

**Lenten Vesper Meditation**  
**Psalm 118**

**Wednesday, April 1, 2009**  
**Georgetown Presbyterian Church**  
**Rev. Stephen H. Wilkins**

Martin Luther had a special fondness for the psalms. But out of all the psalms, the 118<sup>th</sup> psalm is one that Luther singled out as his particular favorite. Luther had this to say about the 118<sup>th</sup> psalm:

“Although the entire Psalter and all of Holy Scripture are dear to me as my only comfort and source of life, I fell in love with this psalm especially. Therefore I call it my own. When emperors and kings, the wise and the learned, and even the saints could not aid me, this psalm proved a friend and helped me out of many great troubles. As a result, it is dearer to me than all the wealth, honor, and power of the pope, the Turk, and the emperor. I would be most unwilling to trade this psalm for all of it...”<sup>1</sup>

I wonder what it was about this particular psalm that struck Luther so powerfully? I wonder what it was about this particular psalm that made him single it out as his favorite?

Maybe it's because the entire psalm is framed in a proclamation of God's steadfast love: The psalm begins with the proclamation, “O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his steadfast love endures forever.” And the psalm ends with those same words: “O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his steadfast love endures forever.”<sup>2</sup> It is a literary device which indicates that everything in between is informed by God's steadfast love, which endures forever. And so the gratitude for salvation is informed by God's love; the supplication for deliverance is informed by God's love; the transformation of the rejected stone into the cornerstone is informed by God's love; the gift of each day, and how we respond with rejoicing and thanksgiving is informed by God's love; the psalmist's declaration, “You are my God, and I will give thanks to you; you are my God, I will extol you,”<sup>3</sup> is informed by God's love.

Maybe the psalm was Luther's favorite because the confidence by which the psalmist declares that God has delivered him from trouble. That fact is more vaguely alluded to in the portion of the psalm selected for this evening and for Sunday--the portion of the psalm that is not included in this evening's reading is far more explicit in its praise of God's deliverance: “In my anguish I cried to the Lord, and he answered by setting me free... The Lord is with me; he is my helper... The Lord is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation...”<sup>4</sup>

Maybe the psalm was Luther's favorite because of the movement from praise for past deliverance, to confidence in present troubles, to hope for continued blessing and salvation in the future. In Hebrew liturgy, this psalm would have been recited during Passover, which is why the crowd quoted this psalm when Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey. As a Passover remembrance of the exodus and deliverance from Egypt, the psalm would not simply help the congregation remember with gratitude the mighty acts of God on their behalf; even more, the remembrance of God's steadfast love toward them in the past helps them look ahead with confidence in God's deliverance and steadfast love in the years and generations to come.

This week I hope you will reflect on these verses from the 118<sup>th</sup> psalm. And as you do so, give consideration to three things:

1. In what ways does it make a difference to reflect on your life--past, present, and future--through the lens of God's steadfast love?
2. This psalm is included in the Palm Sunday liturgy. As you know, Jesus was hailed and welcomed as King when he entered Jerusalem. But only a few days later the crowd that hailed him as King was calling for his crucifixion, rejecting him as Messiah. How does the 22<sup>nd</sup> verse of the psalm, "The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone," take on meaning in terms of the Christian faith?
3. On Sunday we will celebrate communion. During that ceremony, we hear the words of Jesus, "Do this in remembrance of me." The 118<sup>th</sup> psalm is associated with the two central saving acts of God in Scripture: the exodus in the Old Testament, and the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ in the New Testament. How does the act of remembrance strengthen our faith and our hope for a future blessed by God?

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther, quoted in *Feasting on the Word*, Vol. 2, p. 150.

<sup>2</sup> Psalm 118:1, 29

<sup>3</sup> Psalm 118:28

<sup>4</sup> Psalm 118:5, 7, 14