

"Shouts, Cries, Singing"  
Mark 1:1-11  
Dr. Catherine Taylor  
Palm Sunday, March 25, 2018

Every Wednesday Music Director Steve Lawrence and I  
sit down to decide what hymns to sing in worship.  
Steve and I are new to each other,  
But we've both been choosing music for worship for many years now.  
I've worked with six music directors in five churches  
and Palm Sunday has always been one of the easier Sunday's of the year  
because we always want to sing "All Glory Laud and Honor"  
or "Hosanna, Loud Hosanna,"  
as the Choir and the children file in waving palms.  
If you've grown up in church it's part of your collective memory,  
something we don't want to do without  
and that we want our children to learn.  
The trouble comes with the other hymns.  
This is a day that begins in gladness but ends in shadow.  
The raucous parade is going to give way  
to more ominous gatherings before the week is out.  
We always wonder if we should end in a minor key  
or at least with words that communicate threat.  
Because we know the story of this day all too well  
and the soundtrack, as it were, needs to match.  
All four gospels have a version of the triumphal entry into Jerusalem.  
Mark's is the first and oldest version and it is wonderfully spare.  
Most of the description has to do  
with the disciples getting the colt and dealing with questions,  
not with some grand parade.  
Although it says "many people" were involved,  
you get the sense that this might well have been  
a pathetic little disturbance  
rather than the flashy spectacle of Matthew,  
which has "very large crowds" and "the whole city in turmoil."  
Or, I can't resist saying, more like today,  
instead of our usual Palm Sunday service.  
The Luke version is almost identical to Mark,  
but then swells with Jesus weeping over the city  
and thrashing around in the Temple.  
None of that is here.  
Here there is almost a feeling of letdown.  
Jesus goes to the temple, looks around at everything,  
then, because it's late, heads to Bethany and goes to bed.  
That's it.

Other than the rather touching detail  
that he took time to look “at everything,”  
this ending is an abrupt “thunk.”  
It’s also good preparation for the spiral of disasters  
that will soon lead to the cross.  
On this day, part of me always wants to run out from the crowd,  
yank Jesus by the sleeve, and shout “Run away!  
Run away *now* before the welcome turns nasty  
and the cries of ‘Hosanna!’ (save us/give us success) turn to ‘Crucify!!’”  
Of course, I know it is no good.  
Jesus called Peter names for saying the same thing.  
Indeed, Jesus’ determination *not* to run away  
is central to the power of this day.  
But even so, thoughts of rescue or retreat come to mind.

The other thing I think about today, ironically, as it turns out, is singing:  
the singing that we do to inaugurate this day,  
the Palm Sunday parades I sang in as a child,  
a Palm Sunday musical my children took part in,  
and the songs I’ve sung in parades and demonstrations in the past.  
Had we not been too tired and worried about getting back in the snow,  
Rob and I might have gone to Washington DC this weekend  
to worship at the National Cathedral Friday night,  
and take part in the demonstration yesterday  
in support of sensible gun laws.  
It would have been wonderful to sing again in the National Cathedral,  
where I attended school as a child  
and sang in Bethlehem Chapel in my first choir at age six.  
There is no mention of singing in Mark’s story today,  
only of shouts, but I have never been to a march  
or parade where the people did not sing.

Music has the power to bond strangers  
and bear emotions words alone can’t express.  
So we probably ought to add singing  
to our picture of the scene as Jesus entered Jerusalem.  
He, too, might have had music in his mind.  
As a Jew he would know many liturgical songs  
and would have known psalm 118,  
which would have been sung  
to a tune we no longer have.  
It tells of “glad songs of victory in the tents of the righteous,”  
by those who rely on the LORD.  
But that isn’t all it sings about.  
It also sings of being surrounded on every side  
by a crowd of enemies like “bees”  
that “blazed like a fire of thorns.”

It is just possible that Jesus was aware as he rode along  
that this welcoming crowd would soon turn hostile.  
If so, perhaps he listened a song of his own in his head  
to still the beating of his heart.

I think I've told you before that when we took  
our daughter to college for the first time,  
the last event before parents left involved a procession.  
All the freshman marched in and  
sat as a class for several short addresses.  
Then the convocation closed with the playing of a march  
That had been specially composed  
by one of the music professors for *their* class,  
to be played four years later at their graduation.  
It was an interesting work with a difficult rhythm,  
and Rob and I joked that maybe by graduation  
the orchestra would have learned to play it better.  
But it was a beautiful idea;  
a reminder that art matters  
and that there is always an accompaniment in life,  
the one we sing to ourselves  
and the ones others sing for us.

Alan Cohen tells a story that I hope is true about an African tribe  
where, when a woman knows she is pregnant,  
she goes out into the wilderness with a few friends  
and together they pray and meditate  
until they hear the song of the child.  
When the women attune to the song, they sing it out loud.  
Then they return to the tribe and teach it to everyone else.  
When the child is born, the community gathers  
and sings the child's song to him or her.  
Later, when the child enters education,  
the village gathers and chants the child's song.  
A friend is someone who knows your song  
and sings it to you when you have forgotten it.  
When the child passes through the initiation to adulthood,  
the people again come together and sing.  
At the time of marriage, the person hears his or her song.  
Finally, as death nears, family and friends  
gather at the person's bed,  
and they sing the person into the next life.  
There is one other occasion when the villagers sing to a child.  
If at any time during his or her life  
the person commits a crime or aberrant social act,  
the individual is called to the center of the village

and the people in the community form  
a circle around him or her and sing the person's song.  
The tribe recognizes that the correction  
for antisocial behavior is not punishment;  
it is love and the remembrance of identity.  
When you can recognize your own song, the thinking goes,  
you will have no desire or need  
to do anything that would hurt another.  
Also, and perhaps most importantly,  
those who love you are not fooled  
by mistakes you have made  
or dark images you hold about yourself.  
They remember your beauty when you feel ugly;  
your wholeness when you are broken; your innocence when you feel guilty;  
and your purpose when you are confused.

Music has the power to create identity,  
and to speak even to enemies.  
Perhaps you recall the story of the cellist Vedran Smailovic,  
Along with hundreds of thousands of other Bosnians  
in the 1990s, he endured the Siege of Sarajevo,  
surviving the cold, the food and water shortages,  
and the constant bombings and sniper fire in the street.  
He was known for playing for free  
at different funerals during the siege,  
even though such funerals were often targeted by enemy fire.

One morning an explosion killed 22 people  
who had been standing in line for bread.  
The next day Smailovic put on his white tie and tailcoat,  
set up a chair in the bomb crater, and played  
*Albinoni's Adagio in G Minor* by Remo Giazotto.<sup>1</sup>  
It is an achingly mournful piece of music.  
For 22 days Smailovic donned his tails, set up his chair,  
and played the adagio, sniper fire sounding close by.  
According to one story, incredulous soldiers once asked him  
why he was playing where they fighting.  
"Why are you fighting where I am playing?"  
was his reported reply.  
He varied the time of day when he played  
to avoid the snipers' bullets,  
but his bravery nonetheless struck deep chords everywhere.  
Photographs of him playing in the crater,  
his chair fire-scorched and his face grieving  
were seen around the world.

The shouting crowd in Jerusalem does not know  
    Jesus was doing anything brave.  
They are full of their own tunes,  
    assuming he is someone who can meet their expectations.  
There must have been many points of view among them,  
    some who wanted Jesus to be a political leader,  
some who were looking for outright revolt against Rome,  
    some who had an inkling that he was not the Messiah they expected,  
some who were just along for the ride.  
Whether the crowd was large or small,  
    for a moment their energy was likely contagious.  
It might have been hard not to be swept up,  
    the way more than one political figure or celebrity has lost sight  
    of his or her own ends to please a following.  
But Jesus is silent before the crowds.  
    He gave careful instructions about the colt,  
    But once the cheering begins he has nothing to say,  
    no speech to give, no side to root for,  
    no cause to promote;  
He has a journey to complete,  
    and he will not be swayed from it  
by other people's understandings  
    of who he is or what his actions mean.

Cellist Smailovic did want to manage people's  
view of his actions.  
After the events in Sarajevo, Canadian author Stephen Galloway  
wrote a novel about how three fictional characters  
    reacted to the cellist's protest,  
    including a female sniper who came everyday to protect him  
    from snipers on the other side.<sup>ii</sup>  
The cellist himself does not appear  
    beyond the first five pages of the book,  
    and so Galloway did not attempt to research Smailović's life.  
He simply used what he had done  
to set other people's stories in motion.  
But Smailovic felt violated.  
He sued, trying to control and benefit financially  
    from how his own story was used.  
But you can't control how your story is used  
    anymore than you can control how a song is heard.  
Once an action is taken or a song is sung  
    it has a life of its own.  
People can hear or mishear, see or not see at all,  
    shout "Hosanna," or "Crucify!"  
Perhaps this knowledge accounts for Jesus' silence

as the crowds waved their palms.

That is the truly extraordinary thing about this day  
that began in shouts and songs of joy and ends in  
cries of fear and sadness.

Jesus had his own song in his heart  
a determined song of love and sacrifice  
though it likely also contained fear and sorrow.  
It could not be drowned out then by any competing tunes,  
or cries for the social arrangements  
that suited the religious elites of his day best.  
Today it will not be silenced by the shouts of those  
who think Jesus belongs to them alone,  
or by the crack of sniper fire in an ethnic war,  
or bombs left by a psychopath for hapless victims to find,  
or the pop of a handgun in a madman's fist.  
Jesus' song will sound and sound and sound.  
It will sound despite the irony of having no musician today,  
because we will always gather to sing it,  
and we will never stop. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Giazotto first alleged that he based it on a fragment of music found in the ruins of a Dresden library firebombed by the Allies in World War II, though later he claimed the whole work as his own.

<sup>ii</sup> *The Cellist of Sarajevo* by Canadian novelist Steven Galloway