

Scripture Reading for Palm Sunday – 10th April 2022

Philippians 2:5-11 (NIV)

⁵ In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: ⁶ Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; ⁷ rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. ⁸ And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross! ⁹ Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰ that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹ and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Luke 19:28-48 (NIV)

²⁸ After Jesus had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem. ²⁹ As he approached Bethphage and Bethany at the hill called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples, saying to them, ³⁰ “Go to the village ahead of you, and as you enter it, you will find a colt tied there, which no one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here. ³¹ If anyone asks you, ‘Why are you untying it?’ say, ‘The Lord needs it.’”

³² Those who were sent ahead went and found it just as he had told them. ³³ As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, “Why are you untying the colt?” ³⁴ They replied, “The Lord needs it.” ³⁵ They brought it to Jesus, threw their cloaks on the colt and put Jesus on it. ³⁶ As he went along, people spread their cloaks on the road.

³⁷ When he came near the place where the road goes down the Mount of Olives, the whole crowd of disciples began joyfully to praise God in loud voices for all the miracles they had seen: ³⁸ “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!” “Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!” ³⁹ Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Jesus, “Teacher, rebuke your disciples!” ⁴⁰ “I tell you,” he replied, “if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out.”

⁴¹ As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it ⁴² and said, “If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace—but now it is hidden from your eyes. ⁴³ The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. ⁴⁴ They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognize the time of God’s coming to you.”

⁴⁵ When Jesus entered the temple courts, he began to drive out those who were selling. ⁴⁶ “It is written,” he said to them, “‘My house will be a house of prayer’; but you have made it ‘a den of robbers.’”

⁴⁷ Every day he was teaching at the temple. But the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the leaders among the people were trying to kill him. ⁴⁸ Yet they could not find any way to do it, because all the people hung on his words.

Sermon: “If Those Stones Could Talk”

Have you walked around Fort Malden here in Amherstburg or some other historic building in a major city and wondered at the *history* that those structures have witnessed? We sometimes say, “If only those stones could talk” they would tell us a thing or two. For example, at Fort Malden, the stones could tell us about the various people who lived there, not just their duties and responsibilities, but their personalities, loves, and losses. The stones could also tell us of sights, sounds, and smells of the battles they witnessed, along with their contrasting experiences of peace and routine activities. Museums do their utmost to bring history to life with pageantry, crafts, exhibits, etc., and, in the process, we get a glimpse of how much life has changed in just a few hundred years.

The stones of the temple in Jerusalem had also witnessed a lot of history. It had originally been built by King Solomon and finished in 957 BCE and it housed, amongst many other things, the ark of the covenant. However, in 586 BCE, King Nebuchadnezzar conquered Israel and removed the temple treasures,¹ and totally destroyed the building.² Later, when King Cyrus of Persia conquered Babylon, he allowed some Jews to go back to Jerusalem and rebuild the city, including the temple which was completed in 515 BCE.³ That was the same temple of Jesus’ day – although King Herod the Great⁴ instigated *extensive* renovations, beginning in 20 BCE and lasting 46 years. The temple was again the center of Jewish life, and you can appreciate why the chief priests and pharisees were so proud of this accomplishment, even if Israel was under Roman occupation. The foundation stones had centuries of stories to tell, both of joy and sorrow, along with songs of praise to God at times of annual festivals and pilgrimage. Perhaps some stones that were eventually used to build the temple also saw Solomon’s coronation celebrations, as he rode on David’s donkey to the spring just outside of Jerusalem.⁵ And maybe those same stones witnessed Jesus the Messiah riding on a donkey, approaching city from the east. As Zechariah had prophesized: “Rejoice . . . daughter of Jerusalem! Look! Your *king* is coming to you: he is legitimate and victorious, humble, and riding on a donkey.”⁶ Given that Jesus had *walked* for several years, it’s strange that he would suddenly hop on a donkey for the last couple of kilometers! This is clearly a *symbolic* and *provocative* action; Jesus is deliberately enacting that prophecy and thereby making a bold *royal* claim. Yes, if only those stones could talk!

Let’s pause there and recall that Luke’s Gospel has been telling us for the last ten chapters that Jesus was determined to go Jerusalem.⁷ There was *nothing* spontaneous about Jesus coming to Jerusalem

¹ In 604 and 597 BCE.

² The Babylonian exile of the Jewish elite then began.

³ However, Antiochus IV Epiphanes plundered it in 169 BCE and desecrated it in 167 BCE by commanding sacrifices be made to Zeus on an altar built for him. This final act touched off the Hasmonean revolt, during which Judas Maccabeus cleansed and rededicated the temple; the event is celebrated in the annual festival of Hanukkah.

⁴ 37 BCE – 4 CE.

⁵ Gihon; see 1 Kings 1:32-40. Remember that Solomon was literally a “son of David.”

⁶ Zech 9:9. (See also Zech 14:4 and Luke 19:29 where the Mount of Olives is clearly mentioned.)

⁷ See Luke 9:31, 51.

and its temple at Passover season. Passover celebrates God's deliverance of his people from slavery in Egypt through Moses. It's a nation-defining moment and, consequently, Passover has both religious *and* political overtones; it celebrates *nationalism*. In the first century, many tens of thousands of pilgrims came to offer sacrifices in the temple at this annual festival. The Romans were understandably alert and ready for trouble in case an insurrection arose spurred on by religious fervor. That was the *last* thing the temple elite wanted, as I mentioned last week.⁸ They were still basking in the glory of a rebuilt and enlarged temple and they didn't want that threatened by religious fanatics. Those in positions of power and influence often bend over backwards in compromise and pragmatism in order to maintain it. The ruling chief priests were no exception. As the old adage says, "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely." We see that today in Putin, and we also see that in politicians closer to home.

Jesus comes, then, to Jerusalem at Passover as God's chosen Messiah and savior.⁹ Luke writes earlier in the chapter that Jesus summarized his mission in this way: "The Son of Man came to seek and to *save* the lost."¹⁰ As he approached the city with his entourage of followers, they spread their cloaks on the road, which echoes 2 Kings 9:13, where the people threw their cloaks on the ground in front of their new king.¹¹ In case we missed that connection, Luke then tells us they shouted, "Blessed is the *king* who comes in the name of the Lord."¹² These words are from Psalm 118 - our Call to Worship today - and pilgrims sang them every year as they approached Jerusalem; however, Luke edits them in inserts "the king" to make them specific to Jesus the Messiah riding on a donkey. Moreover Luke adds: "Peace in heaven and glory in the highest," which is reminiscent of the angels' proclamation to the shepherds at Christ's birth, as well as implying Jesus is the bringer of peace.¹³ With this kind of public commotion, there's bound to be a reaction. Some of the pharisees in the crowd tell Jesus to rebuke his disciples, "Keep them under control and curtail their excess," they say. As I mentioned before, the pharisees were afraid, presumably because the disciples were proclaiming Jesus as *king*.¹⁴ Jesus responds, "I tell you, if they keep silent, the very stones will cry out!"¹⁵ And so we come back to the mention of stones and we wonder, *what would they cry out?*

First, recall that the psalmist says, "creation declares the glory of God."¹⁶ Creation honors its Maker; human silence does not exhaust creations' praise of God's presence and majesty. Yet in making that

⁸ <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/The-Price-of-Everything.pdf> . (See John 11:48-50.)

⁹ And not just savior of Jews, but of the world as Luke makes clear from a post-resurrection perspective; Luke 2:10-11; 29-32; 24:44-49, esp. 47.

¹⁰ Luke 19:10. After that, Luke tells us: "Jesus went on to tell them a parable, because he was near Jerusalem and the people thought that *the kingdom of God was going to appear at once*" (Luke 19:11). Pilate seems to have had cause for concern.

¹¹ Luke has no mention of (palm) branches!

¹² Ps 118:26. See also Luke 13:31-35, esp. 35.

¹³ Luke 2:14. That (divine) angelic proclamation is now being fulfilled, says Luke.

¹⁴ See also Luke 19:11 – esp. the ending of "immediately" (cf. Luke 24:21). See also Luke 23:2-3. Note that in Luke's Gospel, only the disciples or Christ's followers are mentioned, not the general public. This is different from the Good Friday crowd.

¹⁵ Luke 19:40. See also Luke 3:8b. (There is also the Hebrew pun or wordplay between "stone" and "son.")

¹⁶ Ps 19:1; 95:3-5; 104:24-25; see also Rom 1:20 (written before the Gospels).

connection, there is an implied reprimand, in that the pharisees are *not* recognizing God's glory being revealed in Jesus and his miracles.¹⁷ The mention of "the stones crying out" suggests that, in one way or another, the truth *will come out*; Jesus is the legitimate King, and he comes in peace and to save.

Second, and more significantly, Luke alludes to a prophetic quotation of judgement against rulers and leaders; listen to what Habakkuk says: "Woe to him who builds his house by unjust gain, setting his nest on high to escape the clutches of ruin! You have plotted the ruin of many peoples, shaming your own house and forfeiting your life. *The stones of the wall will cry out*, and the beams of the woodwork will echo it."¹⁸ Habakkuk's point was yet another warning on those nations or kings who become rich by oppressing others; the enduring stones witness their unethical actions and will eventually accuse them of it. In the first century, Israel may have seen this as an oracle against Rome, but Jesus uses it here against the pharisees. And we hear an echo of John the Baptist, who at the beginning of Luke's Gospel calls the people to repent and prepare for *the coming of God's salvation*.¹⁹ John then says, don't think your Jewishness will save you, "for I tell you that *out of these stones* God can raise up children for Abraham."²⁰

Luke also tells us that when Jesus approached Jerusalem on a donkey, he paused and looked over the city from a vantage point, and then he wept, saying: "If only you had recognized *on this day* the things that make for peace! The days *will come* when your enemies. . . will crush you to the ground . . . and they will not leave. . . *one stone upon another*; because you did not recognize *this moment* when God visited you."²¹ Luke and his readers know of that dreadful future time of which Jesus speaks, for a later Jewish rebellion against Rome ended with the temple's destruction in 70 CE. All that remained of the Temple Mount was a portion of the retaining Western (or Wailing) Wall, and it's still a focal point of pilgrimage today. This ominous warning is all the more devastating because this is the last reference to the pharisees in Luke's Gospel. They have, in Luke's mind, consistently opposed Jesus. And now they are silenced and pass from the scene. If the Jewish people did not cry out in praise, God would raise up another community of people to fulfill God's purposes - even from other stones, namely, non-Jews.

Luke mentions stones again in the next chapter. Jesus not only cleared the temple and tried to reform its practices,²² he visited it daily to teach the people.²³ One day, after telling a pointed parable that criticized the religious leaders, he said: "What does the psalmist mean by: 'The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone'?"²⁴ This sounds a bit cryptic, but it's a line from that earlier Passover pilgrimage psalm containing, "blessed is the one who comes in the name of the LORD." The full

¹⁷ See Luke 19:39.

¹⁸ Hab 2:9-11.

¹⁹ Luke 3:4-6, esp. 6; citing Isa 40:3-5.

²⁰ Luke 3:8-9.

²¹ Luke 19:42-44.

²² Luke 19:45-46.

²³ Luke 19:47 – 21:38.

²⁴ Luke 20:17; citing Ps 118:22; consider too Luke 9:22; 17:25. (See also Acts 4:11; 1 Pet 2:7.)

quote is: “The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. *This is the LORD’s doing*; it is marvelous in our eyes. This is the day that the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.”²⁵ Because this is *God’s* doing, the religious leaders should be rejoicing, but they refuse to recognize Jesus as God’s Messiah and so Jesus warns: “Everyone who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces, and the one on whom it falls will be crushed.”²⁶ This alludes to warnings from Isaiah and Daniel, and picks up earlier themes of Jesus as the ultimate judge.²⁷ Luke’s message is simple: Don’t trip over Jesus. See him for who he really is, not a discarded worthless stone – but the *critical cornerstone*, that important foundation stone that holds everything together. Yes, Jesus comes humbly on a borrowed donkey, in peace and to save. But never forget he is a king.

This image of the rejected Jesus becoming the honored cornerstone is reiterated in the first letter of Peter.²⁸ What this shows is that the early church looked to the Old Testament to help understand the events of Easter and they found this metaphor to be particularly pertinent and powerful. The letter’s author says the risen Christ is the “*living stone*” and then continues: “People did not accept him, but God chose him and places the *highest* value on him.” Paul also makes that latter point clear when he reminds the Philippian church of an early Christian hymn, our other New Testament reading, whose lyrics proclaim in a creed-like way that Jesus emptied himself of the divine nature and became human; he did not grasp or cling to power but became a servant. He even humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross. In light of that, God exalted him to the highest place and gave him *full authority* over everything in heaven and on earth, and all people will one day acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord – that he’s the true king - to the glory of God the Father.²⁹

The writer of 1 Peter not only says Christ is the living cornerstone, but that his followers – including us - are *also living stones* who God is building into a spiritual *temple*.³⁰ I said earlier, “If these stones could talk, what would they say?” Another question is, “Given that we are *living stones*, what will we say?” What will we proclaim concerning the new temple – the new community of God – that the Holy Spirit is building, with Jesus the Messiah as the foundational cornerstone? Will we sing of God’s praises along with all of creation? Will we celebrate Jesus as not only the rightful King, but as *our* King? Will we sing that Philippian hymn and say that because of the shocking events of Easter Week, God has elevated Jesus and given him *all* possible authority? What will we say about Jesus on this Palm Sunday?³¹

I conclude with a final reference to a stone. I mentioned earlier that Jesus lamented over Jerusalem saying, “If only you had recognized on this day *the things that make for peace!*” And so we ask, “What

²⁵ Ps 118:22-24.

²⁶ Luke 20:17-18; see also Isa 8:13-14; Dan 2:34, 44.

²⁷ As you reflect of Jesus as judge, remember the tearful lament of Jesus in Luke 19:41.

²⁸ See 1 Pet 2:4-8 (and Eph 2:20-22).

²⁹ See Phil 2:5-11, see also Col 1:15-20.

³⁰ 1 Pet 2:5 (with us has its holy priests!). See also Eph 2:20-22.

³¹ A further challenge is found in Luke 19:45-46: Is our “house” one of *prayer* for a whitewashed hideout for the unscrupulous? Ethics matter.

are those necessary things that lead to or bring about peace?” That’s always an appropriate question and particularly timely for this Easter. At its core, there needs to be an *earnest desire* for peace, something that Israel was sadly lacking in Ezekiel’s day.³² At that time, the nation had a history of wanton violence and wickedness. Their experience of exile humbled them and in that state of remorse and hopelessness, Ezekiel prophesied a new thing *God* would do, saying “I will give you a new heart, and I will put a new spirit within you. I will remove *the heart of stone* from your body and give you a heart of flesh.”³³ A change of heart is needed, not just in Putin, but in *all* humanity, and for that we need God’s help. As Russian dissident, novelist, and Nobel Prize winner, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, famously said: “The line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of *every* human being.” I suggest the peace process begins by acknowledging that evil *actually exists*. That’s important because some modern philosophies have baked within them a premise of inevitable societal *progress*, often thought to be linked to human evolution. Tied in with this is the perfectibility of humankind, our innate *goodness*, and the denial of the anything external, such as evil, and instead regarding such matters as merely a “sickness.” I remain unconvinced and the terrible news from Ukraine is one reason why I continue to believe in evil and the need of divine help in addressing this dark, destructive power.

In summary, “If only these stones could talk” is, amongst other things, a plea to remember *history*, including the events of Easter week. As we journey with Jesus from Palm Sunday onwards, let’s also remember that Jesus came in peace and his death, Luke says, brought about a much wider peace because he faced evil and overcame it.³⁴ Amen. Let us pray.

³² In other words, after Solomon’s temple was destroyed and during the Babylonian exile.

³³ Ezek 11:19; 36:26; see also Jer 31:33; Heb 8:7-13.

³⁴ That’s a much bigger topic for another time!