

"The Stones Would Shout Out"

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28After he had said this, [Jesus] went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem. 29When he had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples, 30saying, "Go into the village ahead of you, and as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here. 31If anyone asks you, 'Why are you untying it?' just say this, 'The Lord needs it.'" 32So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them. 33As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, "Why are you untying the colt?" 34They said, "The Lord needs it." 35Then they brought it to Jesus; and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it. 36As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. 37As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, 38saying, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!" 39Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, order your disciples to stop." 40He answered, "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out." (Luke 19:28-40)

Earlier this morning, just outside of the eastern walls of Jerusalem, tens of thousands of happy Christians gathered to walk the path that Jesus rode from Bethany and Bethphage down through the valley and up to the gates of the old city. As they processed together down the western slope of the Mount of Olives, these pilgrims sang hymns. They prayed aloud and lifted enthusiastic "Hosannas" into the air. They clashed cymbals, plucked guitars, beat drums, and blew trumpets. In short, they were loud. Just like that original crowd about 2,000 years ago. As scripture says, *"the whole multitude of the disciples [were praising] God joyfully with a loud voice."*

We are also told that the Pharisees didn't like all the noise. They called out to Jesus to get the people to be quiet. Not only did he refuse to do it, he even suggested that it would be pointless to ask. *"I tell you," he said, "if these were silent, the stones would shout out."*

Scholars have puzzled over this bizarre statement, but I think the best explanation is that Jesus the rabbi, the teacher, was channeling the Psalms. Jesus wanted to link the celebration of his disciples to celebratory worship that all creation offers to the God of heaven and earth. Psalm 96 is an obvious example of the connection:

Worship the LORD in holy splendor; tremble before him, all the earth. ... Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice; let the sea roar, and all that fills it; let the field exult, and everything in it. Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy before the LORD.¹

Psalm 98 contains a similar message:

Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth; Let the floods clap their hands; let the hills sing together for joy at the presence of the LORD.²

¹ Psalm 96:9-13.

² Psalm 98:4, 7-8.

In both of these cases, inanimate parts of creation are worshiping God with joy. It is loud, it is boisterous, and it is just as God wants it to be.

Albert Barnes was a nineteenth century Presbyterian minister who graduated from Princeton Theological Seminary in 1823 and went on to serve as the pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Philadelphia for 38 years. But he is most remembered for his series of Biblical commentaries. In looking at this passage, Barnes saw Jesus as simply affirming the obvious and natural reaction to his coming — the inevitable reaction of the people, the heavens, the earth, the fields, the trees, and all of creation. "Of course the people would shout out," Jesus is saying. "Of course they celebrate my coming. It would not be right for me to suppress them." So joyful is the event which they celebrate, Jesus says, that it would be wrong for him to impose silence on them. Even if he were to try and do that, creation would not allow it. The stones would take up the chorus and sing in their stead.³

Such is the joyful exuberance that we are called to bring to this day, this day when we join our voices with all of creation to celebrate the Messiah's entry into the final act of his faithful witness. Some might say, however, that the response that we Presbyterians offer is more similar to the inanimate stones than it is to the vocal, palm-waving enthusiasm of those first disciples. A few years ago, when Rachel, Lynne and I were leading the Palm Sunday service, we set up a moment, just like today, when the children would process into the sanctuary waving palm branches. Rachel said that as the kids got ready in the narthex that they were brimming with excitement and energy, but as soon as the sanctuary doors opened and they began to walk in, their demeanor changed immediately. They got very quiet and serious. As Rachel walked with them, she tried to pump them back up. As she waved her branch, she asked one of them to shout "Hosanna!" with her. He just looked back and said "You're crazy!"

Now, I would chalk a good deal of this up to good parenting. These kids had clearly learned good lessons about how important it is to behave well in church. But it also seemed a little sad, as it seemed a lot of the childlike joy and spontaneity that had been present just a moment before in the narthex suddenly disappeared into seriousness and stoicism as soon as they entered the worship space.

A few times over the last few months, I have sensed some similarly self-conscious moments in our worship, and I think I can sum them all up by borrowing a familiar line from Shakespeare. "To clap, or not to clap?" That is the question. When the children's choir sings or something else joyful happens, some of you are really wanting to clap. But most of us are a little unsure.

Again, I think this goes back to how many of us were raised. Some of you have told me that you were taught not to look back at the choir during worship, that you would be punished if you so much as turned your head. If head turning was forbidden, then the idea of clapping during worship would be downright unfathomable. I understand that this question also surfaced in a conversation at the retreat a few weeks ago. So, this seems as good a time as any to say a word about it.

To answer this question, I have to begin with another question: **WHY** are we clapping? For the record, I will say that as your pastor I have no objection to clapping in worship, as long as we are clapping for the right reasons. We need to think

³ Albert Barnes, <http://biblehub.com/commentaries/luke/19-40.htm>

theologically about the reasons we have for clapping or not clapping. So I would like to offer two theological ideas that may help us answer that question.

The first theological point goes to the nature of worship. Much of what we have done with worship across the centuries suggests that the gathered congregation is an audience. Even the configuration of pews makes it seem like that is the case. Against this idea, the Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard famously argued that God, not the congregation, is the real audience of worship. But even this is an incomplete view of what happens when we gather here. God cannot be relegated to the role of a guest who wanders in off the street and takes a pew to wait and see what we come up with. In true worship, God is both the audience and the actor. God is active and alive in all the aspects and roles of worship. Somehow, we find ways to participate in this eternal act of worship, but we are never really the audience.

Tom Long, one of the best preachers of our day, offers a metaphor that may help us understand this dynamic. He says worship is like community theater — that we are all actors who are not here just to sit and listen, but to play out upon the stage a script of worship and praise. "As in the best community theater," Long writes,

the participants in worship are striving for excellence, seeking to bring their finest gifts, best skills, and most sharply honed abilities to this event. But these are not professional worshipers; they are amateurs, people who do this for love. ... It is [therefore] more important that everybody be on the great stage speaking a part than that the parts be spoken flawlessly. It is more important that all of the singers join in the chorus than that all of the notes be true.⁴

When we see our roles in worship as actors who are making an active offering to God, then our view on clapping may shift. As one worship scholar has noted, if we went to a play and the actors on the stage kept stopping to applaud the performances of their fellow actors, the disruptions would quickly become distracting.⁵

So, the first theological point to make about clapping is that worship is not a performance being offered to us as the congregation. Here, we are not an audience. Here, we are actors in a drama offered to the glory of God, participants in a wonderful play being acted out for God in gratitude and joy. So, when we gather in this sanctuary — or in Davis Hall or Memorial Garden or wherever we may be for our worship — we are not consumers who have come for a good show. We are disciples who are all actively playing, praying, and speaking our hearts out to God, for God.

At the same time, there is another theological idea that speaks just as powerfully to the question of clapping, and that is the theological idea of joy. If we are moved by something wonderful that has been offered, it may be that we cannot help but clap! A few weeks ago in worship we sang that old hymn that says, "*The peace of Christ makes fresh my heart, a fountain ever springing! All things are mine since I am his! How can I keep from singing?*" When the children sing and we are filled with joy, when the chancel choir and organ moves us to tears of gratitude, if something is said from the pulpit that touches us deeply, it may well be that we cannot keep from clapping. This kind of clapping is not the same kind of applause that we would offer at a talent show or a concert, but rather a joyful

⁴ Thomas G. Long, *Beyond the Worship Wars*, Alban Institute (2001), p. 45.

⁵ Randal Rouser, <https://randalrauser.com/2013/01/why-you-shouldnt-clap-in-church/>

and natural response to something godly and wonderful. A response of spontaneous joy to that kind of inspiration is something that Jesus would never dream of dampening. In fact, he would probably say that, if we didn't offer it, the stones would shout out to fill the void.

Just in case some of you have lingering concerns, just consider that scripture itself bids us to clap in worship, as long as we are doing it for the right reasons. Psalm 47 says it clearly: *Clap your hands, all you peoples; shout to God with loud songs of joy. For the LORD, the Most High, is awesome, a great king over all the earth.*" Clap with joy. Sing with joy. Offer God your joy, because the Lord, the most high is awesome!

Now, I understand, and you understand, that joyful applause is not always appropriate. There are times in worship that call for reverence and seriousness. Sin is serious. Death is serious. Repentance is serious. Illness and violence and injustice are all serious. But God also created us to be joyful, and we should not be afraid to let our worship be joyful at times. The last thing we want to do is to stifle our joyful responses to God's love and grace. The last thing we want is for a child to enter this sanctuary, waving a palm frond, worried that his joy might get him in trouble.

As Jesus rode into Jerusalem, the multitude began to praise God joyfully with loud voices. This morning, thousands of our fellow Christians are doing the same. Following their lead, let's not leave it to the stones!! In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**