TALKING STONES

Scripture: Luke 19:28-44

FOCUS: Jesus came to initiate a new kind of kingdom and to fulfill God’s mission of grace and salvation, a mission which cannot be stopped.

Last month Boeing was awarded $25.7 million contract to begin work converting two 747s into new generation Air Force Ones, there are always two. They are projected to be complete in 2024. The contract is only the first of many and covers only the expense of a study to find cost savings while defining the scope of the massive task at hand. The first estimate is by the time the two planes are finished the cost will be in the neighborhood of $3 billion. And when was the last time a massive federal project came in under budget?

Each plane will be equipped with a souped up set of engines specially designed to facilitate lightning fast take offs and maintain a cruising speed of nearly 700 miles per hour. They will have a range of 6,800 miles and will be capable of inflight refueling, if necessary, to facilitate unlimited time in the air. On board will be nearly 100 phone lines, hundreds of miles of communication cable, secure internet access and multiple satellite links. There will be a medical room staffed with a full time surgeon at all times, complete with X-ray equipment, a fully stocked pharmacy, and an operating table. Multiple conference rooms elaborately furnished with leather chairs and numerous work stations are in the plans as well as several galleys to be staffed by several chefs and capable of serving hundreds of gourmet meals.

Every time an Air Force One is in the air carrying the passenger for which it was designed it is preceeded by at least two C-5 cargo planes which arrive well in advance and unload their cargo of two armored limousines, numerous support vehicles, an ambulance, and often a specially equipped helicopter. As the plane lands anywhere in the world its distinctive blue and white paint, American flag, special seal and large letters proclaiming “United States of America” are immediately recognized. The moment the president emerges scores of support staff and hundreds of law enforcement personnel go to work. There will always be a large welcoming party on the ground, often including the highest governmental dignitaries. It is an impressive sight when Air Force One arrives anywhere.

On Palm Sunday there was an ancient version of such an elaborate arrival in the city of Jerusalem. A powerful guest came to town, entering through the impressive west gate. He reclined regally in the finest of chariots surrounded by scores of staff and security folks. The military were there in all their glory, impressive armor glittering in the bright sun, carrying imposing and meticulously shined weapons, making their presence known. The most elite unit was in the lead carrying the Roman standards, visible symbols of the seat of civic power and authority. There was a well-choreographed, and somewhat reluctant welcoming party. Religious and civic leaders accompanied by their less than fully willing but conscripted underlings were there driven far more by fear than out of respect.

Pilate came in grand fashion at this time each year, not because he chose to celebrate the Passover, rather because the Roman government feared the great feast. Paranoia was a constant companion of the occupying Roman authorities, especially when large numbers of folk gathered together. Perhaps paranoia is not the right word, for, as some say, ***“You are not paranoid if folks really are out to get you.”*** The Romans had good reason to be on edge. During the little more than 30 years of Jesus life there were no fewer than 60 armed rebellions against the occupying Roman forces. Pilate wanted to insure there were no more during his tenure.

Across town another far different royal procession would form. There would be a crowd, but not any dignitaries. There would be soldiers, sent, not to honor, but to control “those folks”. You know the kind, mostly poor, outcasts shunned by polite society. Some had criminal records, some were prostitutes. There were scores of broken people in the crowd, demoniacs and cripples, blind men. Few would pass a Secret Service screening. And in a day when no self-respecting dignitary would include women or children in their official party, there were many of both in this crowd and they were all welcomed. This crowd came willingly, volunteer groupies, grass roots followers.

Their rag tag appearance was matched by the mode of transportation chosen by the one they honored and was a reflection of his mission. There would be no chariot, not even a stripped down model. There was no regal war horse, not even an old gray mare, just a donkey of all things, and only a colt. Think an adult trying to ride a child’s bicycle. There sits this grown man on a tiny donkey colt struggling to avoid dragging his feet on the ground, knees sticking up in the air, a comical sight to be sure. There would be no standard to bear, no armor, no security detail, just twelve very regular guys gathered around him, fishermen, tax collectors and the like, those unwelcomed across down. There would be no red carpet. Even had they wished to lay one down this crowd could never have afforded it. So they cut branches, waved some of them enthusiastically and tossed others, along with their humble coats, on the road in a spontaneous display of honor and respect.

Even the route into town spoke of humility. It began on the Mount of Olives and wound down a steep, narrow path. It was not the way royalty ever entered town. As they wound their way toward the modest gate the crowd began an odd and confusing chant, ***“Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in highest heaven!”***  The one coming through the gate certainly didn’t look like a king, the crowd with him was anything but kingly, and what was this about coming in the name of God? Kings were not accustomed to coming in anyone else’s name, rather they were proficient at proclaiming themselves divine.

As was always the case with Jesus, nothing about Palm Sunday was by chance. The donkey was a clear fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy from the book of Zechariah. There we read: ***“Shout and cheer, Daughter Zion! Raise the roof, Daughter Jerusalem! Your king is coming! a good king who makes all things right, a humble king riding a donkey, a mere colt of a donkey.”*** And the words of the crowd speak an eternal truth. Jesus came to earth to fulfill God’s mission, a mission which was proclaimed at his birth by the magnificent choir of angels. ***“Peace on earth.”*** Now the people proclaim the coming of a time of peace in heaven. Unknowingly, they are proclaiming in advance the victory over sin and death which would be the culmination of the coming week, a week marked by anything but usual images of peace.

The contrast couldn’t be any greater. On the west side of town gather those who seek to preserve their positions of power at any cost, who represent a government built on conquest and military might, who are privileged at the expense of others and proud of it, who live in opulence. On the east gather those society would prefer to ignore, the least, the last and the lost. There they gather around a leader, a king, who is anything but majestic by the world’s standards, a king who not only has no palace, but who has no home on this earth, who seeks not conquest but peace, who not only does good wherever he goes, but also willingly offers his own life for the benefit of others. From the west come those consumed by things of this world, from the east comes the one who, though not of this world, came to earth to show us the way to our eternal home.

Paul’s letter to the Philippian church captures the extraordinary nature of the king who comes from the east: ***“Christ had equal status with God but didn’t think so much of himself that he had to cling to the advantages of that status no matter what. Not at all. When the time came, he set aside the privileges of deity and took on the status of a slave, became human. Having become human, he stayed human. It was an incredibly humbling process. He didn’t claim special privileges. Instead, he lived a selfless obedient life and then died a selfless, obedient death on a cross.”***

Jesus was not coming to town to threaten the civil authorities. But they didn’t know that. For all they could tell he might just be another in the long line of revolutionaries seeking to wrest political power from the occupying Romans, or at least to cause the local authorities significant trouble with the folks back in Rome. Jesus was not coming to town to overthrow the priests or to take over their temple. It was not the sacred artifacts he would soon turn over, it would be the tables of those who were taking advantage of the faithful by overcharging for sacrificial animals. As he had proclaimed before, Jesus was not sent by God to abolish the law or to condemn the Jewish faithful, rather he came as a faithful Jew to complete the revelation of the God he and the priests served. But the religious authorities didn’t comprehend. Like the politicians they were bound to the status quo and were blinded to God’s truth by their closed mindedness and self-interest. They had it good and nobody was going to mess it up if they could help it.

Jesus didn’t go to Jerusalem to cause trouble for the government, after all he was the one who had instructed his disciples to render to Caesar what belonged to Caesar. Jesus didn’t come down from the mountain to destroy the temple, he sought to sanctify it, to restore it as a house of prayer. Jesus came to town to reveal God’s truth, and truth telling can be dangerous, especially when spoken to power. Speaking truth would cost Jesus his life, not because God is a bloodthirsty tyrant, but because the civil authorities and the Jewish leaders were, and because you and I are self-centered creatures in need of redemption.

The religious leaders feared the Roman government would blame them if this odd fellow on the donkey were to start trouble. So they sent out some Pharisees, leaders steeped in the law, to tell him to get his group under control, to warn they were somehow in violation of God’s law in the eyes of the authorities and to insist they stop praising Jesus in God’s name. They were successful, at least for a while, in quieting the crowd. The crowd of misfits came into town shouting praise, cheering the one who came. But they were soon silenced, intimidated by those they knew could make life miserable for all who crossed them and becoming confused by the unfolding events which were not at all what they had expected.

So why did the cheering stop? Why did the tide turn so quickly against Jesus? For one thing, as he moved toward the cross Jesus began to speak more and more of commitment, total commitment. It was during this Holy Week Jesus instructed the rich young ruler, a good fellow who obeyed Jewish law, if he were to follow Jesus he must sell all his wealth and give it to the poor. Such was not only an unpopular concept, it flew in the face of conventional wisdom of the time which said if you were blessed financially it was because God liked you and how you lived. But Jesus says wealth makes discipleship more difficult and makes a deep friendship with God more complicated.

Jesus’ persistent message, clearly illustrated by the crowd he brought with him, was all people, not just faithful Jews, not just the powerful, but everyone has genuine value in God’s eyes and all deserve to be treated as beloved children of God. The message did not sit well with those who were comfortable with things just as they were. Then, as now, Jesus challenges prejudice and judgementalism. He says there are not Jews and Gentiles, not men and women, just children of God. Those two affirmations don’t bother us too much, but he also says there aren’t liberals and conservatives, just children of God, there aren’t illegal aliens and good citizens, just children of God. He says there are not good kids and bad kids, just children of God. He was not saying God does not judge behaviors. He did not claim all folk are equally faithful. Jesus ***was*** saying God’s criteria and ours are often not the same when it comes to judgment. He was saying judgment is an activity reserved for God, who knows far better than we all hearts.

Another damper on the cheering was the way Jesus began to talk more and more of a cross. In the early part of his ministry Jesus performed miracles and talked about God’s peaceful kingdom but as his time on earth began to draw to a close he did no miracles, at least not the kind folk had become accustomed to seeing and he increasingly began to speak of sacrifice, even of giving up your life for God and for each other.

The story is told of the batter in a little league game, a real power hitter, who was sent to the plate at a crucial juncture in the game. As he looked toward his coach he recognized the signal for laying down a sacrifice bunt. He then proceeded to swing mightily at three straight pitches, missing them all, striking out. As he headed sheepishly to the dugout the coach ran up and got in his face. ***“Didn’t you see me give the bunt signal?”*** he screamed back. ***“Yes coach, but I didn’t really think you meant it.”*** Isn’t that what the crowd began to say during Holy Week? Isn’t that what we often say when God calls us to real sacrifice?

The Pharisees told Jesus to make the crowd hush. ***“It doesn’t really matter if they hush or not.”*** Jesus said. ***“If you are successful in quieting them, the rocks will speak out the truth in their place.”*** A rather odd and implausible message. What he meant was God’s truth may be quieted for a while on occasion by oppression and hatred, but it will never remain silent. God’s truth is truth no matter what and cannot and will not ever be overcome, and in the end, because of Holy Week, the King of Kings will reign forever.

If stones can speak I suspect bricks and walls can as well. I wonder what these walls say. In Birmingham stands a marvelous Gothic church, McCoy United Methodist, the sign says. It once housed a vibrant active congregation. But the neighborhood changed racially and the congregation was unable to change with it. At one time guards were placed at the door to keep out African Americans. It is even said one of the Birmingham church bombings was planned by a couple of men in a downstairs Sunday School room in McCoy. For years the magnificent structure has been empty. And what do you thing those stones of McCoy United Methodist have been saying? I suspect they may well have been shouting out loud and clear a warning to us all, a reminder we are called to follow the king who came to Jerusalem by the east gate, the king who calls to selfless commitment, the king who welcomes all, the king who sacrificed all and who calls us to do the same.

But that is not the end of the story. The bricks have been heard. Several years ago in response to community needs, civic leaders established the McCoy Center for Community Service, which houses various service agencies in the renovated building to the east of the sanctuary. The sanctuary and west annex have now been designated for the Alabama Gospel Center which is now being developed as a place to honor and celebrate the great heritage of gospel music. McCoy lives.

For our sake, for the sake of this community and for the sake of the kingdom of God may we hear the warning of the great building and may these walls, the walls of our church building which is now rising from the ashes, and our very lives shout loudly and clearly the gospel message for all to hear. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, AMEN.