

**The Reverend Jon Hauerwas – April 14, 2019 – Uncontainable Joy
Psalm 118:1-2, 21-24, 26-29 and Luke 19:28-39**

We've all heard someone say, "oh, if those walls could talk." And maybe they can. The Gothic structure of the McCoy United Methodist Church is located on a busy thoroughfare in downtown Birmingham, Alabama. Once one of the most vital and active congregations in its Conference, McCoy's membership began declining in the 1960s, as demographic changes emerged in the surrounding community. After the congregation disbanded in 1993, the property was ultimately sold to the city.¹

Stated bluntly, "the neighborhood changed racially, and the congregation of McCoy refused to change with it. At one point, guards were placed at the door to keep African Americans from entering the church. It was even said that one of the Birmingham bombings during the 1960s was planned by a couple of men in a Sunday school room in McCoy's church basement."²

In Habakkuk, chapter 2, we hear that "the very stones will cry out from the wall, and the plaster will respond from the woodwork" "against the corruption of the

¹ Will Willimon, *Lectionary Sermon Resource: Year C, Part 1*. (Abingdon Press, 2018), 228.

² *Ibid.*, 228.

wicked.”³ Friends, if these walls could talk at the former McCoy United Methodist Church, what do you think that they would say? “Perhaps, that God is not so nice to churches who refuse to be faithful to the commands of Christ.”⁴

When Jesus arrives in Jerusalem on the back of a donkey, there are no guards to turn him away as were once found in the entryways of that thriving-turned-abandoned Birmingham church. Instead, a raucous crowd of well-wishers wave palm branches as “a sign of hospitality and welcome” and lay cloaks on the road in his honor.⁵ The prevailing image is one of a joyful parade. And yet, it’s actually more in keeping with a funeral procession.

That’s because Jesus’ detractors are in the crowd. They are easy to identify. They hold no palms in their hands. They lay no cloaks on the road. Their brows are all furrowed. They speak to one another in hushed tones. And as the welcome party ensues, they formulate a plot to take him down. A few verses later, it is of these whom Jesus says, “they will not leave with you one stone upon another.”

³ Ed. Joel B. Green, *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year C, Volume 2*, (Westminster John Knox Press, 2018), 112.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 228.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 224.

Friends, what do you suppose Jesus' critics were so concerned about? Well, mainly, power and control. As we all know, the very nature of regime change is a disruption of the status quo. When leadership changes, new alliances are formed. New voices are elevated. And yesterday's power brokers can feel as if they are now on the outside looking in. Just imagine the leaders of a sidelined political party, once at the height of power, now asking their opponents for a seat at the table they once controlled.

The situation in Jerusalem was even more sensitive than this. In those days, the holy city was a cauldron of tensions that regularly boiled over. For the residents there, Jesus' entrance procession was cause for alarm. Over the years, "numerous kings and conquering generals had entered Jerusalem."⁶ And scholars now estimate that during Jesus's earthly life, alone, "there were at least sixty armed rebellions against the Roman occupation forces." That's nearly two per year. So it's easy to understand why "people waving palm branches and shouting was a threatening sign, particularly when they were shouting that there was a new king in town."⁷

⁶ Alan Culpepper, *Luke, The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary Volume IX*, ed. Leander Keck (Abingdon Press, 1996), 366.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 224.

It is stressful and depleting to live in a place that is mired with so much conflict. The average citizens may have been uneducated, but they certainly weren't daft. They didn't appreciate Rome's occupying forces, and yet most people felt powerless to stop it. In marched one would-be rebellion after another. Those swept away in the cause were surely exhausted, especially if they had pinned their hopes on any one of the insurrectionist movements.

And yet, the alternative was also stressful. Because the mental and physical toll that one feels when an existing order and power structure collapses is immense. Like the Hebrews wandering in the desert for forty years, I imagine the people saying, "why, O God, did you lead us out of Egypt for *this?!?*"

And don't forget that a number of people personally benefit from the way things are. Jesus critics "have worked out an arrangement between the faith of Israel and the power of Imperial Rome. They do not want the common political fanatics to disrupt the alliance they have constructed." So they implore Jesus, saying, "Scold your disciples. Tell them to stop!' They want Jesus to tame the outburst, to tone down the uproar." ⁸

⁸ *Ibid.*, 224.

But now, Jesus, the one who previously instructed others not to speak up about him says, “I tell you, if they were silent, the stones would shout out.” The time is now right for the fulfillment of our first lesson. There, in Psalm 118, we hear familiar words of praise shouted during Jesus’ Palm Sunday triumph: “I thank you that you have answered me and have become my salvation. The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone... The Lord is God and has given us light. Bind the festal procession with branches... Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.”

Holy Week is now upon us. Long considered “the ‘chief cornerstone’ of the Christian year,” this is when the central story of our faith is most fully recalled and enacted.⁹ Jesus “will soon cleanse the temple with authority, silence the scribes into amazement, foretell calamity on a cosmic scale, and silently offer himself up to suffering and crucifixion.”¹⁰ “A rejected stone will become our firm foundation, though we may not know how.”¹¹ Oh, if those walls could talk. And maybe they can.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 109.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 111-112.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 110.

In 2005, the North Alabama Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church organized a ‘Service of Confession and Recommitment to Disciple-Making’ on the steps of the former McCoy United Methodist Church. As part of that service, the gathered asked for “God’s forgiveness for letting segregation and racism limit the church’s willingness to reach out to communities.”¹²

Now, 14 years later, that historic, Gothic structure, originally dedicated to the glory of God is empty no longer. “The McCoy Center for Community Service leases the entire property and uses the former education building for its programs. The Birmingham Public Library operates a literacy and outreach center there. The Alabama Gospel Center has plans to use the former sanctuary as a performance hall and to add exhibit spaces.” Oh, if those stones could talk. And maybe they can. Thanks be to God. Amen.

¹² https://www.bhamwiki.com/w/McCoy_United_Methodist_Church. Accessed on April 9, 2019.