

Palm Sunday Stories: Rocks and Branches

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Luke 19:28-40

I didn't watch the Grammy awards this past Sunday. I didn't watch the Oscars the week before, either, so didn't learn about what had happened until the next morning when my phone was abuzz with reports and hot takes. I have nothing to add to that, nor do I have anything to add on the Grammys.

Except this. To tell you about Jon Batiste. Batiste is known as the band leader for the Stephen Colbert show. In addition to that, he won a bunch of Grammys including a Grammy for album of the year, for an album called "We Are." As I said, I didn't see any of it. But I read his acceptance speech, and I've read it a bunch since then.

Here is what Jon Batiste said: "I believe this to my core, there is no best musician, best artist, best dancer, best actor. The creative arts are subjective and they reach people at a point in their lives when they need it most. It's like a song or an album is made and it's almost like it has a radar to find the person when they need it the most."

Batiste continued, "I'd like to thank God. I just put my head down and I work on the craft every day. I love music, I've been playing since I was a little boy. It's more than entertainment for me, it's a spiritual practice. "

I love all of that. All of it. Music as a spiritual practice.

We grew up on music. Church music. Piano lessons. The radio – remember those? – on continually. We were singing all the time.

If I remember correctly, we had about three albums. The soundtrack from "The Sound of Music." The Fifth Dimension's greatest hits. And the soundtrack to Jesus Christ Superstar. Really, what more did anyone need. Edelweiss. The Age of Aquarius. And this.

“Hosanna hey sanna sanna sanna ho
Sanna hey sanna hosanna
Hey JC, JC, won't you smile at me?
Sanna hosanna hey superstar”

On this day, this Palm Sunday, I can't help but remember “Hosanna, Hey-sanna, sanna sanna ho, sanna hosanna, hey sanna.” For those of you for whom this song will now be in your ear for the rest of the day...you're welcome.

Hosanna/Hey sanna.

We read, you read, Luke's version just now. Did you notice? Did you notice what you did not notice? At least two things. First, no palms on Palm Sunday. No palms. Matthew, yes. Mark, yes. John, yes. Luke – not so much. Scholars surmise that the palms would not have been as important to Luke's readers as to the other three gospels. Perhaps.

And Luke offers no “hosanna” either. The other three, yes. Luke, no. We often think of “hosanna” (when we think of it once a year) as an exclamation of praise, kind of like “hallelujah,” but different. It is that. But it is more than that. It's two Hebrew words smashed together – “save us” and “beg,” a kind of plea for Jesus to save or deliver us. So while it has that praise feeling, it carries a deeper message with it.

The crowd in Luke's account spreads their clothing on the ground as Jesus passes by, a sign of worship and royal respect. They praised him, we are told, “for all the deeds of power they had seen.” That is, this crowd has been watching Jesus' ministry unfold, filled with provocative teaching and miracle working. They were ready to praise, and praise they did.

Scholars don't think that the absence of palms or “hosannas” is a big deal, but it's kind of interesting to note.

Let's take this a little further. If you were to place the four accounts of Palm Sunday side-by-side, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, and treat each of them like a one act play, each would have a different conclusion. Matthew concludes with the crowd identifying who Jesus was. In Mark, things fade quickly as he looks

around the temple a bit and heads back to Bethany. In John, we learn that the disciples still did not fully comprehend what was happening, no surprise.

In all of the gospels, what soon follows is Jesus entering the temple, becoming angered by the overt profiteering, and overturning tables and running people out, the act, many surmise, that signaled the beginning of the downfall.

How does Luke end? Did you notice?

Let's return to Jesus Christ Superstar for a moment. We hear Caiaphas sing, in a kind of snarly, gravelly deep voice:

"Tell the rabble to be quiet
We anticipate a riot
This common crowd
Is much too loud

Tell the mob who sing your song
That they are fools and they are wrong
They are a curse
They should disperse"

That is to say, the authorities – religious and political – are bothered by the crowd. But you know it's more than that. You know they are bothered by the reason the crowd is gathered. Jesus himself. Jesus and what he represents. Healing, to be sure. But more than that. It is the "rabble" after all, those without power or status, those with no place at the table, no access. Those in power sense the very real threat that this humble man, being treated like royalty as he enters town on a beast of burden, is to them. And Jesus, being Jesus, understands that they understand, if you are following.

And then what follows is one of my favorite moments in all of scripture, the conclusion of Luke's Palm Sunday narrative, the details of which only occur in Luke's version. Let's hear how Jesus articulates it in "Jesus Christ Superstar:"

"Why waste your breath yelling at the crowd?
Nothing can be done to stop the shouting

If every tongue were still, the noise would still continue
The rocks and stones themselves would start to sing”

If the people were quiet, Jesus says, the stones would shout out. That is to say, Jesus seems to be saying...don't waste your breath, or even your effort or energy. This is a movement that cannot be stopped, and even if you do all the things that people in power do to stop movements for justice and hope, the very rocks and stones in silent witness now will take over so that the movement will continue.

That response did two things. It inspired the crowd. They were part of something, something important. And it had to terrify those in power, whose grasp was loosening as the power structures were crumbling.

John Wurster writes that “The power of that moment, the meaning of this week, the importance of Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem cannot be denied. If his disciples don’t announce it, then the stones along the road will take up the chorus. Jesus is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. It is a bedrock truth that must be told. It cannot be ignored or silenced. If we won’t acknowledge him, praise him, acclaim him, then the stones will bear witness.”

Think about stones for a minute. I noticed the stones as I drove in today that we placed to help with drainage. I would have brought one in to show you but they were expensive and we paid too much for them to be a sermon illustration. They got a good workout this week as the rains came down.

There are stones from special places, stones we skip across a pond, stones that hold things back, stones that make traversing easier. There are biblical stones, of course. Stones that marked historic places. Stones that Moses cracked open to produce water for his thirsty people. The stones that Jesus refused to turn into bread at the outset of Lent when he was tempted.

Think for a moment, imagine and dream for a moment, that you were in that crowd. Shouting “hosanna.” What was your joy? What was your plea?” What was Jesus saving, for you? From what was he delivering, for you? Or for us? Or the world?

And then your voice is silent. So think for a moment, imagine and dream, for a moment, what it would look like for the stones to cry out. On our behalf. Cry out in joy. Cry out in despair. Cry out in hope. What would it look like?

A stone collector, Stephanie Perdew writes for all of us: “When I look at them collected on my shelf, pick one up as I pass by and stand a moment, feel its heft or lightness, smoothness or sharp edges, it speaks to me.

The stones speak to me of my memories and dispositions at the time of their finding. Sometimes they speak to me of my suffering, or the tears I shed the year I stumbled upon them. Sometimes they speak of my joy at the memory of my traveling companions and our discoveries and adventures. Sometimes they speak of my solitude as I noticed them while sitting on a bluff or the edge of a shore.”

In general, I love parades. Floats. Marching bands. This one is different. When I was in college, I was privileged to spend a term in Israel, and we were there for Palm Sunday. There are actually two Palm Sundays, the western one marked today, and the Orthodox one, marked by the eastern church on a different calendar.

On the western one, thousands and thousands of students gathered in Bethany on this day and recreated the march, the Palm Sunday parade. Americans and Europeans, mostly. I marched with a group of German students. We sang and shouted, I remember, including from another religious-y musical, “Godspell,” singing “Prepare ye the way of the Lord.” It was warm, and dry, and dusty. All those stones.

That’s why this one is different. The crowd is still singing:

“Hosanna hey sanna sanna sanna ho
Sanna hey sanna hosanna”

Then things change. “Hey JC, JC, won’t you die for me, sanna hosanna hey superstar.” Won’t you die for me. The pleas become clearer, truer. The tone changes. The momentary joy pivots. He knows what is coming, the powers-that-be are plotting, the crowd is easily swayed. We will need the silent witness of the stones after all.

I hope your Holy Week can be filled with holy moments. Listen for the stones. Listen to the stones. If you are able, come to this place or other places to engage the story, so that its full sweep and scope claim you, rather than leaping from this

Sunday to next without all that unfolds in between. And if not, allow the words of the poet Ann Weems to enter your spirit and speak to you.

“Holy is the week...
Holy, consecrated, belonging to God...
We move from hosannas to horror
with predictable ease
of those who know not what they do.
Our hosannas sung,
our palms waved,
let us go with passion into this week.
It is time to curse fig trees that do not yield fruit.
It is time to cleanse our temples of any blasphemy.
It is time to greet Jesus as the Lord’s Anointed One,
to lavishly break our alabaster
and pour perfume out for him
without counting the cost.
It is a time for preparation...
The time to give thanks and break bread is upon us.
The time to give thanks and drink of the cup is imminent.
Eat, drink, remember:
On this night of nights, each one must ask,
as we dip our bread in the wine,
“Is it I?”
And on that darkest of days, each of us must stand
beneath the tree
and watch the dying
if we are to be there
when the stone is rolled away.
The only road to Easter morning
is through the unrelenting shadows of that Friday.
Only then will the alleluias be sung;
only then will the dancing begin.”

The dancing will begin. I believe that. Until then, we enter the city with him, and wave and shout and sing and cry and pray. Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest. Amen.

