Palm Sunday, April 8, 2001
THE STONES WOULD SHOUT OUT
Luke 19:28-40

The last verse of the Palm Sunday story as recorded in Luke's gospel has always intrigued me. "Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Jesus, 'Teacher, order your disciples to stop.' He answered, 'I tell you, if these were silent, the very stones would shout out!'"

Here's the background of this exchange of words. Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem with his disciples accompanying him. They were going there to celebrate the Feast of the Passover — a Jewish religious holiday with a long history. The best way to participate in this festival was to be in Jerusalem, the Holy City. The celebration was an annual recalling of the time when the Hebrew people had been led by Moses out of slavery in Egypt. In political terms, it was like our 4th of July. In religious terms, it reminded them that God had, through Moses, delivered them from bondage.

All of you have your favorite places in which to celebrate the major holidays and festivals. At Christmas, you want to be home with your family, or maybe your family travels together to a favorite place, and of course, you want to be in church. At Easter, you want to be with family members and again to be in church. Some of the journeys to celebrate holidays are very short, and others are long.

Such journeys are a very important point of your life. You've heard me say many times from this pulpit that it's helpful as a follower of the Christian way to think of your life on this earth as a journey. In your life's journey, it's also beneficial to try to follow God's leading. As with all journeys, there are mountaintop highs and valleys of doubt and despair. No journey is completely smooth from beginning to end. There are always bumps in the road.

Sometimes in your life's journey, there are holding patterns and stopping places that you hadn't planned on, and you have to be patient and wait. There are times when you feel lost and have to wait or ask for new directions. And there are unplanned detours in your journey; some contain wonderful surprises, and others are sad and tragic. Sometimes, too, you encounter traveling conditions over which you have no control — bad weather or accidents.

You will also discover, if you have not done so already, that as you continue on your life's journey, you tend to acquire things along the way. You need to be continually deciding what is necessary baggage and what is excess baggage. For example, there is the excess baggage of conflicts from the past that have not been resolved; the unnecessary baggage of grudges, hates, mistakes, old fears, and anxieties that should have been left behind long ago.

Some of the necessary baggage you need on your journey is an ample supply of unconditional love, suitcases filled with forgiveness, and other luggage overflowing with an openness to new ideas and experiences. You also need to carry with you the desire to grow and mature and the expectation that you will find God in unexpected places.

You not only need God's Spirit as your guide and traveling companion, but you need other people as well. No journey in life need ever be taken alone. There are always friends along the way. As I look back on my life's journey, I can see that there have been countless friends along the way who have made all the difference in the world. Some of these friends have helped turn sadness into joy. Others have helped me avoid mistakes. Still, others have helped me change

directions, and there are those who have carried me when I stumbled. Furthermore, it's more fun to travel life's journey with others than to travel alone.

Some parts of your life's journey will be filled with celebration, festivity, and fun, while others will be sad and lacking in hope.

Today I invite you to travel with Jesus on the last segment of his life's journey, and although this trip to Jerusalem led to his arrest, trial, and death, it also ended with his resurrection, so it was above all a journey of triumph.

It's a long trip as you travel to Jerusalem. The eighty-mile journey takes you along the Jordan River valley to sunny Jericho, the last stopping place for pilgrims from the north country who travel to Jerusalem for the religious holidays. Since Jericho is 825 feet below sea level near the Dead Sea, while Jerusalem is situated on the hilly backbone of Palestine, some 2500 feet above sea level, you quite literally will be going up to Jerusalem.

As you travel along, the roads leading up to the Holy City are crowded. It's like the streets leading to the football stadium in Lincoln on the Saturday of a home game. Jesus and his disciples are heading for one of the eastern suburbs of Jerusalem, a little town called Bethany. This will be their stopping place and a place to stay for several days. There are several important reasons for staying here rather than in the city. For one thing, finding accommodations in the city would be difficult because of the many travelers. Jesus also had close friends in Bethany, and he could stay with them. It's only about a half hour's walk from this village into the city.

As I mentioned in last week's sermon, in Bethany, Jesus and his disciples were the guests of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. A dinner party was given in his honor. It was during that evening that Mary used the whole bottle of her most expensive perfume to anoint the feet of Jesus, which caused Judas and others present to complain about the waste. The next day, Jesus and his disciples made a trip into the Holy City, and it was then that he was greeted with shouts of praise and joy. It was a kind of spontaneous demonstration that developed along the way as he rode a donkey into the city.

Some of the religious authorities in Jerusalem were upset by the noisy demonstration. They asked Jesus to quiet down his followers. It was then that he said, "I tell you if these were silent, the stones would shout out."

What did this statement mean then, and what does it imply for us today? It means first and foremost that there are some works of God in this world that cannot be stopped. Wise people have always known this. There's a brief story in the Book of Acts in the New Testament that illustrates this. After the resurrection and the early church took hold, some of the religious authorities in Jerusalem decided it was time to stop this new movement. Peter and John were arrested. The religious authorities gave them strict orders not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. They disobeyed the order and were put in jail again. Once more, they were warned not to proclaim this new message of God's love. A debate arose in the council of the religious leaders as to what to do with these bold apostles. Some of the council members strongly urged that they be killed. But a Pharisee in the council named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law and widely respected, offered this wise advice.

He said, "Consider carefully what you propose to do to these men. For some time ago Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody, and a number of men, about four hundred, joined

him; but he was killed, and all who followed him were dispersed and disappeared. After him, Judas the Galilean rose up at the time of the census and got people to follow him; he also perished, and all who followed him were scattered. So in this present case, I tell you, keep away from these men and let them alone; because if this plan or this undertaking is of human origin, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them — in that case, you may even be found fighting against God." A quick summary of this argument is: if it is of God, you cannot stop it. If it isn't, it will die anyway.

That's what Jesus was saying with his statement, "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out." There are movements of God in the world that cannot be stopped, and his was one of them. Furthermore, these movements of God are present not only in religious circles but in political systems, scientific discoveries, and human relationships.

For example, the church tried to silence Copernicus and Galileo with their new discoveries about the nature of the universe. The church wanted to halt the spread of new knowledge. But it was to no avail. Even today, there are parts of the church that are always trying to stop the teaching of the theory of evolution. Other sincerely religious people continue to try to ban certain kinds of scientific research by passing laws against it.

Because human beings are created in God's image, our human minds are by nature curious. New discoveries will continue to be made in all fields of knowledge. We can guide them and do our best to see that the results of such research are used for positive improvements. The discovery of atomic energy is a good example. There is no way that discovery by scientists all around the world could have been halted.

The same is true of advances in the field of medicine. A new book I've been reading is entitled, "Great Feuds in Medicine." It's written by Hal Hellman, a specialist in the history of science. He demonstrates in his book how every major advance in the field of medicine was opposed by many of those in charge. A few examples: when the theory of the circulation of blood throughout the bodies of animals and human beings was proposed and solid evidence was presented, that theory was not only disputed by some of the leading physicians of that day, but it was made fun of. In some cases, the attacks seriously disrupted the discoverers' lives. Claude Bernard worked under constant accusations by anti-vivisectionists that his physiological experiments on animals were a crime against nature and society. He was even disowned by his own family. Fortunately, he persisted, and his discoveries prevailed.

Ignaz Semmelweis, who argued that obstetricians should wash their hands before delivering babies, was dismissed from his hospital job and ended up in a mental institution.

In 1591, Eufame Macalynane, a Scottish lady of rank, sought relief for the pain of childbirth. For this transgression, based on some passage from the Bible, she was burned at the stake in Edinburgh.

Look at the field of civil rights. There were many people, some of them good church people, who supported slavery and who fought every proposal for equal rights, including the right for former slaves to vote and to own property. People who supported civil rights were told to be quiet, to go home, to not meddle. The words of Jesus fit here, "I tell you if these were silent, the stones would shout out." What was behind the killing of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.? It was an attempt to stop the civil rights movement. Every great movement for greater justice throughout our human history has had its strong and often violent opposition, but in the long

run, the movements toward greater justice continue to win. “If these were quiet, the stones would shout out.”

There is no way to stop people from thinking new thoughts and making new discoveries, and yet we still try. Unfortunately, throughout human history, it has often been religious leaders and religious institutions who have been in the strongest opposition and in the long run have found themselves fighting against God. Too often the wise words of Gamaliel are forgotten, “If it is of God, you cannot overthrow it and in many cases, you may be even found to be fighting against God.” When that’s the case, you will always lose.

The leaders in Jerusalem on that first Palm Sunday thought they were ultimately in charge. Jesus had to remind them that was not the case. “I tell you if these were silent, the stones would shout out.” He was saying, “Maybe I could convince my followers to be a little more quiet in their enthusiasm, but that wouldn’t stop the power of the movement which I represent.” And later events proved that even killing Jesus did not stop the movement.

The Palm Sunday story is filled with irony. The religious establishment was all worked up about the noise. The joy angers them, the faith infuriates them. They demand that Jesus tell his followers to shut up. Here’s the irony: while they are complaining that the noise is offensive to their worship of God, God is coming to them. God is there, and they do not know it.

The good news for all of us is that God continues to come among us. We can find God’s Spirit working in all sorts of new discoveries. Critics of new technologies often want to stop research or slow it down. They claim that our discoveries will outdistance our capacity to develop ethical guidelines to use what we discover. I don’t think so. The same God who has given us the power to expand our knowledge has also given us the power to use it for the betterment of humankind. Thanks be to God! Amen.