

A Sermon for DaySpring

By Eric Howell

The Voices of the Stones

Luke 19

April 13, 2025

Palm Sunday

Wendell Berry has a word for Palm Sunday in the Oak Grove: “I don’t think it is enough appreciated how much an outdoor book the Bible is. It is . . . a book open to the sky. It is best read and understood outdoors, and the farther outdoors, the better. Or that has been my experience of it.” Berry claims that the message of scripture becomes more credible, more believable when taken outside the walls and stained glass of church buildings and into creation itself. Here’s a longer quote from Berry:

Passages that within walls seem improbable or incredible, outdoors seem merely natural. This is because outdoors we are confronted everywhere with wonders; we see that the miraculous is not extraordinary but the common mode of existence. It is our daily bread. Whoever has really considered the lilies of the field or the birds of the air and pondered the improbability of their existence in this warm world within the cold and empty stellar distances will hardly balk at the turning of water into wine—which was, after all a very small miracle. We forget the great and still continuing miracle by which water (with soil and sunlight) is turned into grapes.

I would add, these little tassles, with the later-in-the-year acorns, and soil and water and sunlight become centuries-old oak trees.

Most significant events in the biblical narrative did not occur in temples made with hands but in gardens and sheep pastures, wilderness, on the shores of rivers and sea. The entry of Jesus into Jerusalem is an outdoor story that involves outdoor things: the Mount of Olives, branches from palm trees, a road, a donkey, stones, and crowds—the kind of crowds that fit in no building. No one is using their inside voices in this story. There is singing and shouting, praising God for all the mighty works they had seen. The entry of Jesus into to Jerusalem is triumphal.

Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest! When some of the anxious religious leaders told Jesus shush up everyone he would hear of it, “This is an outside story and the outside cannot be silent in its praise of God. Sometimes the inside isn’t either. If these are silent, one of the kids will drop their clipboard or someone’s phone will bing, and someone’s metal water bottle will fall over. Shush them? Not on this day. Because if the clipboard didn’t fall, and the water bottle didn’t clang, then the babies would cry, and if they were silent, the door would creak, the leaves would clap their hands and the birds would sing, and if the winds were still and the birds were silent, the crickets would chirp and the squirrels would scurry up and down the bark of the trees, and if the crickets didn’t play their music, and the squirrels stayed still, and the dogs didn’t bark, and the rivers didn’t trickle, and waves didn’t crash, and the flies didn’t buzz and cows didn’t moo, and lions didn’t roar, and the whole world stopped singing, then the stones would cry out.”

This is an outside story, and outside, creation's orchestra has already struck up the tune and the song of all the living creatures has already begun, "Holy, holy, holy to the God almighty, who was and who is and who is to come." Hosanna in the highest, indeed. It's our song this day.

But for all of this, the song is fragile, and it's vulnerable. We can lose our voices, and our song can go quiet. We can lose them in the way people lose them at ball games or rallies or parades or protests. We get worn out, and we get tired. You sing and yell, parade or protest so long and so loudly that you lose your voice. Years ago, on a September Sunday, I had a divine appointment with the DaySpring pastoral search committee to meet at a church in East Texas where I was to preach for them as part of the process of becoming pastor. All good. The problem was the day before I had tickets to an Aggie football game with my best friend and ball-game-buddy from college. Bad timing for me: oh, yes, I went to the game, but you better believe I sat there mostly quiet. I couldn't risk losing my voice with so much on the line the next day. It helped that the Miami Hurricanes pummeled the Aggies that day so there wasn't much to cheer about anyway.

Sometimes, we just lose our voice. We might wonder if at this critical moment, Jesus had just about lost his voice and strength not from yelling, that wasn't his style, but in exhaustion. By now, he's walked half of Israel, and just about said it all about God and the gospel of God's kingdom in just about every setting to just about anyone who might listen. He had to be weary, but he didn't ride because he was too tired to walk. He rode a donkey from the Mount of Olives down the Kidron Valley toward Jerusalem because that's what true kings were to do. The true king draws the sword from the stone; the one ring demonstrates its power; true love lays down its life for its friends; the one true messiah rides a donkey to Jerusalem like King David. Sometimes actions speak louder than words and a moving picture is worth a million words. If you lose your voice from praying too much, from protesting too loud, from trying too hard, find another way. The church can't lose its voice now with so much on the line. If our voices can't carry the song Hosannah any longer, then let our actions speak louder than our words: love, give hospitality: offer a hug, deliver a casserole, plant a sequoia.

We can lose our voices in another way. If we lose our hearts in despair that any good we've done, that we do, that we will ever do will not change anything that matters. Sometimes, we feel this about our own selves—that we cannot change our weakness or our sin or our shame. Sometimes we despair for the world—that the world is hopeless and helpless and barreling toward its own destruction. Sometimes it's the same thing—shame of ourselves, misery for the world. Wendell Berry feels this in his poem, *the peace of wild things, where he says:*

When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake

rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world and am free.

I love that poem and the remembrance that a walk in the woods or a lie-down by still waters can restore our souls and our sanity as creatures. Yet, there are times when there is no rest in the peace of wild things or in green pastures or by still waters. Those good gifts of creation must wait another day. On Palm Sunday, there's no afternoon refuge for Jesus now. Will he lose his voice and his will in the face of a world that by all outward appearances he--after all of his efforts---has not changed one bit?

On the back of the donkey, he come past the Mount of Olives to a ridge overlooking the city of Jerusalem. You can see the whole city from here. He stops. The crowd stops on the road behind him. The palm branches go still. They all fall silent. And he weeps. He sees the whole city before him and sees all things. He knows their pain—the mummies and daddies, hungry children, lonely teens; he sees the dreams of young men and young women seemingly going up like wood smoke; he sees the suffering of the old and infirm; he sees the tears on the cheeks of the mourning. Christ sees the hills and valleys and city, and with penetrating vision, all things that were created in him and for him, visible and invisible, all things—beautiful things--held together in him, unravelling. While the crowd shuffles around behind, in him rises “an endless deep and far-reaching love born from an unbreakable intimacy with God and reaching out to all people, wherever they are, were, or will be. There is nothing that he does not fully know. There is no body whom he does not fully love.” (Nouwen, *Show Me the Way*).

He sees Jerusalem from here, and nothing is beyond his sight. He sees Gaza City, and nothing is beyond his sight. He sees Kiev, and nothing is beyond his sight. He sees Washington, and nothing is beyond his sight. He sees us, our outside places and our insides where our thoughts and fears our hopes and dreams and our pride and shame, and doubts and fears all reside.

When all the words have all been said, the tears fall. And the Lord begins his descent into the city and citadels of suffering. He who is equal with God descends into the valley, and empties himself, taking the form of a servant, humbling himself to obedience to death even death on a cross.

He weeps for who we were and who we are and who we are becoming. And then he loosens the muscles in his hands which relaxes the reins. The donkey turns its head as if to ask, “Are you sure about this?” He nods, and the two of them shuffle their way down the hill toward the heart of human pain and trouble and sin. And to the cross.

Only from there can we begin see, can we sing the song, can we find the words and the will and the faith that on this day because of all of this, truly his wonders in all the world has just begun. Only from there can we see that today is triumphal, the cross as wondrous, Friday as Good, and ourselves and this world as dearly beloved.

If we ever lose our voices, our faith, our will, the stones cry out. And if they are silent, they will break wide open, and if not, look to the morning dawn and see them roll away from the entrance of the tomb.

Amen.

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