

Hero
#7 in *Images of Jesus*
Dr. D. William McIvor
April 4, 2004 — Palm Sunday

Introduction to the Morning Lesson

Today we look at the final image in our Lenten series on the “Images of Jesus.” As I’ve reflected back on these sermons, what jumped out at me the most is how much we tend to make Jesus in our own image.¹ Even when the images are taken directly from the Bible, we tend to understand them in terms of our own cultural context. Think, for example, of today’s image. I did a Google search on the words “Jesus” and “hero.” That pointed to over 600,000 Internet pages with those two words. One of those pages referred to a book published in 1998 called *Jesus, Hero of Thy Soul*.² The promo for that book said, “All of us yearn for a hero ... someone to spark a flame in our souls, someone to inspire us to live beyond ourselves, someone to help us live up to the potential our Creator has placed within us.”

Now I don’t know if reading that book would help Jesus spark a flame in our souls or not. What’s interesting to me is that the book talks about Jesus as a hero in terms of something very popular in our culture — *self-improvement*. Self-help books sell like hotcakes in our culture, whether it’s Dr. Phil with his mantra of “Get Real, Get Smart, Get Going” or Jesus helping us “live beyond ourselves.” We tend to see Jesus in images that fit our own culture.

So if Jesus is our hero, what kind of hero is he? Is he a self-help guru? Is he, as Benjamin Franklin understood him, a wise man worthy of imitation. Is he a moral teacher as Thomas Jefferson said. President Bush said Jesus was his favorite philosopher. What would we say, especially in terms of the image of hero? Let’s turn to Luke’s Gospel to help us grapple with that question.

Luke 19.28-40 (NRSV)

After he had said this, [Jesus] went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem.

When he had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples, saying, “Go into the village ahead of you, and as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, ‘Why are you untying it?’ just say this, ‘The Lord needs it.’” So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them. As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, “Why are you untying the colt?” They said, “The Lord needs it.” Then they brought it to Jesus; and after throwing their cloaks

¹ Stephen Prothero, *American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003). This is one of the books I turned to frequently in this series. Prothero is chair of the religion department at Boston University. His book doesn’t look at Jesus theologically, biblically, or devotionally. He was interested in writing about Jesus culturally: how has Jesus been seen in our culture over the last 150 years or so, by believers and nonbelievers alike? It made me think more carefully about Jesus than any other book I’ve read for a very long time.

² Jim McGuiggan, *Jesus, Hero of Thy Soul: Impressions Left by the Savior’s Touch* (West Monroe, LA: Howard Publishing, 1998). The page from Howard Publishing also said: “Jesus is the hero in your soul. His awe-inspiring love enables you to reach beyond your limitations and become the person God created you to be. Your heart will soar as you read Jim McGuiggan’s stirring devotional and inspirational stories about everyday men and women who have been touched by the Savior’s hand and who live to reflect his nature. Allow the Rescuer to touch your life — you’ll be forever changed by the impressions left by the Savior’s touch.”

on the colt, they set Jesus on it. As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, saying,

“Blessed is the king
 who comes in the name of the Lord!
 Peace in heaven,
 and glory in the highest heaven!”

Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, order your disciples to stop.” He answered, “I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out.”

Introduction

When Christians think about Jesus entering Jerusalem, we usually mix all the gospel accounts together in our mind and probably picture huge crowds along the lines of some of the movies we have seen (and, no, I’m not going to talk about Mel’s movie). So we have this mental image that all of Jerusalem — tens or even hundreds of thousands — took notice of the Lord entering the city and waved palm branches as they would for a conquering hero. We’ve even come to call this Jesus’ “triumphal entry.”

But that’s not the way Luke remembered the tradition. He spoke only of the “whole multitude of the disciples.” Disciples, not the general populous, noticed Jesus entering Jerusalem and disciples sang his praise. And what kind of hero were they singing about? A teacher and healer? That was his reputation. A savior? Maybe, but I’m not sure they understood what that meant. A king? No doubt. That’s why the Pharisees objected. If Jesus was a conquering hero who was going to change things politically, that would be bad for those already in power. Better to silence all this hero worship before it got out of hand.

But Jesus said you can’t silence it. And here’s the point: even if the disciples had stopped singing, the stones would have shouted joy and praise. God’s praise will happen one way or another and if we’re going to think about Jesus as our hero, we need to keep this in mind. God’s praise will happen, one way or another.

God’s praise will happen

When Jesus said the stones themselves would sing out praise if the disciples were silent, he was speaking symbolically and yet never more truthfully. He was saying that the creation in its very being is a song of praise to God. Stones and trees and mountains and suns and galaxies *in themselves* are a hymn of praise. Only human beings have to think about praising God from whom all blessings flow. The rocks and trees have enough sense in themselves to stand as a witness to the Creator who made them. Only human beings are dumb enough sometimes to not praise. But if humans keep their mouths shut, then the rest of creation will still sing the song.

Remember a few weeks ago when we were teased with a couple of warm days and we thought, *Ah, this nasty winter is over and maybe spring will come early.* Like I say, the weather gods were just teasing us. But on one of those days I went out for a little run. The air was moist and cool. The sun was setting but it was still partially light. Some white/gray clouds scudded along. The whole sky shimmered a bit. Magnificent! And it felt as I started to push along and my heartbeat got faster, that

I was joining with some natural rhythm of praise. The skies and all around were by their very being praising God. That day I had enough sense to join them. I think that's what Jesus was getting at.

Even the rocks have enough sense to praise God. I was curious about how many times the Bible refers to rocks or stones. We might think that rocks would not enter the biblical story very often, but they do. Almost 450 times. God is our rock. The Lord hides us in the cleft of the rock. From the rock flows living water. Stones are piled up so people will ask "what mean these stones?" and the answer given that they remind us that God delivered us. Wise people build their lives on the rock and on the rock Christ builds his church. The stone was rolled away and Christ came forth to bring life to the world. Rocks and stones are strewn all through the Bible giving witness and praise to the power of God.

We live, or course, in a scientific age. Science is incredibly important and the church shouldn't ignore it so. But maybe it's the scientific ethos in which we live that diminishes our praise. We can pick up a rock and think it's just a rock. We classify it: igneous, sedimentary, or metamorphic. In classifying it we think we have described it. But Jesus says even the rocks will sing God's praise if we don't have enough sense to do it. And often human beings don't. For it is only humans who will pick up the simple stone which can witness to the glory of God and use that stone to end another's life.

"Let the one who is without sin, cast the first stone," said Jesus. No human is without sin but we pick up the rocks or insults like rocks and let them fly to do their wicked deeds. Oh, that we could be as wise as the stones. With the whole creation they utter praise of God. Even disciples can silence themselves and refuse to sing God's praise.. But if our lips are silent, the rocks will sing praise.

I realized this again a couple of weeks ago. I don't know about you but I've never been very good about keeping a journal or diary. I do okay for awhile and then there are long lapses. Months can go by without my writing anything. But I've discovered one advantage to this because my journals are pretty short. So when I run across one, it doesn't take too long to read what was happening at some point in my past. Well, even though we've been here since July, at home I'm still shuffling boxes around, throwing things out, and finding things. A couple of weeks ago I found one of my short journals talking about this exact time of year: the Thursday before Palm Sunday in 1989.

It was a memorable week because I had just seven more days to complete my doctoral dissertation. The seminary had imposed an arbitrary deadline because my advisor was going to be somewhere where he couldn't get mail except my mule train or something like that. I was angry about that. Our kids were still home then and my daughter called from school because she needed me to bring something to her which she had forgotten (even though I had reminded her 73 times to not forget). I was angry about that. I wrote down that was angry with my wife Merrie for not helping me more (which certainly wasn't true) and I was angry with my son and he hadn't done anything. Most of all, I was angry with God for not taking care of things better. Didn't he know how busy I was? It was, after all, the week before Holy Week and I was down here trying to do his work and why wasn't he helping me more! My journal reminded me of how angry I was.

And the sweet, divine irony was that all this anger was bubbling out of me on the day that I had to finish the bulletin for the special **praise** service we were having on Palm Sunday and finish my sermon which was all about **praise**.

I wrote down how God laughs at us. Certainly at me at least. I wrote down what I learned from having to go from the anger of a lousy Thursday to dealing with a service and a sermon about praise. What I wrote down is how impossible it is to praise when filled with anger. What I wrote down was the realization that even before I finished the bulletin, even before I finished the sermon, even before I stopped being angry, I was glad that my week ended with sisters and brothers in the sanctuary to worship. Worship is not just praise but it is always at least praise, and that's where our week ends. I know Sunday is the first day of the week but I think for most of us, especially preachers, Sunday ends the week that begins on Monday. What I wrote down is how glad I am that my weeks end in praise.

I cannot praise if I'm angry. So worship means that I must get past my anger. And when I do and when I praise, I show that I have at least as much good sense as a rock and that I, too, can let my very being give praise and honor to my God — Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer.

Conclusion

So think now of waving our palm branches of praise to Jesus Christ our hero. What kind of hero is he? Is he "One of Us"? That was the first image we looked at. Is he "Superstar" or "Mother" or "Servant" or "Brother" or "King" or some other kind of "Hero"? Yes, Jesus is all these images and more. But notice where our hero points. He points to the rocks which in their very being stand in praise to God. Jesus says to disciples, "Be at least as smart as the rocks for God's praise *will* happen."

In other words, our Hero points to what is expressed in the first question of the Westminster Catechism, albeit in male-specific terms. The catechism asks, "What is the chief end of man?" "Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever."³ Friends, when we glorify God, when we praise God, the enjoyment of God will follow as naturally as the dawn follows the night. So may we follow Jesus our Hero and let our very beings exist in praise to God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, world without end. Amen

³ *The Book of Confessions*, The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Part 1 (Louisville: Office of the General Assembly, 1999) 7.001.