

Even the Stones Will Cry Out!

Luke 19:28-40

You and I live in a messianic age. Now, I'm not suggesting this in the typical fashion of Christian televangelists who check their Revelation calendar with every headline. Nor am I making this claim in the scholarly sense that, theologically-speaking, ever since the resurrection of Jesus, Christians are living in the messianic era.

What I mean about this time is that the world (and particularly our country) is in such a state of turmoil, anxiety, and restlessness, that people are searching for their political messiah to rise up and fix things and make them right (whatever "right" seems to mean to people nowadays).

This is fairly evident in how the Presidential election is playing out. The prototypical "establishment" candidates in both parties have been challenged, if not overwhelmed, by a couple of mavericks: Donald Trump on the right and Bernie Sanders on the left. Both Trump and Sanders are grassroots candidates whose populist messages have taken hold with a surprising groundswell of support completely unexpected by the party operatives and media pundits. Nobody could have predicted this a year ago, let alone when each party's Super PACs began choosing their favorite candidates after the last election.

Both Sanders and Trump garner their support largely from disaffected voters, who are angry at the way the system is set up and the way it leaves them out. According to *The Washington Post*, Trump's followers are "a mix of men and women who are mostly white but not exclusively. Their salaries, education levels, religious beliefs and degree of conservatism run the gamut. Their top worries are terrorism, national

security, the economy and the ballooning national debt.”¹ On the other hand, nearly half of Sander’s supporters are young (many first-time voters)—college-educated, early career young adults frustrated by the income gap, corporate greed, and student debt, and those who lean more to the liberal side on social issues.

What these two disparate groups (“Trumpeters” and “Sandernistas”) have in common is an appeal to a candidate who they view as being prophetic, honest, and forthright—telling it like it is—saying what they say, seeing things as they do about how broken the system is—even though their respective candidates would take the country in entirely different directions. Both campaigns reflect characteristics of past social or political movements which, at the time, were gadflies to the party mainstream or ran on third-party tickets.

Social movements like this gain their popularity by being led by a charismatic figure who focuses on what’s wrong about the current system and marshals a crusade to gain the power to change it or to resist changes that might be anticipated. Populism always pits “the people” against “the elites” and institutions of power, which control the wealth, the political system, and the benefits and advantages of living in that society. It is set up as “the people” versus “the powerbrokers.”

So what we see in 2016 is textbook populism—not something unique to the politics of our time, as many believe. According to political theorist, Margaret Canovan, populist politics is

not ordinary, routine politics. It has the revivalist flavour of a movement, powered by the enthusiasm that draws normally unpolitical people into the political arena...This extra emotional ingredient can turn politics into a campaign to save the country or to bring about a great renewal. Associated with this mood is the tendency for heightened emotions to be focused on a charismatic leader.

¹ Jenna Johnson and Jose DelReal, “Here Who Supports Trump—and Why”, *The Washington Post*, March 3, 2016.

Personalized leadership is a natural corollary of the reaction against politics as usual. Rejecting ossified institutional structures, including bureaucratic layers of organization, populists celebrate both spontaneous action at the grassroots and a close personal tie between leader and followers.²

This is what “The Donald” is all about and it’s pretty much Bernie 101.

Clearly, I’m equating messianic and social movements with populism, which means, then, “messiahs” of a type arise all the time. And I believe they do. Some are good, others not so good. Some are large scale (e.g., national political campaigns), while others are smaller and often limited to a particular specific religious culture, or community concern, or some social cohort, be it defined by a racial, ethnic, gender, age, or similar characteristic. Typically, a charismatic figure embodies the values and aspirations of a particular people and inspires a campaign, like a crusader leading an army. At their best, such movements empower people to make a significant impact on their society and environment. At their worst, these groups can become anti-social, isolated and insular to the point they function much like a cult, with leaders who have authoritative and psychological power over the supporters, with little to hold them in check or accountable to others.

Yet, despite this risk, history’s greatest messianic figures are those who embody the virtues, ideals, and vision of social movements that stand the test of time, often because they represent the fundamental concerns of human welfare and dignity, often because they speak truth to power in their time, and often, sadly, because they are martyred for the very cause they lead (e.g., Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., Oscar Romero, to name a few).

Needless to say, Jesus of Nazareth would have fit right in. As much as our pious traditions and Christian beliefs frame Jesus’ significance entirely

² Quoted in, *Charismatic Leadership and Social Movements: The Revolutionary Power of Ordinary Men and Women*, Jan Willem Stutje, ed., Berghahn Books, 2012, pg. 145.

with divine attributes, in the first century world of his birth, Jesus would be seen more akin to a populist leader and charismatic preacher, who gathered around him those who were disaffected, disenfranchised, and angry at the way the system left them out. He wasn't the party's endorsed candidate for civil or political leadership by any means (at the height of his popularity, he made Sadducees, Herodians, and Pharisees nervous), but his following made him appear to be the people's choice.

The terms we ascribe to him with religious devotion—Son of God, Savior of the world, Lord of all, King of Israel—were not religious titles at all, or even unique to him because of who he was; rather, they were already in vogue in the Mediterranean world as designations for the Roman emperor—titles that even many Jews used to demonstrate their allegiance to Rome. So making reference to this Galilean prophet with such lofty imperial language seemed ridiculous and ironic, if not treasonous. In that context, who was this backwater messianic figure whose followers proclaimed him to be a legitimate rival to Caesar? Even Herod and Pilate barely took this movement seriously.

Yet, as we come to see, this is the crucial question posed by the events of this week we call Holy. Who was this “messianic” figure from Galilee, whose followers proclaimed him as a rival to Caesar? Was he going to stir up rioting in the streets of Jerusalem in the height of the Jewish Passover festival? Would his followers threaten the social order? Would the political parties start to fracture over those who suddenly found Jesus' message compelling, enough to endorse him?

What was Herod going to do about it? Or what about the city's religious and political establishment? Couldn't they come up with a way to take him down before he brought his campaign into the public center and

disrupted this patriotic holiday? Wouldn't his popular uprising simply divide the Jewish nation and put their entire welfare at risk? Jesus may have made his name standing up for the disenfranchised and poor in rural villages and valleys, but it's an entirely different game when he'd be among the elites of Judean society in their home turf—the capital city of Jerusalem!

Thus, this dramatic political, social, and moral confrontation all began with a carefully choreographed entrance, with Jesus' followers parading him up to the city gates, festooning him with palms, praise, and with honor—presenting him like some great political luminary, or like a Roman military commander processing in from victory on the battlefield. Except, instead of a white steed, it was a rather comical scene for most of him riding in on a donkey—a beast of burden, not battle—except for those who discerned it, Jesus was acting out Zechariah's imagery of the Prince of Peace arriving humbly on the foal of a donkey.

In other words, this wasn't innocent fun—it was prophetic street theatre, intended to mock the Roman dignitaries and the establishment's ceremonial pomp and circumstance. It was a deliberate political statement to incite the pilgrims coming into the city for Passover—appealing to their collective pride and deepest desire for divine deliverance. This was their moment to rise up! Jesus was playing the messianic card in ceremonial fashion, and even if no one realized what he was up to, those in the courts of power certainly did. And they would meet the challenge Jesus was orchestrating, so he and his populist campaign would not invoke the ire of *their* Lord to bring down the house and destroy their nation.

Some of the Pharisees who were watching in the crowd took it right to Jesus: “Teacher, order your disciples to stop!” But Jesus, spiritually

prepared for this moment as he was, answered, “I tell you, if these were silent, even the stones would cry out!”

Perhaps, only those who knew their scriptures would know what Jesus meant by that rather cryptic response. In time, maybe only those who witnessed Rome’s eventual destruction of Jerusalem would take it to heart. For Jesus was making a direct reference to the prophet, Habakkuk—an allusion that to this day many scholars and Christian traditions fail to appreciate.

There may be good reason for that, because quoting Habakkuk wasn’t kind to the elites or the establishment of Jerusalem in his day, or to ours. In the second chapter of the prophet’s oracle, where this line was lifted, was a series of five woes directed mainly as complaints against Babylon, though the implications were meant as well for the powers within Jerusalem.

The woes begin with those who cheat or steal from others—they shall have their day of reckoning. So too will those who run roughshod over others who get in their way—those who construct their world to their own advantage without regard to anyone else. Another woe is directed toward those who manipulate others for their personal gain or to shame them. The final woe is aimed toward those who place idolatrous value on money and material wealth.

But the text Jesus referenced was this:

Woe to you who get evil gain for your houses,
Setting your nest on high to be safe from the reach of harm!
You have devised shame for your house
by cutting off many people, you have forfeited your life.
The very stones will cry out from the wall...

In the words of Ralph Smith, an old Baptist scholar from Dallas, Texas:

[This] woe is the doom of the exploiters and extortioners. The term, “to get evil gain” comes from the weaver’s term “to cut off the threads.” It is used several times in the OT in the sense of evil gain... “to make one’s cut.” We still use the

expression “to get one’s cut” in a bad sense. Those who get their wealth by illegal methods feel the need for security. They build their nest on some high, secluded spot guarded by every security device available. But the stone in the walls of the house and the wood in the beams will cry out against them.³

Jesus echoed this same indictment against his contemporaries. The elites of Jerusalem did this very thing. The powerbrokers lived behind the walled city of David that stood high and mighty and apart from where most people lived in their unprotected villages and lives. They ran the system protecting themselves and their own interests, while leaving others to fend for themselves, exposed to endless complications and harm. As Jesus and his messianic movement entered the city gates on the day we honor as Palm Sunday, that would be his prophetic claim upon his own nation.

In my estimation, what Jesus stood for sounds like a word that is being proclaimed in our public square (though rarely by politicians), as much as it was directed toward an ancient audience. As the story is told, this prophetic parade leads us into a week that quickly became apparent would not end well—at least for those who followed the populist messianic campaign of Jesus. That shouldn’t surprise us. The Establishment—the powers that be—don’t like unexpected surprises; they don’t care for mavericks; they will crucify them as quickly as they can. They prefer to have political leaders they control. That’s the way politics works.

But, if you and I are wise and discerning, we will recognize that’s not the way God works. History proves this to be true. For when even the stones cry out for truth and justice, for integrity and honesty, for mercy and compassion, when so many yearn for a future with hope, then no one can avoid the reality that change needs to happen. The injustices are too systemic; the anger is too great! The system isn’t working; the people are

³ Ralph Smith, *Word Biblical Commentary: Micah-Malachi*, Word Books, 1984, pg. 111.

oppressed by too many injustices and burdens. In such a time—a messianic time, someone will always rise up and speak the truth.

And in the end, much like the unfolding drama of Holy Week, the true prophets of social and political change will know their claims will stand the test of time—that even death won't keep down a truly good person or a merciful cause. God will make certain of that. The people who have walked so long in darkness will find their great light and, along with their beloved Messiah, they will certainly, most certainly, rise again.

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