

Stones Shall Shout

Luke 19: 29 – 40

Fairview Evangelical Presbyterian Church

March 20, 2016

Palm Sunday

What non-believing people in the modern world fear most: that God exists

On March 4, 2016 the medical journal Plos One withdrew from publication an earlier study it had published titled: **Biomechanical Characteristics of Hand Coordination in Grasping Activities of Daily Living**. The paper did what it claimed to do, analyze the characteristics of the human hand as we humans go about our day to day activities. After the original article was published, the journal received objection from a vocal segment of the scientific community that took offense at the suggestion by the authors that the hand coordination indicates “the mystery of the Creator’s invention,” and that the human hand is due to the “proper design by the Creator.” These voices took exception to these words in this scientific paper. Many modern scientists seek to live in a world without God. By definition, they see science as explaining the world without needing to appeal to a higher cause or authority. We will come back and look at this more fully later in this message, but for now I want to point out that those who objected to the message of this scientific paper did not offer a reasoned argument in opposition. They demanded a retraction. Like the Pharisees on the first Palm Sunday, they sought to silence the witness of others. “Tell your people to be quiet,” the critics insisted. And, unlike Jesus, the publishers of Plos One capitulated and withdrew the study.

The Pharisees told Jesus to silence his disciples. Jesus replied “I tell you, if these were silent, the very stones would cry out.” What did Jesus mean in saying this?

How do stones “cry out”? What did Jesus mean when he said, “I tell you, if these were silent, the very stones would cry out.”?

A favorite poem of mine, God’s Grandeur, by Gerard Manley Hopkins, captures this truth well.

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
Crushed. Why do men then now not reck his rod?
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

And for all this, nature is never spent;
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;

And though the last lights off the black West went
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs —
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.

When Jesus says that the very stones would cry out what he means is that the reality of God's work and presence are woven into creation itself. The world can seek to silence God's people. The world can arrest, intimidate and seek to silence those who testify to God's work in Christ. But the world cannot erase what God has done. The world is as God has made it. There is nothing the world can do about that. For this reason, the world cannot silence the testimony of creation to the grandeur of God.

What I intend in the rest of this sermon is to illustrate briefly some of the ways in which stones shout. How is God's voice heard in the witness of creation itself?

The stones cry out: the universe is intelligently made.

the very stones would cry out

As seen in my opening illustration regarding the scientific article on the nature of the human hand, my sense is that the arena of debate that most disturbs modern unbelieving secular elites is that of the question of Intelligent Design. Intelligent Design is simply a shorthand reference to the orderliness, beauty and the remarkable complexity of the universe. How did creation get that way? Where does its order, beauty and complexity come from? A watch implies a watchmaker. Creation implies a creator. And that logical argument scares modern secular unbelieving elites.

The atheist philosophy Anthony Flew developed a parable about two explorers working their way through a tropical jungle when they happen upon a garden growing flowers and vegetables. It is obvious that the garden is cared for, but by whom? Flew develops his parable as the two explorers try different methods to identify the reality and presence of the invisible gardener. But none of their experiments succeed. The gardener remains hidden, undiscovered. The inability to discover the hidden gardener led Anthony Flew, and countless other who were influenced by him, to conclude that the gardener does not exist. God does not exist.

What is the problem with this parable? What is missing in the parable? What was Flew's mistake in logic?

Late in life Flew became a theist. He stopped being an atheist and came to believe in the existence of God. [Though, he *did not* become a Christian – a believer in Jesus Christ.] Why? What brought about his change of conviction from Atheism to Theism? What was the logical error in his parable of the jungle garden? It was this: Why was there a garden in the first place? How did the garden come to exist?

For Flew, it was the complexity of creation and the human person that led to his reevaluation of his atheistic beliefs. The indications of design suggestion the presence

of a designer. A watch implies a watchmaker. God may not be discernable via the five senses, but how did the created order become so *ordered*? The design complexity suggests that there is a hand behind the ordered world in which we live. This, my friend, is a very powerful argument. It led Anthony Flew late in life to move from atheism to theism.

Modern unbelieving elites understand the power of the design argument. They fear it. This is why the secular elites of our day are willing to go to court in order to prevent this idea from being spoken of favorably in government school education. Modern secular unbelieving science is scared of the intelligent design argument. They do not want to hear it. They need to silence it.

This is the first way the stones cry out. The universe is intelligently made. The second is through the majesty of creation.

The stones cry out: the majesty of creation

The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.

The previous point affirms the intelligibility of the created order: a watch implies a watchmaker. This point is different in that it considers the glory and majesty of the universe. It is not simply that the created order is capable of being studied, analyzed and understood through human effort, but beyond that the universe is vast, unimaginable, and astounding to us. There are discoveries to be made in the created order that lead us to marvel at the creativity and beauty of the world that God has made it and entrusted it to us. Here is an example of the majesty of creation.

China, during its Cultural Revolution, sought to erase six thousand years of Chinese culture: law, manners, art and history. Destruction and murder ruled. Nien Cheng could see her time coming. She was wealthy, educated in London and worked for Shell Oil. The communists arrested her and threw her in prison: a damp cell caked with dirt, with a light that burned twenty-four hours a day. One day, she began watching a pea sized spider outside her bars. It climbed toward the ceiling and then spun out with a silken thread. It attached it, and then spun again. Again, again and again. With perfection and confidence, the spider worked. It completed its web. Nien Cheng thought. I had just watched an architectural feat of an extremely skilled artist. Her mind was filled with questions: "Who had taught the spider to do this?" "Could it really have acquired such a skill through evolution?" "Or did God endow it with the ability to make a web so it could catch food?" She said, "I thanked God for what I had just seen. It helped me to see that God was in control. Mao Zedong and his revolutionaries were much less menacing. I felt a renewal of hope and confidence." The stones spoke.

The universe is intelligently made. There is majesty revealed in the universe. Third, the stones cry out in the legacy of the past.

The stones cry out: the legacy of the past

As you know, most of the great universities in the United States began as religious institutions. They begin as a faithful community of followers of Christ. But over time, the secular forces of our world push back and erase the spiritual foundations of the institution. Occidental College was founded by Presbyterians in the foothills of the San Gabriel Mountains. Herrick Memorial Chapel was built in the 1960's. Like many chapels, it had a cross on the building and a cross over the entry way. Some faculty objected. They did not like the symbolism of walking under the cross, of submitting to a particular religious tradition. Eventually, they removed the cross. The sensitive secular sensibilities of the faculty were protected.

But what did Gerard Manley Hopkins say, "The world is charged with the grandeur of God." The administration of the school removed the cross at the entryway. But they did not redesign the building itself. The upper levels still contain lovely stained glass of Old and New Testament themes. The faculty still enters a building that is shaped like a cross, that is charged with the grandeur of God. The faculty may be silent, but the building itself declares God's message and glory.

The universe is intelligently made. There is majesty revealed in the universe. Third, the stones cry out in the legacy of the past. Fourth, stones cry out in witness to history's purpose.

The stones cry out: history's purpose

³³ And as they were untying the colt, its owners said to them, "Why are you untying the colt?"
³⁴ And they said, "The Lord has need of it." ³⁵ And they brought it to Jesus, and throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it.

God is involved in the story of human history. God has an interest in how history unfolds. It is a small detail, that Jesus sends the two disciples who fetch the donkey for Jesus to ride as he enters Jerusalem. The detail is important for it tells us that things are unfolding as God intends. The prophecies are being fulfilled. History is unfolding as God intends it to unfold.

The secular unbelieving world is blind to certain important spiritual realities. The unbelieving world does not realize that God is at work in human history. Luke 24:27 tells us of Jesus' teaching of two disciples on the road to Emmaus. This verse says, And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself. God hid within the scriptures testimony to the person and work of Jesus of Nazareth. The prophecies, together with their fulfillment in the life and ministry of Jesus, tell us that God is working his purposes out. He is doing so through the life, ministry and spiritual legacy of Jesus of Nazareth.

Modern secular institutions are caught up maintaining, declaring and protecting their own sense of importance. Think of all the effort (and money) that is expended in presidential campaign. Those who win elections want a legacy. They want to carve their place in history. Typically, those in the secular world have little interest or

involvement with those in the spiritual world. To their way of thinking, there is no pay off in it.

When Lois Ann, Benjamin and I traveled last year we ended one of our day tours of the town of Bruges, Belgium, in a pub that had been established in 1515 – two years before the Protestant Reformation! It had been around for a long time. Nonetheless, it is easy to miss the significance of God's hand at work in our world. Think of the social institutions that exist today: governments, schools, civic organizations, medical facilities, community establishments, and so on. When did they begin? When were they organized? Can you think of any that trace their lineage farther than a few hundred years? Next year we will celebrate the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. Five hundred years is a long time. But, five hundred years is still a long way from the ancient world of Greece and Rome. The only social institutions that continue from the ancient world are Judaism and the Church. God's people endure. The Roman Empire is ended. The Greek empire is only history. The Greek and Roman gods, for the most part, are forgotten. To the modern secular mind, the spiritual world is not seen as all that significant or important. But it is the spiritual legacy of the Judeo Christian tradition that continues with ongoing influence and impact today.

In review, how do the stones speak? They speak in that the universe is intelligently made. The stones reveal the majesty of the universe. Third, the stones cry out in the legacy of the past. Fourth, stones cry out in witness to history's purpose. And finally, the stones cry out in that the tomb is empty.

The stones cry out: the tomb is empty

“I tell you, if these were silent, the very stones would cry out.”

Today is Palm Sunday, the beginning of Holy Week. Jesus spoke to the Pharisees, telling them that if my disciples fail me, the stones themselves will speak. The sad fact is that the disciples did fail. On the night that Jesus was betrayed they all ran. Each was weak and afraid. Peter, who had boasted of his courage that evening at dinner, failed miserably as he denied the Lord Jesus three times before morning came. The week had begun so well. And ended so miserably. The hope of the disciples had ended as Jesus was crucified on the cross. The dreams had failed. The testimony grew silent.

All that was left was the cleaning up, doing the things that must be done in order to give a loved one a proper burial. The women met early on Sunday morning. They had their supplies of linen and spice to complete the burial duties. They set out for the tomb where Jesus was laid.

On Easter morning, who, or rather what, spoke the message first? What was the first indication of Christ's glorious resurrection? The women approached the tomb, asking themselves, how will we remove the stone? That is a job for the men folk. But they approach the tomb and find that the stone was removed. It lay there rolled to the side.

The stone rolled to the side stood there shouting its message: Christ is risen. In the witness of the empty tomb the stone speaks. It says, "He is not here. He is risen!" Jesus said that the stones themselves would speak declaring Christ's greatness. This stone, rolled back from the tomb, tells us that someone was laid here whom death could not hold. This stone, rolled back from the tomb, tells us that this death, and this person, was unlike any other the world has known. This stone tells us that death and burial are not the final word. This stone tells us that there is life on the other side of the grave.

This stone points us to the one who was laid in the tomb. It declares that Jesus Christ is Lord. That he has conquered death. That he is the Lord of Life.

Turn to Christ. Believe in Christ.

Say "Amen!" Somebody.

Luke 19:29 – 40

²⁸ And when he had said these things, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem. ²⁹ When he drew near to Bethphage and Bethany, at the mount that is called Olivet, he sent two of the disciples, ³⁰ saying, “Go into the village in front of you, where on entering you will find a colt tied, on which no one has ever yet sat. Untie it and bring it here. ³¹ If anyone asks you, ‘Why are you untying it?’ you shall say this: ‘The Lord has need of it.’ ” ³² So those who were sent went away and found it just as he had told them. ³³ And as they were untying the colt, its owners said to them, “Why are you untying the colt?” ³⁴ And they said, “The Lord has need of it.” ³⁵ And they brought it to Jesus, and throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it. ³⁶ And as he rode along, they spread their cloaks on the road. ³⁷ As he was drawing near—already on the way down the Mount of Olives—the whole multitude of his disciples began to rejoice and praise God with a loud voice for all the mighty works that they had seen, ³⁸ saying, “Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!” ³⁹ And some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, rebuke your disciples.” ⁴⁰ He answered, “I tell you, if these were silent, the very stones would cry out.”