

Psalms & Palms

Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29 Give thanks to the LORD because he is good, because his faithful love lasts forever.

² Let Israel say it: "God's faithful love lasts forever!" ³ Let the house of Aaron say it: "God's faithful love lasts forever!" ⁴ Let those who honor the LORD say it: "God's faithful love lasts forever!"

⁵ In tight circumstances, I cried out to the LORD. The LORD answered me with wide-open spaces.

⁶ The LORD is for me--I won't be afraid. What can anyone do to me? ⁷ The LORD is for me--as my helper. I look in victory on those who hate me. ⁸ It's far better to take refuge in the LORD than to trust any human. ⁹ It's far better to take refuge in the LORD than to trust any human leader. ¹⁰ All the nations surrounded me, but I cut them down in the LORD's name. ¹¹ Yes, they surrounded me on every single side, but I cut them down in the LORD's name. ¹² They surrounded me like bees, but they were extinguished like burning thorns. I cut them down in the LORD's name!

¹³ I was pushed so hard I nearly died, but the LORD helped me. ¹⁴ The LORD was my strength and protection; he was my saving help! ¹⁵ The sounds of joyful songs and deliverance are heard in the tents of the righteous: "The LORD's strong hand is victorious!" ¹⁶ The LORD's strong hand is ready to strike! The LORD's strong hand is victorious!" ¹⁷ I won't die--no, I will live and declare what the LORD has done. ¹⁸ Yes, the LORD definitely disciplined me, but he didn't hand me over to death. (Ps 118:5-18 CEB)

¹⁹ Open the gates of righteousness for me so I can come in and give thanks to the LORD! ²⁰ This is the LORD's gate; those who are righteous enter through it. ²¹ I thank you because you answered me, because you were my saving help. ²² The stone rejected by the builders is now the main foundation stone! ²³ This has happened because of the LORD; it is astounding in our sight! ²⁴ This is the day the LORD acted; we will rejoice and celebrate in it! ²⁵ LORD, please save us! LORD, please let us succeed!

²⁶ The one who enters in the LORD's name is blessed; we bless all of you from the LORD's house.

²⁷ The LORD is God! He has shined a light on us! So lead the festival offering with ropes all the way to the horns of the altar. ²⁸ You are my God--I will give thanks to you! You are my God--I will lift you up high!

²⁹ Give thanks to the LORD because he is good, because his faithful love lasts forever.

John 12:12-16 ¹² The next day the great crowd that had come for the festival heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. ¹³ They took palm branches and went out to meet him. They shouted, "Hosanna! Blessings on the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessings on the King of Israel!" ¹⁴ Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it, just as it is written, ¹⁵ Don't be afraid, Daughter Zion. Look! Your king is coming, sitting on a donkey's colt. ¹⁶ His disciples didn't understand these things at first. After he was glorified, they remembered that these things had been written about him and that they had done these things to him.

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Psalm 118 is the most frequently quoted psalm in the New Testament. It begins with four proclamations that God's steadfast love endures forever and ends with that same statement. The psalmist wants to be sure that we hear that God's love is steadfast and permanent. The Hebrew word translated as steadfast love is *hesed*, a word rich in meaning. It is love expressed in mercy and goodness, love that is characterized by fidelity, an enduring, everlasting love. It is unshakeable. It is permanent. This is in stark contrast to the pagan gods of antiquity. They were seen as stern, angry, fearsome gods who were detached from the concerns and welfare of human life. Our ancient ancestors imagined gods who were like us – only more so! And we have painted the Holy One of Israel in much the same way, describing God as angry, mathematically keeping score, weighing each little bad deed on the scales of justice, and eager to extract retribution. We have a long history of making both little “g” gods and the capital “g” God in our own image. But this psalm emphatically says that we are loved and cared for unconditionally. If we could only stop picturing God as a bigger and mightier

version of us, we would be able to hear how remarkably and dramatically different God is, this God who refuses to stop loving us!

The psalmist goes on to describe how we can appropriately respond with wholehearted thanksgiving. In our secular world, our thanksgiving is more a matter of self-congratulation – we just go through the motions of gratitude and thank the “nice God” who gives us our stuff. But verse 19 describes the worshippers standing outside the gates of the temple and shouting enthusiastically, “Open the gates of righteousness for me so I can come in and give thanks to the LORD!” What would it be like for contemporary churchgoers to stand outside, calling for the doors to be opened, and then to enter together. Next Sunday, as is our custom in recent years, we will gather around the flower covered cross in the front yard, offer prayer, and be led as a congregation into the sanctuary by one of our ruling elders.

Our other scripture this morning is the story of Jesus’ arrival in Jerusalem for Passover. All four gospel writers tell about this event but the text for today is from the gospel according to John. In the previous chapter, Jesus had raised his friend Lazarus from the grave. Since Lazarus had been dead for three days, this created quite a stir among the people. The religious leaders were concerned and said, “If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation.” (John 11:48 NRS) Jesus left the area for some period of time, but as today’s text begins, Jesus has returned to Bethany, home of Lazarus and his sisters, and which was a short distance from Jerusalem. As word of his return spread, the crowd grew and became very excited. All four gospel accounts tell us that the crowd began to shout a direct quote from Psalm 118. “Hosanna! Blessings on the one who comes in the name of the Lord!” “Hosanna” means “save now!” By shouting these phrases, the crowd is welcoming Jesus like a victorious king and appealing to him to save them. They even shout their expectation clearly, calling Jesus “the king of Israel!” They are so tired of Roman oppression and they long for and expect God’s anointed king to come set things right. Surely the one who raised Lazarus from the dead after three days in the grave will work wonders and save his people from the Roman boot heel that grinds them down. Just as the Maccabees threw out the Greeks, surely Jesus will get rid of the Romans.

John’s account is unique in several ways. Only John specifies that this is on Sunday and only John specifies that palm branches were laid on the path. Ever since the Maccabees threw the Greeks out of Palestine, palm branches have been symbols of national triumph and victory. So, in words and actions, the crowd expresses their understanding of who and what Jesus is.

This is not the first time that the people had sought to make Jesus king. John tells us in chapter six that Jesus fed the five thousand and, ¹⁴ When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, “This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world.” ¹⁵ When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself.” (John 6:14-15 NRS) The crowd misunderstood the nature and purpose of Jesus’ power. And the crowd does so again on Palm Sunday. But this time Jesus doesn’t escape into the mountains.

Bethany was close to Jerusalem. Like many other times in the past, Jesus could easily walk to the city. There was no need for a donkey to carry him. In John’s account, after the acclamation of the crowd, Jesus found a young donkey to ride, which was very important symbolically.

Zechariah 9:9 reads, “⁹ Rejoice heart and soul, daughter of Zion! Shout for joy, daughter of Jerusalem! Look, your king is approaching, he is vindicated and victorious, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” So far, Jesus’ actions seem to

confirm the understanding of the crowd. But the passage in Zechariah continues, “¹⁰ He will banish chariots from Ephraim and horses from Jerusalem; the bow of war will be banished. He will proclaim peace to the nations, his empire will stretch from sea to sea, from the River to the limits of the earth. (NJB) Jesus is symbolically affirming that he isn’t the warrior king the crowd expects, but the kind of king that Zechariah describes – a new type of king, no proud trappings of royalty, no trumpets, no pomp and circumstance, one who banishes the instruments of war, the war horses, and the weapons.

The crowd doesn’t get it. They continue to misunderstand who Jesus is because they’re so focused on who they want him to be. And John tells us that the disciples didn’t understand either. Despite having lived with Jesus, having walked the hills and valleys of Palestine with him, and having heard him teaching his message many times in many places, they, too, misunderstood. John says that it was only when Jesus was with them after his resurrection, only after they looked back and reflected on all that Jesus taught and all that had happened, only then did they understand.

We have the same problem. There’s the Jesus we want, but sometimes that isn’t who Jesus is. We say that we love the truth and we’re eager for the coming of our Lord’s will on earth. But often the truth is right in front of us. We fail to recognize it, or we don’t like the look of it, and want nothing to do with it. Like the crowd along the path to Jerusalem, we’d like for Jesus to fix our problems and do it in the manner that we think best. Like the first disciples, we can fail to understand Jesus unless we look at the whole picture. We need to hear him as the Jew he was, as the prophet he was, as the Holy Spirit infused Son he was. We need to hear what he taught and learn from how he lived.

When we cling to a few favorite passages, our understanding is incomplete at best and often skewed as well. We love to quote John 3:16, “¹⁶ God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him won’t perish but will have eternal life.” But if that’s all we know, then we can easily misunderstand, because “¹⁷ God didn’t send his Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through him.” It’s important to know that the point isn’t to judge and condemn, but to love and save us.

Palm Sunday doesn’t celebrate a victory march or yet one more parade; it’s a moment for reflection on Jesus’ identity, and we have to reflect on the whole story. Sometimes we really don’t want a servant leader; much less do we want to lead by serving others. And sometimes we want peace through victory, rather than victory through peace. Like that Sunday on the trail to Jerusalem, Jesus won’t be used for our purposes. Instead, we are called to serve his purposes. Amen.

God’s faithful love lasts forever.
Respond with enthusiastic thanksgiving.
Don’t try to make Jesus who you want.
Rather, mold yourself to be who he wants.