

The Church of the Pilgrimage  
Rev. Dr. Helen Nablo  
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Psalm 118:1-2; 19-29 / Mark 11:1-11

Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures forever. Let Israel say: "His love endures forever." Open for me the gates of the righteous; I will enter and give thanks to the LORD. This is the gate of the LORD through which the righteous may enter. I will give you thanks, for you answered me; you have become my salvation. The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; the LORD has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes. The LORD has done it this very day; let us rejoice today and be glad. LORD, save us! LORD, grant us success! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD. From the house of the LORD we bless you. The LORD is God, and he has made his light shine on us. With boughs in hand, join in the festal procession up to the horns of the altar. You are my God, and I will praise you; you are my God, and I will exalt you. Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures forever.

As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage and Bethany at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two of his disciples, saying to them, "Go to the village ahead of you, and just as you enter it, you will find a colt tied there, which no one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, 'Why are you doing this?' say, 'The Lord needs it and will send it back here shortly.'" They went and found a colt outside in the street, tied at a doorway. As they untied it, some people standing there asked, "What are you doing, untying that colt?" They answered as Jesus had told them to, and the people let them go. When they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks over it, he sat on it. Many people spread their cloaks on the road, while others spread branches they had cut in the fields. Those who went ahead and those who followed shouted, "Hosanna!" Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" "Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!" "Hosanna in the highest heaven!" Jesus entered Jerusalem and went into the temple courts. He looked around at everything, but since it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the Twelve.

### **What We Lay Down**

You could, I suppose, think of Palm Sunday as a parable, which is to say something that has to be interpreted to be understood.

There was the crowd, shouting out praises from Psalm 118 (the psalm we read out loud earlier in our worship today) and laying before Jesus branches and cloaks. It was a procession fit for a king, a different sort of king for elsewhere, on the other side of town, the emperor and his troops were having a grand military parade, one meant to keep the peace during the Passover, the Passover being a time if ever there was a time when the people might be inclined to revolt. Today's psalm, was, in fact, a psalm often sung at Passover, when the people were remembering the Exodus, God's delivery of the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt.

The people greeting Jesus were paving his way with gifts that would honor him –

branches cut from trees and fields would make things festive, green with life and cloaks, well, cloaks were valuable things - people were laying down something of worth to them to show the great esteem they held for Jesus.

So, I've been wondering this week: What if Jesus were to come to town, the town of Plymouth, that is? What if he were entering our space, making his way down Samoset Ave to downtown, up into Town Square...How would we greet him today? What would we lay down before him?

Maybe we'd begin with our image of what Holy Week is all about. Maybe we'd lay down the idea it is primarily about the depravity of human beings, how loathsome and misguided and frail we can be and ground it instead in those wonderful words from Psalm 118: *Give thanks to God, for God is good, God's steadfast love endures forever!*

I was once a pastor at a church that used those words at the time of offering. When the offering was brought forward, the worship leader would say Let us give thanks to God, for God is good, God's steadfast love endures forever! And the people would respond:

*Thanks be to God, whose love creates us.*

*Thanks be to God, whose mercy redeems us.*

*Thanks be to God, whose grace leads us into the future!*

It was lovely really. At the time we offered our gifts, we paused to remember, with the same words every Sunday (No need for the worship leader to come up with something different) We paused to remember *and express our gratitude* for the generous, steadfast, loving and graceful presence of God.

This week, in bible study, we learned that the Hebrew root of "steadfast love" is a mother's womb - God's strong, compassionate, fiercely steadfast love. Whereas the Greeks understood their gods to be stern, angry, powerful and fearsome, and, in the end, pretty much detached from human life, apathetic about it all the psalmist's way of understanding God is completely different. (*Stephen Montgomery, in Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol 2, p. 146*) The emphasis is on love - loving engagement with us. Five times in this one psalm, three times in the portion we read today, we are reminded of God's steadfast love, a love that endures forever.

Ernest Hemingway once told the story of a Spanish father who decided to reconcile with his son, who had run away to Madrid and had not been heard from in years. The father took an ad in a Madrid newspaper: "Paco, meet me at Hotel Montana Noon Tuesday. All is forgiven, Papa" Paco is a common name in Spain, and when the father arrived at the square in front of the hotel at the appointed time, he found eight hundred young men named Paco waiting for their fathers. (*Stephen Montgomery, Feasting on the Word, p. 148*)

What a lovely picture of God, of God's steadfast love. And all those wayward sons, responding to it.

You want to enter the spirit of the crowd who cried out on Palm Sunday? Think of a time in your life when you had fallen short, been a whole lot less than you wanted to be, got caught up in something that was beneath you and someone reached out to you. Letting you know they still loved you, still cared for you, still saw you as a person of worth. You are not the worst thing you have ever done or said. All is forgiven. When a father says that, a mother says that, a friend or spouse says that *then* you have a glimpse of the compassionate, steadfastly loving heart of God and you know the gratitude of the procession that day.

The crowd cried out using phrases from Psalm 118 because they were full of expectation. Just as God had acted in the Exodus, bringing the people out of slavery in Egypt, so they saw -- in Jesus coming to town -- God acting again. Likewise, while Passover and our regular celebration of the Lord's supper rightly look backward, these commemorations are not just about God's steadfast love back in time, but about that love here, in the now, here today. Palm Sunday says the God who acts to bring people from slavery into freedom can act again, will act again. We are to live, therefore, *expectantly*.

Stephen Montgomery, a pastor in Idlewild, Tennessee, tells a story about a church in an urban community that had a ministry to those on the margins of society, including those who were homeless.

One day a mentally disturbed man came into the church office and threw a brick at the head of the office administrator, who was quite wounded and had to go to the hospital. The entire church staff gathered around the communion table in the sanctuary of the church, held hands and prayed for this woman, their sister, friend and colleague. The pastor recounted how he said a prayer, full of the right words, asking for God's will to be done, praying for strength, and praying for the poor and mentally ill perpetrator. Then the church custodian began to pray. His prayer began with simple praise: for waking me up this morning, for the sun that is shining, for the food I was able to eat at breakfast. Then the prayer moved from praise to petition....and not the "nice" petitions the pastor had made, but hard-core demands of God. "God, we expect you to heal our sister! Make her well. Bring her back to full health.' The custodian went on and on, his praise moving from what God had done to beseeching God to be God, to make her well. His prayer was like the psalm: it did not only look backward to the good God had brought forth in the past - it looked forward as well. (Stephen Montgomery in *Feasting on the Word*, p. 150)

So again, what if Jesus were entering our town today, making his way down Samoset street...how would we respond...what would we lay at Jesus feet to welcome him today? Could we lay down something important to acknowledge his arrival? Or could we lay down our distorted images of God, the idea that God has it in for us, that God is one with a ledger, recording each little good deed and each little bad deeds, and getting ready to exact some retribution replacing it with this God of

steadfast love? Would we lay down our secret belief that all this praying is good and well, but God doesn't really answer prayers, or how about the secret belief that religion is for Sundays, for dress up and church attendance and not so much about the rest of the week, how we use our paychecks, how we treat others, or how we hold our politics. Might we lay down the cloak we wear every day, the one that keeps us so well defended from others, and from a God who wishes to enter in and transform us – precisely in and through this amazing steadfast love?

Now if I had a dollar for every time I have heard someone say “The Old Testament God is a God of wrath and the New Testament God is a God of love” ... well, I would have a bigger bank account, for sure! We should note today that it is a psalm in the *Old Testament* that sings of this steadfastly loving God, and that *this was the God Jesus believed in, and the God he sought to serve as he rode into Jerusalem that day*. Father Greg Boyle (featured so much in last week's sermon) quoted his spiritual director, who said “we need a better God”. I thought of people who have a fearful relationship with God – which is, in the end, not really much of a relationship. Father Boyle went on to make the distinction between the God we have and the God we settle for -- or, the God we often use for our own purposes or agenda. He spoke of the family members of those killed at Mother Emmanuel Church in Charleston standing in front of Dylan Roof and saying “We forgive you” but nine months later others, speaking of a “God of Justice” sentencing Dylan Roof to death. Our God talk gets tricky, doesn't it -- and it is not the case that we all have an image of God as Loving Kindness, or Steadfast Love.

So maybe if we need to lay down our less than adequate images of God, what we also need to lay down is our wanting God to be God on our terms. After all, it is hardly likely that we'd have written the script the way it all went down. Poet Gwendolyn Brooks says “Live not for battles won. Live not for the end of the song. Live for the along.”

Palm Sunday is like that. It isn't about knowing the outcomes – or even trying to influence them. It is about Jesus faithfulness, and our welcoming the One who comes in the name of the Lord. The real Lord. The One who longs for our well being. The One whose steadfast love endures forever. Amen.