

April 14, 2019
St. Paul's, Petersburg, VA
Palm Sunday (RCL/C)
A sermon by the Rt. Rev. James B. Magness

I have a stone in my hand. In our first reading from the Bible story of what we call the Sunday of the Passion or Palm Sunday – though in Luke's Gospel in which we read there are no palms – there is a fascinating detail not mentioned by the other three Gospel writers. In the Cotton Patch Version of the scriptures, written in the old language of the South, Jesus is interpreted to have said, "...if the people did not shout Jesus' praises the stones throughout Jerusalem were prepared to 'break into song.'"¹

Can a stone talk? Jesus says that if they could, not only would the stones of Jerusalem talk, they would sing to all who would listen about what God was saying to God's people and doing in their midst.

A very long time ago a man named Jacob, one of our spiritual ancestors, believed that stones marked the place where God acted and spoke with God's people. One night Jacob was traveling through through the desert. He stopped to rest and went to sleep with head upon a stone. Now I know what you are thinking. No, that doesn't sound very comfortable, but that's what the scriptures say. That night in a dream a voice spoke to Jacob about God's blessings that would be given to him and to his descendants. After Jacob awoke from his dream it is recorded that: "...he took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it."² By pouring oil on the stone Jacob distinguished the stone from the millions of other stones on the rocky plain where he stood. The oil marked the stone as the place where God had made a promise to Jacob's sons and daughters. The stone tells the story of that divine promise to all who would pass by.

Today as we begin Holy Week, and I must say we have begun the week in a spectacular fashion, we tell the story the last week of Jesus' life. It is obvious that the way of the cross, not the way of the stone, is at the center of Jesus' story. In the holy city of Jerusalem and in many other locations, some of which are in congregations in this diocese, there is a Good Friday tradition that commemorates the long Gospel lesson we just read. The tradition is walking the way of the cross. In the ancient walled city of Jerusalem, a city with stone walls, streets, and ceilings, the way of the cross is called the Via Dolorosa, Latin for "The Way of Suffering." Each time I lead a Holy Land pilgrimage, the next of which will be in February, on the last full day of our pilgrimage we walk the Via Dolorosa, a walk through the old city on stones that have been worn smooth through centuries of walking. Fourteen times we stop to pray and remember the events of Jesus' walk to the cross. The last station of the Via Dolorosa is at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher where we pray at Jesus' empty tomb. Every time we walk on those well worn stones I can't help but think that if those stones could talk, oh but the

¹ Luke 19:40, in Clarence Jordan, *The Cotton Patch Version of Luke–Acts, Jesus' Doings and Happenings* (New York: Association Press, 1969), 72.

² Genesis 28.18, NRSV.

stories they could tell of the pilgrims who have walked the way of Jesus and have entered into the experience of our Lord's sacrifice.

From those experiences I want to tell you one of the stories which I believe the stones could tell. Three years ago as my wife Carolyn and I were leading a Holy Land pilgrimage we came to the day that was set aside for our walk of the Via Dolorosa. As a spiritual pilgrimage leader and guide one of the things that one of the things I have learned about my pilgrims is that everyone's spiritual journey is different. Some people completely and immediately immerse themselves in the sights, sounds, and teachings of the the Land of the Holy One. In contrast, there is another group of pilgrims who outwardly seem to be more interested in a sightseeing tour and only minimally immersed in a spiritual pilgrimage. During this particular pilgrimage a woman whom I will call Lois was one of our pilgrims. For ten consecutive days Lois spoke about how much she enjoyed seeing all the sights. Yet, Lois didn't show any signs of being engaged in spiritual reflection. In fact I was beginning to wonder if Lois would ever be able to grasp the deeper meaning of Jesus' sacrifice for us.

Each time we walk the stones of the Via Dolorosa I assign different persons to lead the meditations at each stop. Lois was assigned to lead our remembrance at the eighth station where we recall Jesus' words to the women who had drawn themselves to Jesus: "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children."³ As Lois got about half-way through the scripture reading, she began to speak in a halting manner. Her voice began to quiver and she stammered a bit. Lois began to weep. In fact, she began to weep so much that she had to pause before completing her reading.

Afterward I asked Lois if I could help her in any way. At first she said "no," somewhat regaining her cherished emotional balance. But as we walked to the next station she said that something had come over her as she read the passage of scripture. Lois described how she began to identify with the women who had followed Jesus for most of the three years of his adult life. Through reading the scripture passage she said that she had identified with their pain of loss. I remember telling her that the old stones where pilgrims had walked for hundreds of years were talking to her. Once again with tears in her eyes, she agreed with me; the stones were telling her the story of Jesus and his people.

If those stones Jesus spoke of could talk, they could tell about the promises that had God had made to the people who day-in and day-out did the best they could to live and care for their families.

The stones would tell of the oppression of both the government and the religious leaders who made their life so difficult.

The stones would sing a song of the day Jesus entered the city, not just for joy at the coming of a gracious king, but also for grief and sorrow; sorrow like Rachel of the Old Testament who wept over her children; like Jesus weeping over the city of Jerusalem.

³ Luke 23:28, NRSV.

The song of the stones would be a cry rising across this planet of the broken dreams when God's people have suffered.

Jesus' Palm Sunday ride into Jerusalem made it apparent to religious and government leaders that he was at odds with them. Also made apparent to the religious leaders was the fact that a significant number of people were beginning to align themselves with Jesus and not the traditional leaders of the temple or synagogue. Jesus was forcing the people to make decision about him. Be they religious leaders, government leaders, tax collectors, street vendors, mothers, children or common laborers, they were being confronted with a decision about Jesus.

When Jesus rides into our lives, as Jesus has done today, he also forces an issue for us. Shortly many of us will gather around the baptismal font to mark the impact of the Son of God upon our lives. All of us will reaffirm our baptismal vows. Then several members of our congregation will publicly confirm their faith in Jesus Christ through confirmation, reaffirmation or reception. Publicly they will make a decision. The words of our baptism promises could not be clearer.

You will promise to "...turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as your Savior..."

You will promise to "...put your whole trust in his grace and love..."

You will "...promise to follow and obey him as your Lord..."⁴

Then we will make commitments to serve God through such as respecting "...the dignity of God's people"⁵ All our commitments of service are built upon the foundation of your decision to accept, trust, and obey Jesus Christ as your Savior and your Lord.

Now I want to invite you to observe a few moments of quiet as in your mind and in your heart you prepare to make these commitments and promises. After a time has passed we will gather at the baptismal font to continue our worship.

⁴ Book of Common Prayer(1979), pp. 302-303.

⁵ Ibid., p. 305.