

Sermon Text for April 9, 2017

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Psalm 118: 1-2, Matthew 21: 1-11

“Give Thanks to the Lord”

Palm Sunday is a celebration. We are taking a break from Romans today because of this celebration and so we can focus on the Scripture that speaks to the celebration that took place nearly 2000 years ago in Jerusalem. Have you ever stopped to think about the fact that you are part of something big, that you are playing a part in shaping history? You are today a part of something that people for the last 185 years here in this church have celebrated right here in this sanctuary. Think of the thousands of people who have come here over the years. This is the 185th sermon on Palm Sunday that this church has witnessed and that this church has heard.

Each year it is different even if the Scripture remains the same. Some years the pastor focuses on the donkey, other years on the arrangements that took place to prepare everything for Jesus. But I'm a people person. For me there is no more important aspect of life than the relationships that we have with God and the relationships that we have with each other. Jesus came into Jerusalem to reconcile us to God, to bring us closer. We still struggle in trying to figure out how do we have relationships with each other as God would want, but we keep trying.

Both of our Scriptures today, Psalm 118 and our Matthew Scripture, go hand in hand and provide one common theme for us today this Palm Sunday. At the core of our relationship with God and with each other is the command to give thanks. Just give thanks. Let's learn how to do that today so then hopefully we can take that lesson out of these doors and let our lives reflect that thanks.

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The basic story for Palm Sunday is that of a pilgrimage. Christianity, at least Protestant Christianity doesn't have a tradition of pilgrimages such as Muslims who go to Mecca or the Jewish faith which sees Jerusalem as a pilgrimage site and its primary location. The last mission trip to Italy our group was treated to a procession where the streets were filled with people and bands and a very large statue of Mary. We were right in the middle of a celebration as the people of the town started in one spot and ended up

back at church. We don't have that in our tradition so it is foreign to us to hear about and try to understand the concept of a pilgrimage.

Every year Jesus and his disciples had to find themselves in Jerusalem around the time of Passover. It happened every year. No matter what was going on in their lives, as a Jew living in Palestine you had to go to the temple. Sometimes it would take you weeks to get there. We know the roads that were used were not always safe. Remember the story of the good Samaritan and how he came upon someone on the road who had been attacked and left to die? That's why people traveled in groups, like Jesus' family when he was 12. When Mary and Joseph had to turn around and head back to Jerusalem after they discovered that he was not with them, they were taking their lives in their hands traveling just the two of them.

So as a pilgrim arriving in Jerusalem for Passover after a long and arduous and dangerous journey, you just want to celebrate. You want to give thanks to the Lord. You want to say the words of Psalm 121 which is a psalm written for pilgrims as they arrive in Jerusalem and look up the hillside to see the presence of the temple. You can't help but look up and say: I lift up mine eyes to the hills, from where does my help come? He will not slumber, he will not allow your foot to be moved. He will keep you from evil. All that happened and at the end of the journey you can celebrate. As wave after wave of pilgrims made their way into Jerusalem it turns into a pep rally for God as those who have already arrived line the streets to welcome those who are making their way into the city.

That is what we find taking place in Psalm 118. Turn now to the Psalm that we read as our first Scripture reading today. As the weary travelers arrive, look at vs.2, someone would shout out from the crowd: Give thanks to the Lord and then someone would respond, His steadfast love endures forever. Let Israel say: His steadfast love endures forever. Let the people of Aaron say: His steadfast love endures forever. Let those who fear the Lord say: His steadfast love endures forever. The people were lining the streets and this call and response would happen. Let's try it out. Let the people of Strasburg Presbyterian say: His steadfast love endures forever. Come on, it's a celebration. Those who are looking forward to eternal life say: His steadfast love endures forever. Let the lovers of Jesus say: His steadfast love endures forever.

That's it. It is a celebration and you just made it through the terrible traffic of Strasburg to come here today. No, you made it through the most dangerous passes on the face of the earth, and those around you also made it through. It was a celebration as Jesus was entering in and the people of Jerusalem were using the exact words that we have in Psalm 118. That is at least according to Matthew. Let's read some of these verses in Psalm 118 that come a little later than when we picked it up. I think you will be surprised by the number of verses that you have heard before from this Psalm. Let's read starting at vs. 22

But stop at vs.25. You need to hear that in the Hebrew. The word for Save Us is Hosiaah. When it is written in the Greek in chapter 21 guess what comes out? Hosanna. The Hebrew Hosanna means literally, Save Us. It was a greeting, it was a way to respectfully welcome someone into the city of Jerusalem. Even though it was a common greeting Matthew chooses to use these words from Psalm 118 as the greeting of celebration for the Messiah, for our Jesus. Hosanna, Save Us, Crucify Him. They all go together eventually.

As Jesus arrives in Jerusalem we need to be sure that we don't get all caught up in the details that Matthew gives us, which are quite a few and it is easy to get lost in those details, the palm branches, the colt and the donkey, two animals, really, what is up with that?, the two disciples who get the animals in a little bit of a sketchy way. The details aren't really the point, but they are so interesting that there is a danger that it can take us away from the main point.

The main point is the extent to which the people celebrate and give thanks for the coming of Jesus. Now, it is not important if they knew what they were doing, but Jesus was fulfilling prophecy and continuing his journey of salvation and redemption for all of humanity and today this Palm Sunday, was a crucial step and the people in their celebration and giving thanks were playing a key role.

The people were so into the arrival of Jesus that look at vs.10. When Jesus and his disciples arrived in Jerusalem the whole city: was in turmoil is what the Scripture states. The Greek verb to be in turmoil is *siou* and in its noun format Matthew uses 5 times, its noun is *seismos*. What does that mean in Greek? It means earthquake. Five times in Matthew we see things quaking. When Jesus and his disciples arrived,

Jerusalem shook. Jesus rocked their world. When Jesus was born in Matthew 2:3 we read that Herod and all of Jerusalem was afraid. When Jesus died there was an earthquake. When Jesus rose from the dead, there was an earthquake. The presence of Jesus in our life ought to rock our world in a way that the words of Psalm 118 are continuously on our lips. Give thanks to the Lord.

I mentioned that Jesus' entry was one more step in the prophetic journey of him being the Savior of the world. At the end of these verses you find the people asking who is this guy who is leading the largest pep rally we have ever seen. Let all the people of Jerusalem say: His steadfast love endures forever. The answer comes in vs. 11, he is a prophet. It is true, he was, but so much more. He was the type of prophet that Moses speaks about in Deuteronomy 18:15 when we read Moses say: vs.15

This Jesus was the prophet who spoke the Words of God so that we would listen and obey. Thanks be to God. This Jesus would be crushed and killed for our sins so that we could have eternal life. Let the steadfast love of the Lord endure forever. This Jesus rose on the third day proclaiming his place as Those stated, as our Lord and our God.

We have so much for which to be thankful in our lives in our church. Sometimes we get so caught up in the details, the donkey, the branches, the procession, that we forget that Palm Sunday is really all about people giving thanks to the Lord. Our focus as a church should always be on the people who do not know Jesus and finding creative ways to draw them closer to Jesus. That is the purpose of the Easter Egg Hunt, of VBS, of our 150 Day Challenge, of our 5 days of prayer, the purpose is to encourage people to love God and come to know God through people and through relationships.

Psalm 118 tells us the reason we ought to give thanks to the Lord. Find it at vs. 1, it is because his steadfast love endures forever. If we focus on that, then celebration can't help but follow. But we have other Psalms where we find the honest question asked: how can we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land? By the waters of Syria in the town of Khan Sheikhoun we laid down our harps, for our captors there sent chemical warheads to silence us and to kill our children. The Psalms have it all. How do we give thanks when we are at war and we see our children dying?

With Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem not only did it mark a celebration, but it also marked the beginning of passion week. The celebration of the pilgrims and the shouts of

give thanks to the Lord are transformed to I do not know that man, and crucify him. The waving branches are quickly replaced with cruel whips and a crown of thorns. A helping hand along the road becomes a traitorous kiss. Yet we in the midst of it all, we can say it is Well, Give Thanks to the Lord, for his steadfast love endures forever. Amen.