

## A Song of Victory

### Sixth Sunday in Lent (Liturgy of the Palms)

#### Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29

<sup>1</sup> O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his steadfast love endures forever!

<sup>2</sup> Let Israel say, "His steadfast love endures forever."

<sup>19</sup> Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them and give thanks to the LORD.

<sup>20</sup> This is the gate of the LORD; the righteous shall enter through it.

<sup>21</sup> I thank you that you have answered me and have become my salvation.

<sup>22</sup> The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.

<sup>23</sup> This is the LORD'S doing; it is marvelous in our eyes.

<sup>24</sup> This is the day that the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.

<sup>25</sup> Save us, we beseech you, O LORD! O LORD, we beseech you, give us success!

<sup>26</sup> Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the LORD. We bless you from the house of the LORD.

<sup>27</sup> The LORD is God, and he has given us light. Bind the festal procession with branches, up to the horns of the altar.

<sup>28</sup> You are my God, and I will give thanks to you; you are my God, I will extol you.

<sup>29</sup> O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever.

Psalm 118 is most likely the very victory song – song of the people as they journeyed to the temple to worship that Sunday long ago – the song Jesus heard as he rode the borrowed donkey into Jerusalem!

Psalm 118 is a festival psalm for both Jewish and Christian communities. It is read during Passover, as the Jewish people recall God's deliverance of them from slavery in Egypt into freedom. For Christians, Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29 is

read for Palm Sunday each year. The joyful thanksgiving of this psalm was the liturgy of the faithful as they processed to the temple. Verse 26, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the LORD," became the liturgy in all four Gospels for a noisy crowd in Jerusalem welcoming Jesus, who had come to save them. It is still used today for our Liturgy of the Palms as we reenact that first Palm Sunday. We join throngs of worshipers through the centuries as we, too, "bind the festal procession with branches" (v. 27), singing and waving palm fronds.

Psalm 118 begins and ends with a core affirmation of faith: "**O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his steadfast love endures forever!**" This affirmation brackets all that comes in between. In distress, under threat, outnumbered, pushed to the limit—in every circumstance, we are buttressed on all sides by God, who is good and whose steadfast love endures forever. This thanksgiving for God's steadfast love erupts in a cry of confident gratitude at the center of the psalm, "I shall not die, but I shall live, and recount the deeds of the LORD" (v. 17).

Psalm 118 was Martin Luther's favorite psalm. He wrote verse 17 on the wall of his study in Coburg castle, where he stayed during an anxious time. During the tumultuous Reformation, Luther's experiences taught him not to place confidence in human beings, in princes or nations. With the psalmist he knew that our only sure refuge, our confidence, is in God alone.

This model prayer is characterized by thanksgiving wholly focused upon the power and goodness of God. Even at verse 19, when the psalmist says,

"Open to me the gates of righteousness," the petition is based not on confidence in the psalmist's own righteousness, but on confidence in God's righteousness. The petitioner asks to enter the temple not out of personal worthiness, but in order to thank God, who has come to save and set free. In fact, the psalmist says that God has "become my salvation" (v. 21).

Many years ago in a theology class at Columbia Theological Seminary, Professor Shirley Guthrie was teaching the doctrine of salvation. One student became adamant that not all would be saved; that some were unrighteous and deserved God's eternal condemnation. This student was confident that unrighteous people would receive the punishment they had coming to them. As he continued in this vein, the rest of the class hoped he would not start naming names! After a pause, Dr. Guthrie said in his kind, yet confident manner: "Look, God is *for* us... not against us!" That affirmation is the framework within which we live and move and have our being. Our entrance into the temple, into eternal life, is not based on our own righteousness! Our confidence is in God, who has become our salvation.

Why is it so hard for us to live in thanksgiving for God's goodness and love? We mean to live, make decisions, and relate to others in the joyful freedom and salvation God brings. Yet we still act (or react) out of fear instead of faith. Threatened or afraid, we feel that we are on our own to "make it" in this world. We depend on our own power or resources rather than God. Individuals, groups, whole nations turn to economic strength, intellectual prowess, physical or military might to overcome opposing powers. Fearful,

insecure, we measure ourselves against others; their judgment becomes our tool of self-assessment, or we judge others as unworthy.

Psalm 118 again turns our attention to God, who apparently sees things differently from the way we often see them. God chooses to use for good what we often reject. A powerful metaphor (vv. 22-23) makes it clear that the world's judgments are often wrong, at odds with the judgments and purposes of God: "The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. This is the LORD'S doing; it is marvelous in our eyes." The cornerstone of a building is chosen with care, for the weight of the building presses on it from different sides. What looks weak and unworthy to us may be just what God has in mind! Think of Moses and a band of slaves up against Pharaoh and all his mighty army! Today Christians read this metaphor as a reference to Jesus Christ. These verses are often cited in the New Testament (Matt. 21:42; Mark 12:10-11; Luke 20:17; Acts 4:11; and 1 Pet. 2:4-8) to make that connection explicit.

On this Palm Sunday, we join the crowd in Jerusalem, singing thanks to God for past victories and naming Jesus as the one who has come to save us. However because we have lived beyond that first Palm Sunday, we know how the week ahead plays out. We know that the "builders" who reject Jesus as king and cornerstone are not only the chief priests and other authorities, but the crowds also... even his own disciples. Though we try to live in faith rather than fear, we are still in the company of those who fall away, fall asleep, betray, deny and doubt him. We still reject what God chooses. Nevertheless,

our actions do not determine what God is building! Jesus Christ has become the chief cornerstone, the risen Lord! This is God's doing, not ours. It is marvelous in our eyes. "O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his steadfast love endures forever!"

We end where we began: in joyful thanksgiving to God who comes to save us and set us free. Because God has chosen to save us through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, we know that, like him, we do not escape or bypass sadness, danger, threat, and death. Knowing that God is for us and not against us, we may live with confidence in God. Our fears are no match for the salvation God brings. Our loudest laments are lost in the litany of thanksgiving: "O give thanks to God!" *"God's steadfast love endures forever!"* This is our song of victory! **Kimberly L. Clayton**

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