



“Breaking Silence, Telling Truth”

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Luke 19:28–40 (NRSV)***

Luke’s account of the first Palm Sunday describes all the festivities associated with a first-century royal parade, but it ends in an exchange between the Pharisees and Jesus which telegraphs the growing opposition that he faced at the hands of the royal and religious authorities—opposition which culminated with his crucifixion on Good Friday.

We read in Luke 19:40 (*CET*): “Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Jesus, ‘Teacher, order your disciples to stop shouting.’ But Jesus answered, ‘I tell you, if they kept quiet, these stones will start shouting.’”

These words, and the tone that Jesus used, reveal that the first Palm Sunday was not just about palms, parades, and praise; it was also about conflict, controversy, and the cross.

The religious and political authorities of his day were troubled by the growing popularity of Jesus’ messages of compassion and justice which challenged their messages of law and order. Jesus was developing quite a following, and the Pharisees were losing ground. They wanted the crowds silenced, and in particular, they wanted Jesus stopped.

Despite their persistence, Jesus explained that even if he shut up the crowds—and even if the authorities shut up him—the very stones around Jerusalem would shout, “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of God!”

II

Let’s pause for a moment and think about the statement that Jesus made: “I tell you, if [the crowd] kept quiet, these stones will start shouting.”

What did Jesus mean by this comment? Was he making a literal statement? Was he proposing that he could teach inanimate objects to communicate, like the recluse whom Annie Dillard described in her book, *Teaching a Stone to Talk*?¹

Probably not. More than likely, Jesus was affirming that no one could silence his message, because it came from God, and God would accomplish whatever God chose to accomplish in God's own ways.

In addition, Jesus knew that his message spoke to the deep needs of the people around him, so that even if he were silenced, his followers would keep talking about compassion and justice and would amplify his message, and the liberation movement he had begun would continue to unfold.

Sweet Honey in the Rock, the Grammy award-winning African American female a *cappella* ensemble, provides a modern example of how God can and does accomplish God's purposes, and how God's message resonates and resounds within a people even if their leader is silenced. This truth is uttered and amplified in a song called "Biko," which they wrote, recorded, and continue to perform.²

(Sweet Honey in the Rock is currently on a national tour and will be performing at Zellerbach Hall on the Cal Berkeley campus, Thursday, April 22, if you are interested in experiencing their powerful music, which is about personal and social transformation.)

Steve Biko (for whom their song, "Biko," was derived) was a native of South Africa and an anti-apartheid activist in the 1960s and 1970s. He was the person who coined the phrase "Black is beautiful." He was also the founder of the Black Consciousness Movement which empowered numerous Black urban youth to work for the dismantling of apartheid in South Africa.³

Like Nelson Mandela and other anti-apartheid activists, Steven Biko was arrested, beaten, and jailed numerous times by government officials in an effort to silence him. He was banned in South Africa, which meant that during the height of apartheid he was not allowed to speak to more than one person at a time. He was restricted to certain areas, and was not allowed to speak in public. The white apartheid government declared illegal the quoting of anything that Biko said, including his speeches and writings and even informal comments that he made, and they severely punished his associates.⁴

Unlike Mandela, Biko did not survive the atrocities of apartheid. He died September 12, 1977 of a brain injury inflicted by his captors while being transported from an outlying jail to a Pretoria prison hospital. The "kangaroo courts" in apartheid South Africa ruled that

¹ Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk* (New York: Harper Collins), p 85.

² Sweet Honey in the Rock, "Biko," *Breaths*, Flying Fish Records, 1988.

³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Steve_Biko

⁴ *Ibid.*

Steven Biko died as the result of self-inflicted wounds, and the men who beat him to death were never brought to justice until well after apartheid was overturned.⁵

The lyrics of Sweet Honey's song "Biko" go like this:

Bi-ko, Bi-ko, Bi-ko, Bi-ko
Here comes Steven Bi-ko walk-ing down the wa-ters
Hey, hey, whatcha gonna do with Bi-ko, Bi-ko?

Waters of fear and hatred, waters of starving babies
Hey, hey, whatcha gonna do with Bi-ko, Bi-ko?

Come all the way from Capetown
all the way to Wilmington, North Carolina
Hey, hey, whatcha gonna do with Bi-ko, Bi-ko?
You can break one human body; I see ten thousand Bi-kos

Hey, hey, whatcha gonna do with Bi-ko, Bi-ko?
Here comes Steven Biko walking down the waters
Hey, hey, whatcha gonna do with Bi-ko, Bi-ko, Biko, Biko?⁶

The conflict that Steve Biko faced in his ministry smacks of the same conflict that Jesus faced on the first Palm Sunday. Luke recounts: "Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Jesus, 'Teacher, order your disciples to stop shouting.' But Jesus answered, 'I tell you, if they kept quiet, these stones will start shouting.'"

Jesus spoke truth to power, and even though the powerful didn't like what he had to say, and tried to silence him, Jesus' message continued to spread and was amplified by his followers.

This was so because it was God's message, and because God continued to communicate this message from Jesus' time to our time, in and through every person who has spoken truth to power and worked for justice and compassion—in South Africa, in South Carolina, in South Alameda County, and around the world.

III

I wonder, what are the truths that we would utter about God's justice and compassion in our lives? What silences have been imposed on us that we will not maintain? What

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Sweet Honey in the Rock, "Biko," *Breaths*, Flying Fish Records, 1988. Bold face type added for emphasis by the preacher.

truths are so pregnant in our lives that even if we kept silent, the very rocks around us would shout out that truth?

Ponder these questions with me for a moment, if you would. Now imagine for yourself what needs to be said. Imagine where you are. Imagine who you need to convey your message to.

As you formulate your thoughts, I'll offer a few scenarios to inspire your reflection.

- Sometimes the truth that we need to tell is a profound and wonderful truth, such as, "I love you." Yesterday, Stephanie and I were out to lunch at local sandwich shop. We sat near a young family with an infant and a three-year old boy who sweetly and innocently kept chirping, "Daddy, I love you. Mommy, I love you." The truth is that these are words that every person needs to hear. I wonder, "Is there someone who you need to say these words to today? Daddy/Mommy/Son/Daughter/Honey, I love you."
- Sometimes, by contrast, the silence that we need to break is the one around our dinner tables at home. Maybe it's time to say something like this: "Mom, Dad, I'm gay. Or, "We've been working at this for a long time, and getting nowhere. We just need to admit that this marriage is over." Or, "My name is...and I'm an alcoholic, an addict, an abuser, a survivor, or..." fill in the blank. Breaking the silence and telling the truth are often difficult and challenging steps to take, but the only way that anyone in a family begins the very necessary path from Palm Sunday to Easter is by saying what needs to be said, and then doing what needs to be done.
- If home is not the place where we feel called to speak the truth, then maybe that setting is a neighborhood block party, a local PTA or board of education meetings, or a union hall or management team meeting that we are part of. Maybe it's time to say in one or more of these settings that we've got some things to work on if we want to live in a safer neighborhood, or have better schools or a more equitable work environment—and that work starts with us speaking up and speaking out about our commitments to justice and compassion.
- Maybe the venue that you're being called to speak in is beyond your home or our local community. Maybe you are feeling called to immerse yourself in a border education program, like Centro Romero in San Ysidro, California, which is sponsored by the UCC Southern California Conference.⁷ Or maybe you are feeling called to learn about the real reasons that we need immigration reform in our nation—not just for the economic refugees in the US—but for the whole people of God.

⁷ <http://www.ucc.org/justice/centro-romero/>

- Or maybe you are already clear about the need for immigration reform, and you want to take the next step and get involved in political advocacy in support of immigration reform. If so, there are opportunities right here in our neighborhood through Citizens United for a Better Cherryland and COR (Congregations Organizing for Renewal) which among other things is organizing an immigration reform rally the weekend of April 10 and 11. If you feel called to join this effort, keep watching the bulletin, kiosk, and display tables around the campus for more information on the march and other actions in support of immigration reform, and join in these efforts.

I'll stop there with examples, and remind us that each person must discern for himself or herself what needs to be said—what truths are so profound that even if we did not tell them the very stones around us would shout out God's truth.

Again: "What is the truth that God is challenging you and me to say today, this Holy Week, this coming Easter season?"

When we get clarity about our respective answers, we can be sure that there will be a price to pay for saying what needs to be said and doing what needs to be done. But we can also be sure that we are not alone in our witness. God is with us in these challenging times. Christ has gone before us, proclaiming the good news of the gospel: that even death cannot shut up the Still Speaking God whom we worship. This is the message of Palm Sunday. This is what the stones would shout if we did not—that God is still speaking, and God can and God will accomplish God's purposes. Amen.