. But when Nashon walked into the sea deep enough to cover his nose, at the point where his courage put his well-being at risk, at the point where he had to put his complete trust in God, the water parted, and the people made their escape.

The point is, Nashon's courage was not about leading an army to defeat the enemies of God. It was all about managing himself, maintaining his sense of purpose in an anxious situation, and trusting God to be faithful. That's quietly courageous.⁶

Tom Berlin, a United Methodist pastor in Virginia, brought up an old word for courage called “fortitude.” For Berlin, fortitude is not just a

single courageous act, but a disposition in which courage is embedded and sustained in a person's character. Fortitude is based on hope and is very similar to the idea of quiet courage. Berlin says, "For the Christian, you can't have deep courage and take on important topics in your personal life or in the society at large, unless you have hope that you are in fact doing God's work."⁷

Berlin's example is the late Rep. John Lewis, a quietly courageous crusader for civil rights his entire adult life. Lewis was one of the leaders of the march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, in 1965. The point of the march was to enjoy a right that Black people had been constitutionally promised for a century—the right to vote. As they marched across the bridge leading out of Selma, hundreds of protesters were set upon by Alabama state troopers and dogs and tear gas. John Lewis sustained a fractured skull from the club of a state trooper. In later years, people would ask Lewis how he did it, how he marched into the line of police and dogs knowing that there would be hostility and violence and jail for the protesters.

Lewis's answer always had to do with hope. They walked across the bridge at Selma knowing that the battle had already been won. They knew in the short term that it was going to be bad, but in the long term, God had already brought them the victory. God's intention was for all people to experience equality and dignity. Racism was not, and is not, the intention of God, so it is already on its way out. Lewis said, paraphrasing, "We already knew of that victory in Christ. We had such deep hope that I really didn't feel the blows."⁸

The ultimate example of quiet courage is Jesus Christ. From the time he battled the devil in the wilderness until he breathed his last breath on the cross, he was a model of courage. He had fortitude and strength to handle the blows of life. In the midst of anxiety, he kept laser-focused on his purpose, the Kingdom of God. When he started his last journey, Luke says he "*set his face to go to Jerusalem.*"⁹ Even as he enjoyed the praise of the crowd on Palm Sunday, he knew what lay ahead. He knew it was going to be bad. He had told his disciples three times already exactly what

would happen. Still he went. Still he made the journey. Still he endured to the end. Still he had the power of courage.

We live in an anxious system today. Everywhere we turn there are questions of survival. Thank God the worst of the pandemic seems to be over, at least in our country. But we have been forever changed by this last year. Nevertheless, we are still called to be the church. We are God's people, disciples of Jesus Christ. We are called to make a witness. How will we proceed?

One of Gil Rendle's signature stories is about a farm, probably in central Pennsylvania where he's from. There was a storm brewing one night, and the mother sent her son out into the night to make sure the barn door was closed. After about ten seconds, he came back, saying that it was too dark. He couldn't see the barn. So the mother gave him a flashlight and sent him back out. In 15 seconds, he was back inside, saying that the flashlight was too weak. He still couldn't see the barn. So the mom sent her son out a third time, saying, "You know where the barn is. Just walk to the end of the light."¹⁰

We don't know what the next chapter is going to look like. We don't have all the answers for all the questions. But we know where the barn is. We know what our purpose is. And we can walk to the end of the light, because when we get there, the light will have moved, and we can take a few more steps. It's going to take some courage. But we can have courage, because we can have hope.

The disciples of Jesus could not see past the end of the light on that first Palm Sunday. Before the week was over, they would see their Master betrayed, arrested, convicted, beaten, and crucified. It seemed that the light had gone out. But then after three days, they were astonished to witness the resurrection that changed the world. This week I invite you to walk that path with the disciples. Take the journey again, to the last meal of Maundy Thursday, to the last breath of Good Friday, to the first light of Easter. I strongly and personally recommend it.

¹ Luke 19:38.

² Luke 19:39.

³ Luke 19:40.

⁴ Fred Craddock, *Luke: An Interpretation Commentary* (Louisville: John Know Press, 1990), 227.

⁵ Rev. Donna Fowler-Marchant, <https://www.umc.org/en/content/following-gods-direction-donna-fowler-marchant-get-your-spirit-in-shape-ep-090>.

⁶ Gil Rendle, *Quietly Courageous: Leading the Church in a Changing World* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2018), discussed in the podcast *Reservoirs of Resilience*, <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/the-reservoir-of-courage-with-gil-rendle/>.

⁷ Tom Berlin, Leading Ideas podcast, “Courage, Faith, and Resilient Leadership,” <https://www.churchleadership.com/podcast/episode-74-courage-faith-and-resilient-leadership-featuring-tom-berlin/>.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Luke 9:51.

¹⁰ Rendle, *op cit.*