

## The Stones Would Shout Out

Readings: Excerpt of a letter from Michael Servetus to Johannes Oecampadius  
'Demeter's Prayer for Hades' by Rita Dove  
'A Prayer for Palm Sunday' by Roger Cowan

I have two old stories to offer you this morning. Two stories of prophets. Two stories of prophets who were devoted to truth as they understood it. Two stories of prophets entering the cities where they would meet their deaths. Two stories, weirdly, of prophets making reference to talking stones, stones that would proclaim the truth if human voices fell silent.

The first story is the story of Palm Sunday. We join with many in the Christian tradition in telling this story of the prophet Jesus today. In my favorite version of the story, the one told in the Book of Luke, there are no palms at all. Jesus enters the city of Jerusalem riding on a colt, accompanied by many of his followers. The followers are shouting joyfully and spreading their cloaks in the road so the colt carrying Jesus does not walk on the bare ground. This is a sign of respect.

As the story goes, Jesus is off to face people who disagree with him. Jesus is certain that he will die, but he is willing to die. He was willing to die for his truth, a truth that would not let him go. He believed in reform and love and justice and inclusion and forgiveness. He healed the sick and welcomed the outcast. And this challenged the Roman authorities of his day and led to his death. A Jesus enters Jerusalem, he is surrounded by a loud, raucous, crowd – and some of the religious leaders in the crowd call on Jesus to keep his people quiet. They say, "Teacher, order your people to stop." Jesus responds, "I tell you, if these [people] were silent, the stones would shout out." Jesus believes that the truth of his ministry is so powerful that stones would shout out the truth if human voices fall silent.

This story is being read by many people in many churches this morning, this Palm Sunday morning. And we join them because this is our story too. Our Unitarian and Universalist roots can be traced to Jesus and his ministry. His message inspired the founders of our faith. We are heirs to the dissenting tradition of Christianity with roots in the radical reformation. Stories of Jesus belong to us too. I know those of us gathered here have different relationships to Jesus and the stories about him. Some of us believe he is divine. Others regard him as a wise teacher. Some of us have had experiences that make it painful to hear about Jesus, as his name has been invoked in ways that caused us pain. Each of us hold a unique and precious truth about this – as we do about so many other things. And we have created a community where there is room for all of us.

In addition to the stories in the Bible, our tradition includes the stories that are uniquely ours as Unitarian Universalists. My second story of a prophet is one of those.

About fifteen hundred years after Jesus entered Jerusalem, another man stood on the outskirts of a city, a city where he knew no good would come to him. Michael Servetus was a Spaniard.<sup>1</sup> And if you're thinking that Michael Servetus doesn't sound like a very Spanish name, you're right. His name at birth was Miguel Serveto. He was born in 1511 in the early decades of the Spanish Inquisition. In that era, names were commonly made to sound more Latin when they were written and Servetus follows the pattern.

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<sup>1</sup> My main source on Servetus is Wilbur, Earl Morse. *A History of Unitarianism: Socinianism and Its Antecedents*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1945.

Miguel or Michael, Serveto or Servetus or however we want to refer to him was, by all accounts, brilliant. He was a lawyer, a physician and a theologian. And he didn't just have all of these professions, he excelled at them. He served as physician to an archbishop. He was the first European to write about how blood is oxygenated in human lungs. Since he did this in a theological text – as part of an extended metaphor about the holy spirit – no other physicians read it and it was a few decades before someone else published about this and got all the credit. He also wrote widely respected texts on geology and astrology, which was considered one of the sciences then.

And, as can be the case with brilliant people, he wasn't always patient with people who weren't as quick-thinking as he was. Perhaps you know people like that in your life? People who are widely and vastly knowledgeable, but aren't very patient? People who believe they understand the whole truth and are unwilling to listen to others' views? While it's hard to fully suss out someone's personality across the centuries, it seems like Servetus was like that. But we're getting ahead of ourselves. For Servetus's story to make sense, we need to know more of the historical context.

In the centuries before Servetus's birth, the land now known as Spain was the most religiously tolerant place in Europe. Jews, Christians, and Muslims lived together relatively peacefully. But by Servetus's time, Jews and Muslims had been forced out of Spain. Many choose to convert to Christianity in order to stay in their native land. The Spanish Inquisition, led by leaders of the Catholic Church, persecuted people who had outwardly converted, but still practiced their original faith in private. Many were tortured and burned at the stake because others thought they were not sufficiently Christian.

Michael Servetus saw that the trinity was a major obstacle for these newly converted Christians. How could God the father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit be three separate persons, but one God?

So Servetus, a fifteen-year-old law student at the time, started reading the Bible with his friends. He wanted to discover what it said about the Trinity. Not much. Servetus later wrote, 'To me, not only the syllables but all the letters from the mouths of babes, even the very stones themselves, cry out that there is one God, the father. Not one word is found in the Bible about the trinity.'<sup>2</sup> There's a prophet talking about stones shouting the truth again. Servetus believed that the truth of his understanding is so powerful that stones would shout out the truth if human voices fall silent.

Servetus believes in the unity of God. This belief made him one of the first modern Unitarians.

It's important to name that Servetus's truth, his belief in the unity of God, doesn't quite match the Unitarian ideas that evolved over the centuries. Servetus believed in the oneness of God and that everything was God. Servetus believed there was nothing that God was not, nowhere that God was not. Every person, every animal, every object, even the devil—because Servetus believed in the devil—all of that is God. This idea of God in everything, everything in God is part of many earth-centered traditions. The theological word for this kind of understanding of God is pantheism.

Servetus also revered Jesus as the eternal son of God and made him the focus of his devotional life. He even called out to Jesus when he was dying, but again I'm getting ahead of myself in this story.

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Bainton, Roland H., *Hunted Heretic: The Life and Death of Michael Servetus*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1960, p. 24

Servetus, with his unitarian pantheism, thought he had solved the problem of the Inquisition and religious conflict. Everyone should just stop believing in the Trinity. God is God; Jesus is not God. "If everyone just agrees with me," he must have thought to himself, "we can stop the Inquisition and the religious conflict sweeping Europe and do something else." He wrote books about this idea and letters to religious authorities in Spain, France, and Switzerland, including John Calvin, the founder of the Reformed tradition who was the civil and religious leader of Geneva at this time. Here he was, still a teenager, writing to religious authorities to tell them that they are wrong and he is right and if they would just study the Bible and think harder, they would agree with him about not only the Trinity, but on whether baptism should happen to adults or children and on how salvation happens. As you might imagine, that did not go over well.

Servetus did not end the Inquisition; he was called a heretic. Charges were brought against him by the Catholic Inquisitors. In an era when the Catholic Church and the newly-forming Protestant Churches agreed on very little, they agreed on their hatred for Servetus's teachings. The authorities in both communities burned his writings and wanted to put him on trial. There is some speculation that the Catholics and Protestants passed evidence against Servetus back and forth between themselves – in a time when they cooperated on very very little. Servetus spent decades in hiding, using fake names. During this time, he practiced medicine and wrote his books on non-religious topics. But his idea—his unitarian idea—would not let him go. He would publish under new names and write new letters. And be newly persecuted. And then, he would choose a new name, move to a new city, and begin this cycle all over again. One particularly dramatic episode involved him escaping from jail where he had been held by a French inquisitor in the middle of the night in his pajamas.

After that pajama-clad escape, Servetus sought refuge in Italy, where a few others shared his Unitarian idea, where he thought he would be safe. On his way, he went to Geneva, home of John Calvin who had become, over the decades, one of Servetus's chief adversaries. I can picture Servetus, standing outside Geneva, pondering his next move. There were no crowds to praise him. He did not have disciples to accompany him, find him a colt, or throw cloaks across his path. He had only stones and trees. They witnessed a man deciding what to do with his idea, his truth that would not let him go. He could have traveled another route to safety in Italy, but he chose Geneva. No one knows why. I believe he had no choice. His truth compelled him. He had to convince Calvin of the Unitarian position.

Shortly after Servetus arrived in Geneva, Sunday came. Servetus went to John Calvin's Church to hear him preach. He was recognized, arrested, and thrown in jail. I bet you can guess how this story ends. Had Calvin accepted the Unitarian idea, this room would probably be a bit more crowded today. Perhaps there would be a Servetus College up the road in Grand Rapids. Calvin had Servetus executed, burned at the stake. Servetus's pleas for tolerance in belief—like the one I read earlier—went unheard. Servetus became one of the first of many Unitarian martyrs. Servetus and Jesus are two of the many who died so we can believe.

I don't tell these two old stories of courageous prophets and their use of talking stones as a rhetorical device to encourage you to take your truth and go marching into a modern Jerusalem or Geneva, prepared to confront your own personal Calvin. We are not all called to be martyrs and that is a very very good thing. But it is our responsibility to know the stories of those who died for our beliefs. In our radical Christian roots, there are many many stories like this – people who gave their lives for their truth. If we don't know these stories, we are missing so much; we become walls without foundations, trees without roots.

We know so much has changed in the centuries since Servetus was burned at Geneva. Protestantism, which was in its early days in the time of Servetus, has become a major part of the Christian tradition. John Calvin's teachings birthed the Reformed tradition, which includes the Reformed and Presbyterian churches. Servetus' ideas influenced a number of radical Protestants including early Unitarians, many of whom we claim as our spiritual ancestors.

We know that religious difference is rarely a matter of life and death now, at least in this part of the world. And that has to do with Servetus as well. His death horrified many. Many people who did not agree with anything he wrote still believed that it was wrong for him to die for those beliefs. Sebastian Castellio was a church leader in Basel who spoke for many when he wrote to John Calvin following the death of Servetus, "To seek truth and to utter what one believes to be true can never be a crime. No one must be forced to accept a conviction. Conviction is free."<sup>3</sup>

In a later letter to Calvin, he wrote, "What do we really mean by the term "heretic"? Whom are we entitled to call a heretic, without being unjust? I do not believe that all those termed heretics are really such. When I reflect on what a heretic really is, I can find no other criterion than that we are all heretics in the eyes of those who do not share our views.

We can live together peacefully only when we control our intolerance. Even though there will always be differences of opinion from time to time, we can at any rate come to general understandings, can love one another, and can enter the bonds of peace."<sup>4</sup>

We know that religious persecution is not some relic of the early modern era. We know religious persecution is still alive in our world – there are places where people are put to death on blasphemy charges and that our current administration is trying it's hardest to institute a religious test for traveling to this country. And yet many of us are able to come to general understandings, love one another, and enter the bonds of peace in a way that would have been inconceivable five centuries ago. We are able to hold fast to our truths – and recognize that others disagree with us and not try to kill them over it.

I know this in my life and I know this in the life of our congregation. I know this in my life, in part, because of my wedding. Many of you know my husband Brian attends Saint Luke's Episcopal Church. He was recently elected to serve on their board. When we got married five and half years ago, he was Roman Catholic. We even went through Catholic marriage preparation, which was a fascinating cultural experience – and played a big role in his decision to leave that church. Our officiant was a dear friend, a Presbyterian minister –and, though we had no way of knowing that this was a relevant detail at the time, a native of Kalamazoo. So that day, it was a Presbyterian officiating a marriage between a Catholic and a Unitarian Universalist. I think we made Calvin, Servetus and the Catholic inquisitors all roll over in their graves that day. Even though there will always be differences of opinions... we can come to general understandings and love one another.

And this coming to general understandings is not just a story of my life, it is a story of People's Church's life. We know that our beliefs matter, we also know how to identify where our beliefs and values overlap to form alliances and do good and important work in the world. We know in ways Servetus didn't know

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<sup>3</sup> Schulman, J. Frank. 'Unitarianism Begins: II. Sebastian Castellio.' *Unitarian Universalist Fellowships of Fairbanks*. 2003. Retrieved from [http://www.uuff.org/old/fs\\_castellio.shtml](http://www.uuff.org/old/fs_castellio.shtml)

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

or couldn't know, that beginning a relationship by telling someone that there wrong rarely turns out well. In our work with ISAAC, a coalition of congregations and other community partners, we join with groups that we do not agree with about everything, but we agree about many things. We come to general understandings and work together to make our community more just and more peaceful. And in our work to support the Altyara family from Syria make a life in Kalamazoo, we partnered with the refugee program of Bethany Christian Services, a social service agency with roots in the Reformed tradition. It is a beautiful thing that we are not burning one another at the stake, but partnering in the works of love which none of us can accomplish alone.

“Even though there will always be differences of opinion from time to time, we can at any rate come to general understandings, can love one another, and can enter the bonds of peace.”

May it be so. May we make it so. Amen.