

## ***Living in the Knowledge of God's Steadfast Love***

Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29

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A bishop went one Sunday to preach in a church in his diocese. On that particular Sunday, only three people showed up to hear the bishop preach. The bishop looked at the tiny congregation, then he turned to the priest and asked, "Did you tell the people I was coming?"

"No," said the priest, "but word seems to have gotten around anyway."

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In today's text from the gospel of Mark, word seems to have gotten around that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. But instead of coming to an empty church, Jesus is met by a teeming mass of people awaiting the arrival of their Messiah. As a sign of their acknowledgment of Jesus' royalty, they laid their cloaks along the path in front of him, and they waved palm branches.

And they shouted, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"

Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Words of acclamation taken from the 118<sup>th</sup> psalm. It turns out that the 118<sup>th</sup> psalm is the most frequently quoted psalm in the New Testament. The 22<sup>nd</sup> verse, "The stone the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone," is quoted in Matthew, Mark, Luke, Acts, Ephesians, and 1<sup>st</sup> Peter; all four gospels report the crowd shouting out the 26<sup>th</sup> verse, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" Clearly, the New Testament authors find in Jesus the fulfillment of the true meaning of this psalm.

With this 118<sup>th</sup> psalm, we come to the last of our Lenten reflections on the psalms as the language of our faith. Through the past six weeks, we have learned the vocabulary of confession and acknowledgment of our sin; we have learned the value of trusting obedience; we have learned what it is to cry out in despair, yet maintaining hope and faith; we have learned the way of confidence in God's provision and protection, even in times of trouble. And so today, on the Sunday before Easter, we conclude our reflection on the psalms by recognizing that which is the basis of the gospel: the steadfast love of God, which endures forever.

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>1</sup> It is a literary device which indicates that everything in between is informed by God’s steadfast love, which endures forever. And for us it is a way of recognizing that everything in our faith arises out of the knowledge of God’s steadfast love, which endures forever. The Christian faith begins with God’s steadfast love, and it ends with God’s steadfast love, and everything in between the beginning and the end is informed by our knowledge of God’s steadfast love.

Everything changes when we live in the knowledge of God’s steadfast love. Everything changes when we see things, not in terms of God’s wrath and anger and vengeance, but in terms of a God who acts out of love. As people of faith in a God whose steadfast love endures forever, I want to identify three things that are different because we live in the knowledge of God’s steadfast love. The way we look at the past is different when we live in the knowledge of God’s steadfast love. The way we live in the present is different when we live in the knowledge of God’s steadfast love. And the way we look to the future is different when we live in the knowledge of God’s steadfast love.

The way we look at the past is different when the past is viewed through the lens of God’s steadfast love. This psalm is a psalm of remembrance. It recalls God’s acts of salvation for his people. 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. The exodus was not a pleasant experience. The deliverance of the Israelites from their bondage in Egypt involved plagues, violence, and forty years of wandering in a forsaken wilderness. The death of Christ was one of the most unjust, cruel, and painful deaths that anyone could possibly endure. But doesn’t it make a difference when you look at those events with the knowledge that the God who orchestrated those events was acting out of love? Doesn’t it make a difference when you know that even through hardship and adversity, cruelty and torture and even death, God’s love found a way to prevail for the good?

It makes a difference when you can look back at times in your life through the lens of God’s love. There are doors that closed in my life that, at the time, were painful for me to endure. But looking back, I can see that those doors were closed by a God who loved me and who wanted something else for me, something even greater than what I was pursuing. It makes a difference when your remembrance can be filtered through the lens of God’s love.

I am also convinced that life in the present is different when lived in the knowledge of God’s love. It pains me to know of people--and I have known of many in my life--whose idea of God is one of a vengeful, spiteful God who is just waiting for us to slip up. Those folks who view God in that way inevitably fall into two camps. Some will live in constant fear of divine retribution, so they resort to the same kind of legalistic rigidity that Jesus criticized of the scribes and Pharisees; theirs is a church that is short on grace and heavy on law. Others will simply turn their back on God and on all things religious; they are the ones who reject

the church and who put their hope in human institutions because they don't want anything to do with a mean and spiteful God.

It makes a difference when you know that God's steadfast love endures forever, and that everything that God says or does flows out of God's steadfast love. It enables us to live, not in fear of God or in indifference to God, but out of gratitude for God's steadfast love. "Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them, and give thanks to the Lord..."<sup>2</sup> The very reason the people of God come to worship God is to give thanks to the Lord. "This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it..."<sup>3</sup> Our purpose every day is to live every day in thanksgiving to God, to recognize each day as a gift and to celebrate it as such. And we can do that because we know that each day is given to us by a God whose steadfast love endures forever.

You take two people in the same unfortunate circumstance--maybe they've both been laid off of their job. One has an outlook on life informed by the knowledge of God's love; the other's outlook doesn't consider God's love. I guarantee you, the one who looks at life through the knowledge of God's love will have a different attitude toward her circumstance than the one who doesn't see God's love at work in her life. One sees blessing even in the midst of trouble, because she knows that God is at the work for the good; the other sees woe and curse.

It makes a difference to live in gratitude to God for the blessings God gives.

And the knowledge of God's love makes a difference in the way we look toward the future. It is the reason that we have hope, and not despair. There is in this psalm a 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.

I am convinced that is the reason that Jesus decided to enter Jerusalem, even though he knew what really awaited him. Jesus knew full well that the same crowds that yelled "Hosanna!" would later on cry out, "Crucify!" Jesus knew that his disciples who had stood steadfastly by his side would soon scatter and flee, and one of them would betray Jesus to the authorities. Jesus knew what lay ahead, yet he proceeded into Jerusalem nevertheless. And I am convinced that the reason he did so was that he knew the purpose in all that was to happen was rooted and grounded in God's steadfast love. Because Jesus

knew God's love, he was willing to endure what lay ahead; he knew that God's love would prevail, for the steadfast love of the Lord endures forever.

We don't know what the future will bring. But this we do know: God is good, and his steadfast love endures forever. And we know that God's love is greater than the sum of everything else we will encounter in this world.

Remember God's steadfast love.

Give thanks for God's steadfast love.

And let your hope be informed by God's steadfast love.

I promise you this--it will make a difference in how you live your life, when you live it in the knowledge of God's steadfast love.

O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his steadfast love endures forever.

Amen.

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

<sup>2</sup> Psalm 118:19

<sup>3</sup> Psalm 118:24