

Bellaire Community United Methodist Church

April 2, 2017

## **“Thank You, Thank You, Thank You”**

*Series of Psalms (Lent) – part 5*

*Psalm 118:15-28*

You are in the right place this morning. Take a good look around you – go on – because you are surrounded by people who are here to love and worship God together, and love and encourage each other. I cannot think of a better place to be than in church on Sunday morning. You might think you are here by accident. You might have needed three cups of coffee just to make it out the door today. That’s OK, because God sees you just as you are right now, and your presence here makes a difference. This sermon is all about thankfulness, so let me just start by simply saying, thanks for coming. I am honored by your presence.

Would you please join me in prayer? And if you are comfortable doing so, stretch out your hands as a sign to God that you are ready to receive the good news He has for you.

Lord Almighty, Author of Light and Salvation, thank you for your love and mercy. We are gathered as the Body of Christ, the church, to worship you and adore you, to say thank you for all you have done to save us. As we continue this journey through Lent to Easter, guide us by your Holy Spirit to be witnesses of the greatest love story the world has ever known. Show us again the greatness of your salvation in Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. We love you, O God. Amen.

If there were such a thing as liturgical police, I’d be in jail right now. Today, we are celebrating Palm Sunday, which according to the calendar is actually next week, one week before Easter. This is not an oversight, nor a sign that your pastor is losing his mind. It’s part of a bigger plan to see the whole Easter story.

Not too long ago, the entire week before Easter had its own schedule. Palm Sunday was followed by a bunch of Holy Days – Holy Wednesday, Holy Thursday, Holy Friday, Holy Saturday, and of course, Easter Sunday. Apparently there were too many “holies”, so a few days had other names - Spy Wednesday (yes, that’s a thing), Maundy Thursday, and Good Friday.

But we live in a day and age when mid-week services are not common, so to go straight from Palm Sunday to Easter Sunday would essentially miss the whole story of the Passion of Christ. Yes, there is a Community Good Friday Service at Church of the Hills, but not everyone can make it. So I followed a new trend to celebrate “Passion” Sunday one week before Easter, and Palm Sunday Sunday two weeks prior, so as not to skip it.

Some of you are probably wondering, if this is Palm Sunday, why did we read Psalm 118? Is it just because palm rhymes with psalm? No, actually, Psalm 118 is where we find the verses that the people shouted as Jesus entered Jerusalem. But I’m getting ahead of myself. Let’s start at the beginning.

The past few weeks we have been examining the psalms as a way to move us through Lent. With each psalm, we have found a connection to the Easter story. Psalms cover a wide range of emotions – joy, sorrow, grief, anger, and gratefulness. These are the songs Jesus sang, the prayers Jesus prayed, and I believe they help give voice to our prayers, as well.

Psalm 118 is a victory psalm of thanksgiving. It really describes a parade. It’s been a while since I’ve been part of a victory parade. The last one I can remember is the 1996 Parade of Roses. It was sort of a victory parade for us, because our football team had won a lot of games. But that’s not really the image painted by this psalm. I think it closer resembles this. **[3 Pictures of WWII victory**

**parades New York City and Moscow, 1945]** These pictures are from the victory parades at the end of World War II in New York and Moscow.

Have you had a moment like that? Have you wanted to shout joyfully? Have you ever been so grateful that you just wanted to run outside and yell “Thank You” to the heavens? Maybe you have, but then again, maybe you have not. I want to speak to those especially who have not. Look at how happy these people are. Do you long for that kind of celebration? Don’t you want to join those people? **[Picture of Jesus on a donkey]** What about the crowd that followed Jesus into Jerusalem? Do you wish you were so filled with joy and thanksgiving that you were shouting, “Hosanna”?

I know I do. I want to feel that joy and gratitude. That’s why I chose this psalm today. Psalm 118 is a psalm of thanksgiving. But you need to hear the other part of the story as well.

(Read Luke 19:28-40)

<sup>28</sup>After Jesus had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem.<sup>29</sup>As he approached Bethphage and Bethany at the hill called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples, saying to them, <sup>30</sup>“Go to the village ahead of you, and as you enter it, you will find a colt tied there, which no one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here. <sup>31</sup>If anyone asks you, ‘Why are you untying it?’ say, ‘The Lord needs it.’”

<sup>32</sup>Those who were sent ahead went and found it just as he had told them. <sup>33</sup>As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, “Why are you untying the colt?”

<sup>34</sup>They replied, “The Lord needs it.”

<sup>35</sup>They brought it to Jesus, threw their cloaks on the colt and put Jesus on it. <sup>36</sup>As he went along, people spread their cloaks on the road.

<sup>37</sup>When he came near the place where the road goes down the Mount of Olives, the whole crowd of disciples began joyfully to praise God in loud voices for all the miracles they had seen:

<sup>38</sup>“Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!”<sup>[b]</sup>

“Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!”

<sup>39</sup>Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Jesus, “Teacher, rebuke your disciples!”

<sup>40</sup>“I tell you,” he replied, “if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out.”

If you look closely, you notice that the people were shouting the words from Psalm 118. They were drawing comparisons between Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem and this victory psalm of thanksgiving. Let’s look closer to see what they saw.

I did not read Psalm 118 in its entirety this morning, but you can see for yourself, this is a song for giving thanks to God. It starts in the very first verse, our memory verse, which we also sang this morning. “Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his love endures forever.” (118:1) This chant is a response by the people. There were to echo it back to whoever was leading this worship.

Skip ahead to verse 15, where we started this morning, and you will see the people were celebrating victory in battle. They were shouting joyfully. They were giving full credit to God. In verses 17 and 18, the author says he was near death. He expresses thanks that God had disciplined him. Have you ever been thankful for discipline? Are you glad that your parents spanked you? Did you say thanks for taking away the car keys, or grounding you? Did you thank your teachers when they gave you a detention or extra work? Probably not, but in this case, the psalmist is telling us, it was a good thing that God disciplined him. It’s unusual, and as we continue, we will see it’s not the only unusual thing about this psalm.

The focal point of this psalm verse 22. “The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.” That line is followed by a grateful exclamation in verse 24: “The Lord has done it this very day; let us rejoice today and be glad.” You might recognize the NRSV translation better. “This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.”

There is an element of surprise. Something that was overlooked became the very thing that saved them. Who was the stone the builders rejected? For the psalmist, it might have been a prince or king, some military leader who rose from humble beginnings. The authors of the New Testament have a different idea, though. All four gospels quote Jesus applying these verses to himself. Jesus was the stone the builders rejected. The Jewish leaders were looking for a great prophet to arise who would restore full obedience to God’s law. The people were looking for a powerful military leader who would break the rule of the Romans. They were all looking for powerful, mighty, proud leaders. They didn’t expect a simple Jewish rabbi from the backwater town of Nazareth to bring their salvation. But Jesus knew that this was why he had come. He was that stone. He became the cornerstone, the most important stone in the foundation, from which all others are measured.

Salvation is surprising, and it awakens (or it should awaken) a wellspring of gratefulness that has us shouting in the streets, “Lord, we praise you!” The disciples and the people who followed Jesus into Jerusalem saw this. They experienced it. They were filled with joy. They shouted, “Hosanna! God save us!” “God, grant us success!” “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!”

Can I be honest with you? We don't see this type of celebration as often as we should. And that bothers me. Why is it?

It starts with a simple reason. We overlook Jesus. This world, for the large part, rejects that Jesus is the Son of the Living God and the only way to the Father. I know that, and that is why I bend my every effort to helping the church proclaim this truth. But there is more. The reason we don't have these Palm Sunday parades is because we don't credit God with the victory. When we overcome something, we tend to say that it was really luck or coincidence. It was our own skill, talent, or wisdom that provided the victory. We don't celebrate with palm waving because we have stolen the credit from God.

Last week, we talked about confidence, how we should be confident in God's salvation, not our own power. We should never rest on our laurels. God doesn't save us because we are good enough, strong enough, handsome or smart enough. God saves us because we cannot save ourselves, and He loves us.

Sometimes we have the wrong image of what victory looks like. We envision a different kind of victory than what God has in mind for us. It was the same thing in Jesus' time. The people had their differing views of the Messiah.

But the story of Palm Sunday, and of Easter in general, is that salvation through Jesus should surprise us. We should be amazed that we have victory over sin. We should be awed that God redeems us. We should be paradoxically thankful that God even disciplines us by letting us feel the consequences of our sin. Frankly, that's not a victory people want to hear about. But talk to a recovered alcoholic. Talk to someone whose life was so down, they thought they'd never recover. They will say that it was only the grace of Jesus Christ that

saved them, because nothing else could. They say, like I do, “I’m thankful for the valley I entered, because Jesus brought me to the mountain top.”

Thankfulness escapes us when we look for the wrong type of victory.

“God, make me rich so I can get out of debt.”

Instead of, “God teach me to be a generous person with the gifts you have given me.”

Or, “God, get me out of this relationship.”

Instead of, “God, if it is at all possible, help me reconcile, and live according to the example set by your Son, Jesus.”

The psalmist knew that God should be thanked for the victory – not the army, and not the king. All thankfulness flows through God.

So what kind of victory are you looking for? Is it driven by human standards? Money, fame, numerical growth? Don’t get me wrong. God can grant us financial and material success. But that’s not victory in and of itself. More often, God tests us to see what our attitude is in any circumstance, and whether or not we thank him. We truly know victory and gratitude when we can say, like the Apostle Paul in Philippians 4:11 & 13, “I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances....I can do all things through [Christ] who gives me strength.”

We should all be grateful to God for saving us. Praising God is a way of saying thanks for what He has done and what He will do.

So how thankful are you today? The attitude of gratitude should permeate the church. We should recognize that the victory we have is salvation from sins, given only through the redeeming blood of Jesus Christ shed on the cross. We should be so grateful, we should never stop smiling. We should be free to lift our

voice and pray, sing, and shout about God's goodness. "His love endures forever!" We should be surprised that there is nothing like the salvation of Jesus Christ. It is truly amazing grace.

"Please" and "thank you" are the two most important words in any language. That includes the language of faith. How are you practicing your thankfulness?

I used to pick on the crowds for deserting Jesus so quickly, then I realized we are all like them. Instead of looking ahead too far (to the passion and the cross), we should take this moment of Palm Sunday for what it is – a reminder to give thanks in all circumstances, to lift up our voices with all creation and thank God for the gift of salvation. That's truly what Palm Sunday is about.

### Memory verse

Psalm 118:1 – "Give thanks to the Lord, for He is good; His love endures forever."

### Reflection questions

1. How confident are you in our own abilities? What is your greatest strength?
2. What is your current greatest fear? How do you face it?
3. Do you have a fear of death? What does Jesus' resurrection say about the power of death over us?
4. What would it mean for you to have complete confidence in God? What would this look like in your life? What practical steps can you take to show Jesus your confidence in him alone?