

4.2.23 – Palm Sunday
“A Jubilant Misguided Procession”
The United Baptist Church, Annandale, VA

Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29 (NIV)

- ¹ Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;
his love endures forever.
- ² Let Israel say:
“His love endures forever.”
- ¹⁹ Open for me the gates of the righteous;
I will enter and give thanks to the Lord.
- ²⁰ This is the gate of the Lord
through which the righteous may enter.
- ²¹ I will give you thanks, for you answered me;
you have become my salvation.
- ²² The stone the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone;
- ²³ the Lord has done this,
and it is marvelous in our eyes.
- ²⁴ The Lord has done it this very day;
let us rejoice today and be glad.
- ²⁵ Lord, save us!
Lord, grant us success!
- ²⁶ Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.
From the house of the Lord we bless you.
- ²⁷ 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.
- ²⁸ You are my God, and I will praise you;
you are my God, and I will exalt you.
- ²⁹ Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;
his love endures forever.

Leader: These are Hopeful Words of God. All: Thanks be to God!

Matthew 21:1-11 (NLT)

Jesus' Triumphant Entry

¹ As Jesus and the disciples approached Jerusalem, they came to the town of Bethphage on the Mount of Olives. Jesus sent two of them on ahead. ²“Go into the village over there,” he said. “As soon as you enter it, you will see a donkey tied there, with its colt beside it. Untie them and bring them to me. ³If anyone asks what you are doing, just say, ‘The Lord needs them,’ and he will immediately let you take them.”

⁴This took place to fulfill the prophecy that said,

⁵“Tell the people of Jerusalem,
 ‘Look, your King is coming to you.
 He is humble, riding on a donkey—
 riding on a donkey’s colt.’”

⁶The two disciples did as Jesus commanded. ⁷They brought the donkey and the colt to him and threw their garments over the colt, and he sat on it.

⁸Most of the crowd spread their garments on the road ahead of him, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. ⁹Jesus was in the center of the procession, and the people all around him were shouting,

“Praise God for the Son of David!
 Blessings on the one who comes in the name of the Lord!
 Praise God in highest heaven!”

¹⁰The entire city of Jerusalem was in an uproar as he entered. “Who is this?” they asked.

¹¹And the crowds replied, “It’s Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee.”

Leader: These Words of Jesus Were Perplexing. All: Thanks be to God!

Please pray with me:

Dear Lord, be present to us now as we study the Scriptures that begin Holy Week. As we praise Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem, let us leave this space understanding that he would face trial, humiliation, and torture to save us from our sin. May we be diligent this week to spend more time with you in prayer and study following your footsteps toward the cross and the tomb. Reveal for each of us your message, so that we may face our own challenges with courage and praise. Let your voice be the one heard today as you speak through mine. Amen.

Hosanna! Hosanna! Thank you for waving your palms to get us in character. Last week we turned to the psalms for comfort. This week’s psalm is one of triumph and victory, giving God all the glory. It was written for the Feast of Tabernacles after completing the second temple construction in Nehemiah 8:13-18. It was sung usually at Passover, especially at the celebrations of Israel returning from exile. The singing of it accompanied a procession to the temple sanctuary to sacrifice animals and praise the Lord. Its words were familiar and popular, so was probably sung when Jesus came into Jerusalem (our second reading).

Psalm 118 speaks about how Yahweh triumphed over the nations surrounding Israel and how saving them by his strength was worthy of

praise. The symbolic image of the capstone may have originated from the post-exile second temple reconstruction. The tradition made the capstone a king or landowner representing the nation (Hezekiah in this case), a king who would be rejected and ousted, leaving his wealthy kingdom taken over by others. Symbolically, God's good (Hezekiah had done great things for Judah) was under threat of Satan (pagan religions his son re-instituted). In the New Testament, this psalm would have been sung at Passover as Jesus (**their** king) entered Jerusalem, hoping he was the Messiah he had already revealed himself to be.

Boughs of branches were strewn at his feet as Jesus and the people walked the streets toward the temple gates to praise Yahweh. "Open the gates of the righteous" (where the holy rituals were performed inside), so that I (a priest, king, or landowner) can enter and praise God. The worshippers in both the old testament and new testament readings carried bouquets of palm, myrtle, and willow branches (a bit more rare since they are only found near water) to adorn the altar. The shofar (ram's horn) was used to call the people to worship as David did today. Last week we studied Psalm 130, one of ascending the steep hill to Jerusalem, but in this Psalm 118, Jesus **descended** the steep hill from the Mount of Olives across the valley into the East Gate, also called the Golden Gate. That is where the people were cheering him into the temple.

The most important lesson from this liturgical psalm is that God's love is unchanging for his people even to the point of deliverance. God is the light who sets people free from all sin, so is it any surprise that God's son, Jesus is the light of the world sent to rescue us from evil and set us free? These are words Jesus himself used: "¹² Again Jesus spoke to them,

saying, ‘I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life (John 8:12).’” We have heard similar words all throughout the John passages we’ve been studying during Lent.

So, as Jesus rides into Jerusalem (what is called today the Old City), the very city whose leaders nudged him out, he risks everything. He is vulnerable and embraces that gentleness and humility by riding a donkey’s colt. All four Gospels describe this triumphal entry we celebrate today, but only Matthew mentions two animals, a donkey, and a colt. An unbroken colt had to be accompanied by its mother or it would not move, let alone allow itself to be ridden. That is why the disciples used their own cloaks for a saddle for Jesus, a man of peace, to “break” or calm the colt. Now, although the people sang and chanted treating Jesus like a warrior king, the colt was a symbol of peace in that day. A victorious king would have ridden a tall, strident War Horse to prove he had won the battle.

Pilgrims threw their cloaks on the ground in front of Jesus on the colt as a sign of respect and practicality. The wet or rainy season is from the middle of October to the middle of April. This time of Passover occurred during this rainy season where the water gushed from the high mountain wadis down into the valleys. Since Jesus had descended the Mount of Olives, there must have been muddy gullies to cross before going again uphill to the temple, and so they covered the mud with their coats for safe passage. The pilgrims sang “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna to the Son of David!” Jesus had before avoided the city, so there were many who did not know who he was.

Normally there were about 30,000 citizens, but on Feast Days there could be as many as 150,000! The “temple tourists,” if you will, were perplexed and upset and asked, “Who is this man?” The pilgrims answered “this is Jesus the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee.” Jesus had now fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah 62:11 and Zechariah 9:9: “Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion! Shout, Daughter Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and victorious, lowly and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey (Zech. 9:9).” Their vision of Messiah was liberation by a new king from the Roman rule, but Jesus’ view of salvation was more about having a relationship with God and each other in love and freedom.

Yes, he entered in humility, but with a certain toughness and courage to face citizens who no longer wanted him in their city. He came with love and conviction preparing himself for the difficult week ahead. It was a processional of admiration and celebration, but perhaps a misguided one, because the very people who cheered him on later shouted “Crucify him!” Are we not sometimes enthusiastic about something, perhaps a fun new worship experience that we forget the deep transformational gift of God’s grace and mercy that comes from quiet reflection and personal prayer with him? Where is the intimacy of silence and listening for direction? We focused on that last year, but distractions happen. The pomp and circumstance of this season are temporary and joyful, but being authentic, courageous, and having a vulnerable heart are what Jesus modeled for us and for his disciples. Those traits only come with spiritual maturity. Like the resurrection of Lazarus, these next days are to show God’s glory and to give us a chance to repent. **A life restored is a life transformed.** Have you been restored in Jesus? Are you living

out a surrendered call? As we approach Easter, let us not focus on Christ's pain but discover his courage and strength to endure the road ahead. Amen. ||

Will you pray with me? Lord, we are awed by your willingness to face trials and pain for God's glory. We confess we can only do so through your strength and amazing love. As we celebrate your entry as the pilgrims did, let us prepare for your death and resurrection. Help us see opportunities to invite others to church this important week as we prepare for Good Friday, and Resurrection Sunday. Be with those here only in spirit. In Jesus' name, we pray, **Amen.**

Communion follows!