

## SERMONS IN STONES

### Luke 19:28-40

*A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward, on Palm Sunday, April 14, 2019,  
at Westminster Presbyterian Church, in Alexandria, Virginia.*

---

*After he had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem. When he had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples, saying, "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. If anyone asks you, 'Why are you untying it?' just say this, 'The Lord needs it.'" So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them. As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, "Why are you untying the colt?" They said, "The Lord needs it." Then they brought it to Jesus; and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it. As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. As 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, saying, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!" Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, order your disciples to stop." He answered, "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out."*

It is a regret of my life, perhaps not beyond repair, that I have not read more of Shakespeare.

Like many of you, I have seen *Macbeth*, can recognize "to be, or not to be" as part of Hamlet's soliloquy,<sup>1</sup> can say with the best of us "O Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou, Romeo"<sup>2</sup>; but as an adult, I have only read four or five of Shakespeare's plays in their entirety. These have been a labor of love, but a labor indeed.

When I first started preaching, I encountered a phrase from Shakespeare's *As You Like It* that has stayed with me for obvious vocational reasons:

*And this our life, exempt from public haunt,  
Finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks,  
Sermons in stones, and good in everything.<sup>3</sup>*

It is the "sermons in stones" that I remember.

\*\*

I assume Shakespeare got the phrase from Luke's version of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday that forms our gospel lesson for today.

As Jesus rides into town on a colt that "has never been ridden," his followers welcome him not with the palm branches we find in John<sup>4</sup> (from which this Sunday gets its name) but with their own cloaks strewn across the road in front of him. These followers then cry out in joy:

*Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!...*

---

<sup>1</sup> *Hamlet*, Act III, Scene 1.

<sup>2</sup> *Romeo and Juliet*, Act II, Scene 2.

<sup>3</sup> *As You Like It*, Act II, Scene 1.

<sup>4</sup> John 12:12-19 depicts "branches of palm trees"; Matthew 21:1-9, "branches of trees"; Mark 11-1-9, "leafy branches."

Luke quickly notes voices of dissent that arise from some of the Pharisees, Jewish leaders whose major interest is not to upset the apple cart of peace with which they seek to live quietly under Roman rule. They say to Jesus: “Teacher, order your disciples to stop.” “Order them to keep quiet.” “Order them to cease and desist.”

But Jesus answers: ‘I tell you, if these [followers of mine] were silent, the stones would shout out.’

1500 years later, Shakespeare coined the term “Sermons in Stones.”

I want to explore this phrase “sermons in stones” along with two others surrounding it from Shakespeare – “exempt from public haunt” and “good in everything.” I want us to see what these phrases have in common with Luke and what both Shakespeare and Luke can teach us about living in the city in which we live, in the nation in which we live, in the day and time in which we live.

Prayer: *Guide us, O God, by your Word and Spirit, that in your light we may see light; in your truth, find freedom; and in your will, discover your peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

## I.

First, “exempt from public haunt.”

In *As You Like It*, a small group of people have been exiled to the Forest of Arden from their life in the medieval court. Away from the highest pinnacles of political power and prestige, into which most of them have been born and in which all of them have been working most of their lives, they find the opportunity to rebuild their lives in the *natural surroundings of the lush forest*.<sup>5</sup>

An exiled Duke speaks:

Hath not old custom made *this* life [in the forest] sweeter  
than that of *painted pomp*?

...Are not these *woods*  
freer from peril than the *envious court*?

Here...  
...the icy fang  
and churlish chiding of the winter’s wind...  
... are *counselors*  
that feelingly *persuade me what I am*.

Part of his becoming who he is leads the Duke to find and speak *eloquent wisdom*:

*Sweet are the uses of adversity [he says]  
which, like the toad, ugly and venomous,  
Wears yet a precious jewel in his head...*

In addition, several major characters in the play – likewise freed from the pressures of statecraft – find the powerful force of human love.

---

<sup>5</sup> Ralph M. Sargent, “Introduction,” in *William Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, General Editor Alfred Harbage (Baltimore: Pelican Books, 1969), 244.

Thus, in *As You Like It*, the time away from political power and prestige frees the characters for *wisdom* and *love*. Exempt from “public haunt,” free from “painted pomp” and “envious court,” they are “feelingly persuaded” to become “who [they are].”

\*\*

In this regard, Shakespeare’s characters are like Jesus’ disciples who, particularly in Luke, find in him one who *transcends* the immediate *dreams and desires of their nation*, one who in a sense is “exempt from public haunt.” Follow me closely here:

- In Matthew, Jesus is welcomed as “*Son of David*.”<sup>6</sup>
- In Mark, he is welcomed as one who brings “*the coming kingdom of our ancestor David*.”<sup>7</sup>
- In John he is welcomed as the “*King of Israel*.”<sup>8</sup>
- By contrast, in Luke, Jesus is simply the king “who comes in the name of the *Lord*” and who brings “*peace in heaven and glory in the highest heaven!*”
- There is no mention of *David* or of the nation’s name *Israel*.

Thus, it is fair to say:

- The greetings in Matthew, Mark and John are more *specific*, more *localized*, and perhaps even more *nationalistic* than those in Luke.
- By contrast in Luke, Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem is less associated with the *military* and *political* might of the nation’s past, and more associated with the promise proclaimed at his birth: “*Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace, among those whom he favors.*”<sup>9</sup>
- By the same token the faith of those who welcome Jesus in Luke lies more in their welcome of the *transcendence* of his kingdom rather than in *nationalistic* overtones and feelings.
- Thus, in Luke, Jesus transcends *immediate political desires and dreams* of the people welcoming him, legitimate as those might be.

It strikes me that in both *As You Like It* and in Luke’s depiction of Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem, *this transcending of the desires and dreams of the nation* holds something in common. In a brief setting in which people are “exempt from public haunt,” they find

... *tongues in trees, books in the running brooks,  
Sermons in stones, and good in everything.*<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 21:9.

<sup>7</sup> Matthew 11:10.

<sup>8</sup> John 12:13.

<sup>9</sup> Luke 2:14. In King James, we knew this phrase as “on earth peace, good will toward men.”

<sup>10</sup> *As You Like It*, Act II, Scene 1.

People find life when they are in touch with that which transcends the intense life of politics and statecraft which consumes their work, their dreams, their conversations and relationships. “Exempt from public haunt,” they find what is most important.

## II.

The second phrase is “sermons in stones.”

The “exemption” from “public haunt” is not an exemption from truth or public responsibility. In fact, what is so important about the phrase Shakespeare coins from Jesus is the promise it contains that even if all voices of faith, reason, truth, beauty, hope, love, and civilization are silenced, *truth will not only still be spoken, but will prevail.*

*... if these were silent, [Jesus says]  
The stones would shout out.*

*Sermons in stones.*

One of my late mentors, Dr. Fred Craddock, writes of Jesus’ forceful statement:

Some things simply *must* be said.

God will provide a witness  
Though *every* mouth be stopped...

Truth *will* come out.

It will *not* be silenced.<sup>11</sup>

Concerning *As You Like It*, Shakespearian scholar Ralph Sargent writes:

...all the exiled characters  
who have gone through their period of *reformation* in the forest will not stay in [the forest]  
but [will]...return to court,  
there to play *their* renewed part in *civilized life*.<sup>12</sup>

“Exempt from public haunt” does not mean taking a perpetual pass from matters of society. In fact, it means returning – renewed and transformed – “to play a renewed part in civilized life,” confident that truth will prevail. “Sermons in stones.”

## III.

The third phrase Shakespeare uses is “good in everything.” It is a phrase we all *want* to believe but do not always seem to have the *capacity* to believe.

I don’t have any wiser assessment of our present state of affairs than anyone else in the sanctuary today. I have neither abundant confidence nor panicked fear, and I have stopped making predictions. But I cannot help but

---

<sup>11</sup> Fred B. Craddock, *Luke* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990), 227-228.

<sup>12</sup> Sargent 245.

wonder: Can we trust that the “sermons in stones” we are promised to hear called to speak will lead to “good in everything”?

It is not only Shakespeare about whom I want to learn more, but also history. I have been reading a lot of history lately, including the recently published biography of Winston Churchill, one of the many world figures about whom I have known far too little. To make up for this, I am exactly 741/987ths through the recent not-short biography published about Churchill.

One event from his life recently stuck out for me.

On December 13, 1941, six days after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, Churchill set sail to visit President Roosevelt in the White House to offer support and once again to enlist America’s entry into the war against Nazism. Churchill stayed for nearly three weeks, and on Christmas Eve, he joined a ceremony on the White House lawn around the National Christmas Tree. President Roosevelt invited him to speak, and on that dark and fearful Christmas Eve, Churchill said:

*Almost the whole world is locked in deadly struggle, and, with the most terrible weapons which science can devise, the nations advance upon each other....*

*Yet [he continued]... let the children have their night of fun and laughter.*

*Let the gifts of Father Christmas delight their play.*

*Let us grown-ups share to the full in their unstinted pleasures before we turn again to the stern task and the formidable years that lie before us, resolved that, by our sacrifice and daring, these same children shall not be robbed of their inheritance or denied their right to live in a free and decent world.*

Churchill then concluded:

*And so, in God’s mercy, a happy Christmas to you all.<sup>13</sup>*

\*\*

Standing before an American audience recently traumatized by attack, speaking during one of the two most important weeks of the Christian year, Churchill spoke a word of *challenge* and *hope*. Today, less traumatized than we were after Pearl Harbor but more confused as a nation, those of us who are Christian stand at the beginning of the other most important week of the Christian year.

Over the course of this upcoming week, we will commemorate

- That Christ was *adored* and then *turned on* by the crowd
- That he was *betrayed, arrested, tried, convicted*
- That he was *abandoned* by his closest followers
- That he was *mocked and beaten*
- That he was then *publicly* executed.

We will see his body placed in a *tomb* and the tomb *sealed*.

---

<sup>13</sup> Andrew Roberts, *Churchill: Walking With Destiny* (New York: Viking, 2018),

We will see people close to him find the tomb *empty* and *encounter* him in a way in which they do not immediately recognize him.

We will see him *reach out or speak* to each of them – Mary, Thomas, Peter – in a way that *fits* who each of them is and enables them to trust that he who is before them – strange, mysterious, transformed – is *indeed* the Christ they have been following, now *risen* from the dead.

Thus, as we enter this week we call “Holy,” we will see the most important *truth* of all: the truth that this ruler who rides into town on a colt cannot be silenced by *any* human power or authority.

Neither “painted pomp,” “envious court,” “winter’s wind,” nor “adversity...ugly and venomous” can silence the “sermons in stones” that *he* preaches by his life, death, and destiny and to which he calls *us* to bear witness after our times of being renewed “exempt from public haunt.”

So as I look at the events to come this week, and as I look at our world, jumbled and limping as it is, I am still able, with Shakespeare, to *trust* – however faintly – that there is “good in everything.” And based on what I know and have experienced of the one who rides into town on a colt, I am able to echo Churchill and *say* “A happy Holy Week to you all.”

Amen.

© Larry R. Hayward, Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria VA