



Palm/ Passion Sunday
28 March AD 2010

*Based on a sermon "The Stewardship of Praise" by the Rev.
Dr. Theodore J. Wardlaw Luke 19:38-40*

Before there was music, there was praise. Before there was worship, there was praise. Before there were preachers, there was praise. Before there were liturgies and hymnals; before there were sanctuaries and choir lofts and pulpits; before there were prayers and creeds and theologies, there was praise.

Before everything there is praise; in everything there is praise. The hymn, "Earth and All Stars" even lifts up classrooms, labs and loud boiling test tubes! They all "sing the Lord a new song." Even the baby in the crib praises. Did you ever find your child wide awake and talking—talking her own language? You wonder, why didn't she cry to let me know? But there she is happy as a lark, looking at the rays of sun light streaming in the window. She can't voice her own name or the name of God; but with the dawn she sings baby praise.

Today the Christian world struggles with praise. It's Palm Sunday and we begin with a parade, but we end at a cross. Yet, from beginning to end, there is praise.

Before everything there is praise. In the first chapter of the Bible there is that soaring poetry about the Creation. Of light and darkness, of earth and sky, of waters and plants and animals and finally people. And, at the end of this creative activity, as a kind of epilogue to it all, there is attributed to God himself a burst of praise. *"God saw everything that God had made, and indeed, it was very good."*

In Exodus, when the people of Israel had escaped Pharaoh's army, beyond the Sea, and with oppression behind them, standing on firm ground; when they were finally safe, before they did anything else, they paused to praise God. *"I will sing to the LORD,"* sang, Moses and Miriam and the rest, *"for God has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider God has thrown into the sea."*

Isaiah heard the singing of heaven once. He was in the temple at worship; and while there, he had a vision of God and heard the seraphim singing, *"Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of God's glory."*

It's there, all through scripture, as if to suggest that God's praise undergirds every-

thing. God means for us to be stewards of nothing if not praise, because nothing is more appropriate or more timely than praise. There is a “stewardship of praise”; coming into the Land, the people are told to bring their firstfruit gifts in a basket and as they do, they are to sing a song to God about their heritage and God’s goodness. When we bring our gifts, do we bring them eagerly? –with a song on our lips?

Let’s not forget Paul. He wrote Philippians while he was incarcerated, “in chains.” Yet what does he teach the Philippians? “*Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.*” (Phil. 4:4)

Through much of Luke's gospel (since 9:51), Jesus has been on the road to the cross. And here, as if there is a bend in the road and the City suddenly comes into view, the crowd bursts into song as they move down the slope from the Mount of Olives. The whole crowd begins to praise God “*for all the deeds of power that they had seen.*”

But the Pharisees in this story are not so sure about this. *Maybe*, the praise is premature—after all it was one thing to reach the city, but it was something altogether different to claim it in the name of a new messianic king. *Maybe*, they they should postpone the victory songs until there was something to sing about. *Maybe*, they are afraid that the praise will attract too much attention. *Maybe*, the situation was getting a little too hot to handle.

“Teacher, tell your disciples to stop.”

“Jesus answered,” writes Luke, *“I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out.”*

Here we see (hear) it again! –that praise that lies deep down beneath everything else: the fundamental praise in which Creation itself takes part—like the music of the spheres (“ineffably sublime” *LW* 278:5)! God’s praise will find a voice even if it's not ours. Jesus implies when the Church fails to praise, if we are silent, then the stones will ring out. The message is, there's nothing more appropriate and timely than praise! For with us or without us God’s *will is done, on earth as it is in heaven.* And so, *with angels and archangels and all the [rest of the] company of heaven, we laud and magnify the name of God...*

Like the Pharisees we have some nagging doubts. Praise might not always seem appropriate to us; like this morning, or on Good Friday. And, the evening news and the papers don’t report much to sing about. Daily the national debt increases, the number of unemployed rise, and the real estate market has not yet hit bottom

(as of Friday morning's news). There is the conflict (war) in Afghanistan, problems in Jerusalem, and that only scratches the surface. With all this on our mind, should we praise God?

“Yes,” says Jesus. There's nothing more appropriate than praise. Because even on the road to Jerusalem, Jesus' road to shame and suffering for your sin and mine,—even then he says, if we remain silent, the stones must sing. And here's why. The praise that wells up from the bedrock of creation, the praise that simply must be expressed—the songs which the stones will offer if we don't—is praise that bestows on us a vision of God.

We're not talking about cheap songs here. This is not music designed to make us feel good in a slow elevator, or while we're waiting for the next available operator. The praise of God is not about making the world a sweeter place to live. It's a praise that enables us to see the world more clearly as God's Creation and we as his creatures—the objects of his love, new creatures, born anew in the Spirit of Jesus for the praise of God.

Entering into the praises of God, joining with people in praise of God, has the power to change to us. Anytime we enter into the give and take of the Gospel, into conversations about the plans and the workings of God; anytime we allow the formal and informal music of God's praise stream through our heads, the Spirit is at work converting us, changing us, empowering us, striving against all that is base within us.

God's praise is everywhere present. It's even at the Cross. Don't ignore that centurion who witnessed it all. He praised God declaring Jesus' an innocent death; he is the lamb for sinners slain. There is a praise too in the throats of those who went home bewailing their own sins and beating their breasts—they knew why he died. And there is the silent praise of the holy women, standing at distance watching, waiting and pondering.

Watch and praise this Holy Week. Watch with Jesus and praise him every step of the way to the cross, to victory, and to the joy of Easter morning.

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