

BLESSED IS THE ONE WHO COMES IN THE NAME OF THE LORD
MATTHEW 21: 1-11
PALM SUNDAY
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Psalm 118: 1-2, 19-29

1 O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his steadfast love endures forever! 2 Let Israel say, "His steadfast love endures forever."

19 Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them and give thanks to the LORD. 20 This is the gate of the LORD; the righteous shall enter through it. 21 I thank you that you have answered me and have become my salvation. 22 The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. 23 This is the LORD's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes. 24 This is the day that the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it. 25 Save us, we beseech you, O LORD! O LORD, we beseech you, give us success! 26 Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the LORD. We bless you from the house of the LORD. 27 The LORD is God, Bind the festal procession with branches, up to the horns of the altar. 28 You are my God, and I will give thanks to you; you are my God, I will extol you. 29 O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever.

O give thanks to the Lord! God's steadfast love endures forever. What a beautiful psalm. Portions of Psalm 118 are included in our gospel account of the first Palm Sunday. Jesus and those gathered for the Passover in the first century would have been familiar with the psalm. It was said that King David rode a donkey into Jerusalem after his military victory. In the first century a horse showed greater power and prestige, but Jesus chose to ride a donkey. The first Palm Sunday was a day that the Lord had made. It was a day for rejoicing, just as this day is a day for rejoicing. Let us rejoice and be glad in it.

Listen to the Good News of Palm Sunday from the Gospel of Matthew 21: 1-11.

Matthew 21: 1-11

1 When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, 2 saying to them, "Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. 3 If anyone says anything to you, just say this, 'The Lord needs them.' And he will send them immediately." 4 This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying, 5 "Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey." 6 The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; 7 they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. 8 A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. 9 The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!" 10 When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, "Who is this?" 11 The crowds were saying, "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee."

What an exciting day that first Palm Sunday must have been. The disciples were thrilled. Finally, their Rabbi was getting the attention and praise he deserved. People threw down branches and cloaks on the road. It was like rolling out the red carpet in our day. The scriptures say that the people shouted Hosanna. Hosanna means, "Save us," but it was used so often in worship that it took on a liturgical meaning of jubilant praise. Hosanna!

On Palm Sunday we celebrate God coming to us in Jesus Christ. We process with palms. We sing and hear beautiful music. We are glad. Like the people in the first century, we look to Jesus, and we rejoice.

Later in this service, we will be asked if we are willing to turn to Jesus Christ. Do we believe in Jesus as our Lord and Savior? Of course, we say. Like the crowds on the first Palm Sunday, we are caught up in the celebration. We shout Hosanna to our Lord and Savior.

On the Palm Sundays of our lives, it is easy to worship and praise God, but what will happen when life takes a different turn? In the first century, the same crowds that sang “Hosanna” on Palm Sunday shouted “crucify him” only a few days later. They expected a Messiah to defeat the Romans, not be arrested by them. What if our expectations are not fulfilled? Is our faith strong enough to weather suffering, betrayal, hardship and death?

Some Christians today behave like the crowds two thousand years ago. We claim Jesus to be our Lord and Savior only as long as life proceeds according to our expectations. We want prosperity, popularity and the good life. If following Jesus means we must say no to what we want, we sometimes deny that Jesus is Lord. We forget the hosannas. When we discover that following Jesus entails suffering and death, we sometimes turn from Jesus when we need him the most.

Every day is not Palm Sunday. Jesus tried to warn the disciples about the suffering of Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, but they did not understand. Disciples in the first century and disciples today prefer a Palm Sunday Jesus. We do not mind wearing crosses, but we do not want to carry them. Following Jesus after Palm Sunday means we must pick up crosses of betrayal, suffering, conflict and death.

According to the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus went directly from the triumphal procession to the Temple. Jesus turned over tables, chased out people making money off the pilgrims, and called religious leaders hypocrites and a brood of vipers.

Following Jesus after Palm Sunday requires that we confront evil where we find it. Following Jesus requires that we trust God in all aspects of our lives. Later this morning as we celebrate the sacrament of baptism we will have the opportunity to answer the following question, “Trusting in the gracious mercy of God, do you turn away from the ways of sin and renounce evil and its power in the world?”

This is the vow we make at our baptism; but like the first disciples, we are tempted to look the other way when God calls us to confront evil. Only a few days after Palm Sunday, Peter denied he even knew Jesus. The other disciples ran away and hid in fear. Are we hiding today?

What are we doing about the sin and evil in our midst? Do we confront bullies at school or unethical behavior at work? At the recent Presbytery meeting, youth leaders shared some of the prayers that were placed on the prayer wall at recent conferences. I was heart-broken at what these young people face in school. Who will stand up for those who are bullied or hurt by the behavior of others?

Many people think nothing about cheating on their income tax, engaging in sexual intimacy outside marriage or viewing pornography. What about us? Are we engaged in sinful sexual or financial behavior? Like the NY Governor do we somehow think sin is our private business? Are we busy judging others and overlooking our own behavior?

Our society suggests that anything goes as long as you make money or don't get caught. The prostitute who met Governor Spitzer at the Mayflower has been offered 1 million dollars to pose for a magazine. Does money make it right? What some call the oldest profession is also one of the most dangerous and tends to attract young women who have been abused as girls. The escort business is thriving in Austin. So is on-line pornography. Do we trust God enough to confront evil and sin when we see it?

Recently ABC has run a series in which they hire actors to engage in illegal or inappropriate behavior and then video what people do when they observe it. Would we say something if we saw our friend's spouse romantically involved with another person at a restaurant? Would we try to stop verbal conflict in the park if it seems to be getting out of hand? Would we call 911 or stop someone who hits a parked car and tries to leave?

Most people in the series and in our society right now ignore sin and crime. They walk away or act like they do not see it. What about us? Do we renounce evil and its power in the world, or do we try to ignore it? In the ABC series, one woman stopped to help a mother and child leave what appeared to be an argument with an abusive boyfriend. The woman said she had second thoughts but knew she must do what was right. It was part of her faith she said. What about us? Will we trust God enough to confront evil the next time we face it?

A third question asked of those who affirm their faith is if they will be Christ's faithful disciples, obeying his Word and showing his love. It was easy for the disciples to be faithful, obedient and loving on Palm Sunday. They procured the donkey and her colt as Jesus instructed them. They walked along side him as he received accolades from the crowds.

It was after Palm Sunday that discipleship became difficult. Being a faithful Christian was not popular in the first century. It is not popular today. We are not called traitors in America if we follow Christ, but we may sacrifice popularity and success. Whether it is school athletics, social events, work demands or family commitments, we are tempted to deny Jesus in order to get ahead according to society's values. Following Jesus today requires discipline and commitment, whether it is in setting aside time for daily devotionals or arranging our schedules so that we make it to church. In the big decisions and the little decisions of life, we either follow Jesus or deny him. It happens every day.

Showing the love of Christ takes courage. One mother in a recent tornado lay on top of her baby to save its life but in the process she lost her own. I see parents making sacrifices for their children every day, but I also see members of this congregation making sacrifices for each other and for strangers. I see people offering their time and energy, which is their life, in order that others may experience Christ's love. Loving others may cost us our life as we know it, but we gain new life in Christ as a result of our sacrifice. Showing the love of Christ in tangible ways is part of discipleship. Jesus washed the feet of his disciples and suggested they should do the same for others. How might we show the love of Christ to someone today?

The final question of our baptismal and membership vows asks, "Will you be a faithful member of this congregation, share in its worship and ministry with your prayers and gifts, your study and service, and so fulfill your calling to be a disciple of Jesus Christ?" One of the unique characteristics of Christianity is its organization into small groups called congregations or churches. The Apostle Paul said we are "the body of Christ."

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. Churches come in the name of the Lord. Presbyterians believe that God calls us to a particular community of faith because God has plans for us. Those plans include caring and receiving care in the context of a faith community. In the church we are equipped for service. We are encouraged. We are held accountable. We confront evil, and we show Christ's love. We grow in faith together as we accomplish God's mission in a particular time and place.

Our family of faith is a blessing on Palm Sunday, but a family of faith is essential if we are to follow Jesus after Palm Sunday. When we grieve the loss of a loved one or face crises in our families or with our

health, we depend on our family of faith. Kitty and her family were recipients yesterday, but love is given and received daily within this body of Christ in a myriad of ways. We are blessed to accomplish God's mission together, whether it is organizing a lunch for a memorial service, ringing bells, singing in the choir, teaching children, going on a mission trip or attending a conference at Mo Ranch. We are blessed in whatever we do for we come in the name of the Lord.

My friends, let us celebrate on this Palm Sunday. Let us celebrate because God is active in our midst through the power of the Spirit. Let us celebrate because God has called new disciples to join this body of Christ. This is the Lord's doing. May we remember our baptismal vows as we witness the baptisms of others. Let us rejoice. This is the day that the Lord has made. Blessed are those who come in the name of the Lord. Hosanna! Amen.