

Enter the Gate
Psalm 118:19-29
by the Rev. Dr. E. Scott Jones
First Central Congregational Church
14 April 2019

You might have noticed that Luke's version of Jesus' Triumphant Entry into Jerusalem is a little different from the other gospels. No children singing. No shouts of "Hosanna." No waving palm branches.

But other features are there—the rejoicing crowds, Jesus riding a humble beast, the street theatre protest that generates opposition from the authorities.

Luke has Jesus respond to the latter with the phrase, "I tell you, if these [people] were silent, the stones would shout out." We often hear that as an affirmative image—even creation will rejoice at the coming of the Messiah. But that may not be the meaning here. When stones shout, it is usually because they are tumbling in tumult. We might think of the destruction in the wake of an earthquake. The meaning here is more likely, "If you try to silence these people, then you will bring judgment down upon you." A far more sobering image and one that reminds us that today's rejoicing has sinister undertones that will play out over the week ahead.

Luke, like the others who told this story, draws upon the celebratory words of Old Testament processions. In this case, Psalm 118 which I just read.

Psalm 118 is likely an "entrance liturgy," according to Walter Brueggemann. Used to celebrate a "royal victory in battle." We are to imagine that the people have sung this Psalm before as part of a public event welcoming home triumphant warriors. It's the song of a military victory parade.

The psalm has a clear structure. It opens with a summons to the community to gather in thanksgiving to God.

Then, it narrates the story of God's deliverance. The people are in distress, they are surrounded by wicked nations intent on harming them. They have confined us and are buzzing about like bees, stinging us like poisonous thorns. But there is no need to fear—in the midst of our distress, God is with us, God whose love is steadfast and endures forever. God will rescue us, has rescued us, and brought us to a broad place where we might find refuge and live.

Finally, it is the time to celebrate the rescue, with singing and a parade. Give thanks to God, whose love is steadfast and endures forever.

Psalm 118 is the last of six Hallel psalms, used by the Hebrew people as part of the Passover celebration. So they had long been lifted from their original context in a military parade and used around the festival table to celebrate God's rescue of the people from evil and destruction. According to scholar J. C. McCann, these psalms "offer a perspective from which

to face the reality of continuing oppression: recollection of God's past activity as a basis for petition and grateful trust in God's future activity on behalf of the people."

Walter Brueggemann elaborates on this idea. The voice speaking in the psalm "was being strangled and constricted in distress" but has been delivered by God into a broad place where they can breathe. Brueggemann writes, "Fear can be a powerful reality, but refuge in God can bring hope, even in the face of such trauma."

One of *the* central messages in the Biblical tradition is "do not fear." And here, once again, is that same message. In the midst of distress and trauma, don't be ruled by fear. Take courage. Be ruled instead by faith in God's steadfast love that endures forever. Just as God has rescued God's people in the past, God will rescue us. We can look forward in hope to a time of rejoicing, a grand celebration.

So, when Luke uses Psalm 118 to tell his story of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, all of these layers of meaning come into the story. First the obvious parallel—a parade, a triumphal entry, to celebrate God's deliverance of the people. Making Jesus appear like a royal figure in the Biblical tradition, a fulfillment of ancient expectations and longings.

Also, the parallel with Passover. The people join together in an ancient religious festival to celebrate God's deliverance. Jesus participating in this idea, creating it anew.

The Passover celebrates the Exodus, so Jesus is a new Moses, leading the newly delivered people on a new Exodus, forming a new people who will renew the covenant with God.

And the meaning can also be stretched that Jesus is the new Passover lamb, the sacrifice who will make the deliverance possible. Though that implication awaits a later chapter in the story of this week.

Luke's use of Psalm 118 also carries with it the deeper pastoral message that Walter Brueggemann locates in Psalm 118—do not fear. Here at the start of a week that will include threat and danger, betrayal and arrest, persecution and torture, death and uncertainty, Luke is reminding us of this central biblical message—don't be ruled by fear. Yes, there are dark nights of the soul. Yes, we experience Good Fridays in our lives. But even in these darkest and most dangerous of moments, don't be overcome by fear.

For just as the Psalmist has written—God's love is steadfast and endures forever. God will rescue us. We will celebrate in song "This is the day the Lord has made."

In other words, here, before Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, Luke is hinting that Easter will come.

This year for Lent we have invited you to take a sojourn—not to go on a spiritual journey, but to explore the spiritual in your daily lives. I have asked you to be attentive to the ordinary ways that you connect to God.

This has been a "pilgrimage in place" to borrow a phrase from a clergy friend of mine. And that most definitely describes these final days before Easter. Today we begin Holy Week. And though the first few days don't have many activities, they can be a time to begin to focus our attention on what we need to do this week.

I am hopeful that this year you will choose to set aside some of your time to join in recognizing these days. You might do this privately through your own devotional and spiritual practices. In fact you should do that. Whether it is reading the stories in the Gospel, going on a long walk to meditate, listening to Mozart's *Requiem*, Handel's *Messiah*, or the soundtrack of *Jesus Christ Superstar*, or one of my favourite Holy Saturday activities—rereading *The Last Battle* by C. S. Lewis. I hope you will engage in some special spiritual practice this week that draws you into the emotional and psychological import of the days ahead.

I also invite you to join us in worship, as we will explore these emotions together. The celebration and joy of Easter only authentically come after the dark night of the soul of Good Friday and the experience of communion and betrayal of that communion on Maundy Thursday.

In *Ancient-Future Time*, Robert Webber writes,

These are days to be set aside to enter into a worship that is the source of our entire spirituality, a moment in time that defines all time for Christians, a moment in time that is the very sum and substance of our spirituality for every season, every week, every Sunday, and every moment of every day.

Now, we don't stop everything else we do in order to experience these holy days; they occur in the midst of our obligations to job and family. Which is important. That reminds us that these emotions and experiences occur in the midst of our routines, in our daily lives as human beings. They are part of the human condition.

This isn't just a story we read. It is a story we participate in. The people march in a parade to symbolize their deliverance. They join in an ancient festival meal that reminds them that they too are God's people, experiencing God's love. They sing as part of Jesus's ride into Jerusalem. And we too act out the story—we wave the palm branches, sing "Hosanna," process in together. Every layer of this story is about seeing ourselves in the story, re-enacting it in our lives.

Why? Because it is the human story.

Today, by acting out the story once again, may we will feel deeply within our own psyches the great promise—God's love is steadfast and endures forever. So do not fear. Have faith, rejoice, and give thanks.