

CELEBRATE*by Rev. Elaine Poproski*

Today is Palm Sunday. It's the day we remember Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. It was one of the busiest times of year in that city. It was the lead-up to the annual 7-day celebration of the Passover – a remembering and re-telling of the story of Israel's exodus from Egypt because of God's intervention. It is still one of the most widely celebrated Jewish holidays in the world.

Jesus paraded into Jerusalem on a colt, on a carpet of cloaks, surrounded by people waving palm branches in the air. Most of us know this story. We hear it every year if we're church-goers. It's a favourite Sunday School story. It's a breath of fresh air after a Lenten season of fasting and penitence and lament. It's an invitation to put away our sombre robes and put on joy and laughter and celebrate.

In the gospel of John, we read that it was the crowd gathered in Jerusalem for the Passover who went out to meet Jesus. Waving their palm branches they shouted: "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord – the king of Israel!"ⁱ

In Matthew's gospel, we're told that a very large crowd spread their cloaks as well as branches from the trees on the road. The crowd surrounded Jesus, going with him into the city, shouting: "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!"ⁱⁱ

Mark's version of events is very like Matthew's. In his version, the crowd surrounding Jesus shouted: "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!"ⁱⁱⁱ

And then we get to Luke's version. Luke's version of events is a bit different from that of the other gospel writers. You may have picked up on this when Justin and Melodie read Luke's account for us earlier. Luke's crowd seems to be limited to the disciples (not just the twelve we usually think of, but all the people who were followers of Jesus); Luke makes no mention of palm branches – of branches of any kind, really; and, perhaps most startling to those of us who grew up with this Palm Sunday story, no one in Luke's version says "Hosanna!" Instead, the people say: "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!"^{iv}

Do these differences matter? I don't think so. I think these differences simply represent the fact that each writer was writing to a different audience, had different sources of information, and likely wanted to emphasize different things in their telling of the story. I also think it's important for us to remember that God ordained that all four gospels be included in the Bible exactly because no one author could capture the whole picture by himself.

So, what was actually going on?

Here's what we know: First, there was an entry into the city and that entry was filled with all sorts of powerful imagery and prophetic overtones. Jerusalem had witnessed kings and conquering generals enter their city on numerous occasions over the years. These kings and generals were escorted by crowds of city folk or by their own army, shouting out their praise and

welcome. It wasn't by accident that Jesus' entry looked a lot like that of previous conquering kings and generals. It's not by accident that in all accounts, Jesus is named king. In John, he's the king of Israel. In Matthew, he's the Son of David – which is the same as calling him king. In Mark they shout: Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David. The implication being that Jesus is the king of that kingdom. And in Luke they shouted: Blessed is the king...!

In all four gospels, Jesus enters the city on a colt. This set him apart from those conquering kings and generals of previous years. A colt signified humility. It was about as different from a war horse as you could get. It was reminiscent of Israel's great king, Solomon, who rode a donkey to his coronation. But perhaps more importantly, it would have brought to mind the prophet Zechariah's ancient words, from Zechariah 9:9:

Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion!
Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem!
Lo, your king comes to you;
triumphant and victorious is he,
humble and riding on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

Not only did the people call Jesus, 'king', but he looked the part as well. And he looked the part, not of just any king, but of a king with important messianic overtones. (By messianic overtones we mean that they saw in him the coming Messiah.) This was the king they'd been waiting for, for hundreds of years. This was the king who would restore their greatness. This was the king promised by the prophets – the king who would usher in God's everlasting kingdom.

Another thing going on in this story, in all four gospel accounts, is represented by the crowd shouting the words, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord." (Luke substitutes 'king' for 'one', but that's not an important distinction.)

What's important about this sentence in the mouths of the people, is its connection to Psalm 118. This was a psalm already established as one of the great festival psalms. It was recited as part of the Passover celebration as well as at other times. In its original setting, it was likely written out of some kind of military crisis from which Israel had been delivered. It offers a first-person account of that crisis and leaves no doubt that victory was from God and that God was to be praised. Let's look more closely at this psalm. It's Psalm 118. You may find it helpful to follow along in your own Bible.

The psalm opens with a declaration of God's goodness and love. From there, it tells the story of the king's crisis as well as his experience of God's presence and protection in the midst of that crisis. In verses 5 & 6 we read:

Out of my distress I called on the Lord;
the Lord answered me and set me in a broad place.
With the Lord on my side, I do not fear.
What can mortals do to me?

The king recounts all sorts of horrible and frightening experiences, presumably in the midst of a battle. He says, “All the nations surrounded me... They surrounded me, surrounded me on every side... They surrounded me like bees; they blazed like a fire of thorns... I was pushed hard, so that I was falling...” What can mortals do to me? All of these things! But in between each of these statements he declares, “In the name of the Lord I cut them off!”, and he sings a song of God’s strength and might – of God’s deliverance.

One of the things I’m intrigued by is that in-between statement, “In the name of the Lord I cut them off!” It’s a perfectly appropriate thing to say – especially in a psalm. But I wonder if the person who wrote those words experienced their truth while all the horrible things were happening. I wonder if he understood their truth right away, or if it took some time to get there. I wonder if there was an original version of this story in which he said only, “I cut them off.” I think sometimes, especially when we conquer something that’s really hard – when we are victorious out of a battle we weren’t sure we could win – I think sometimes we forget or completely deny God’s involvement. We persevered and we won, or we fought hard and we conquered. God is nowhere to be found.

Of course, there’s the other possible mistake we make here as well. I wonder if sometimes, instead of saying only “I cut them off,” we flip it and we say only, “in the name of the Lord” or “the Lord helped me.” What I mean is that I wonder if sometimes we lay the entirety of the victory at God’s feet and completely ignore our part in it. Does that sound wrong to you? It sounds weird and a bit wrong to me – this idea that we have a part in it. I don’t mean that we’re somehow equal to God and I don’t mean we are victorious outside God’s help. But I do think it’s important to remember that more often than not, God works *with* us, not *instead* of us. Had the psalmist not fought his battle, he would not have been victorious. He says, “In the name of the Lord” because it was in the power and the presence of the Lord that victory was won, but he doesn’t say, “The Lord cut them off.” He says, “I cut them off” because it was the Lord and the psalmist in partnership together.

I wonder if we sometimes forget that that’s the way God works. It’s not that he can’t or sometimes doesn’t work all on his own. But I think the evidence from the Bible tells us that more often God works with us and through us. If all we do is sit back and wait for him to do something, we’ll likely be waiting a long time. It doesn’t mean we don’t wait to hear from him or to find out how he wants us to act; but it does mean that we do act. We work with God, and he works with us. This is where we find victory.

What battles are you fighting these days? Is God in it with you, or are you fighting all alone? Is it time to pause and notice God? Is it time to make room for him to act?

What battles should you be fighting these days? Where have you given up? Where are you expecting God to do something without also doing something yourself? Is it time to get in the fight? Is it time to make room for God to work through you?

In verse 19, the victorious king stands at the gates of the city, and calls for them to be opened. Perhaps they were closed to protect the city during the battle. Perhaps the words are more

ritualistic in nature. It doesn't matter. The point is that the victorious king calls out and he is answered. He goes to the place of worship to give thanks to God for all God has done for him. The words are simple. "I thank you that you have answered me and have become my salvation." They're not fancy or complicated words. It's just, "I thank you that you have answered me and have become my salvation."

When we move into verse 22, there's a shift. Up to this point, there was a single person telling his story. But in verse 22, the words shift from singular to plural. No longer is it about me; now it's about us. This is exactly the way any testimony of faith is supposed to work. When we hear someone's story, it's supposed to lead us to a place of worship. That's what happens here. Though admittedly, the way it begins, with verse 22, doesn't sound much like worship. At least not initially.

The people say, in verse 22, "The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone." Those words sound like they come completely out of the blue, like some weirdly placed proverb. What does a metaphor about builders and stones have to do with anything?

This metaphor speaks to the way something (or someone) who had been rejected or dismissed in one instance, might be exactly what's needed in another. The people are saying that their king had been dismissed by the nations – he'd been looked down on, seen to be of no consequence. But that when all was said and done, it turned out he was exactly the right person for the fight.

The people go on to acknowledge that he wasn't the right person for the fight because of who he was, but because God had chosen him, and God had chosen to work with and through him. Acknowledging that fact is the basis for their worship. They say, beginning in verse 23,

This is the Lord's doing [They're referring to the whole cornerstone thing; the *this* they're referring to is that God chose him and worked with him and through him to achieve victory.]

This is the Lord's doing;
it is marvelous in our eyes.
This is the day that the Lord has made;
let us rejoice and be glad in it.

Those last words probably sound familiar to you. We say them a lot. "This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it." There's even a song – a chorus, really. It dates to the late 1960s. You probably know it. 🎵 *This is the day, this is the day that the Lord has made, that the Lord has made...* 🎵

Those words come straight out of Psalm 118, but when we say them or sing them, I think we probably do so without understanding their meaning from within the context of the Psalm. We say them and we mean that God made today and because God made today we should find joy in it. And there's nothing wrong with that interpretation of their meaning. But in the context of Psalm 118, these words are more nuanced than that.

The king and the people are celebrating victory over their enemies. They're celebrating by paying tribute to God's deliverance – God's salvation and protection. The word *made*, doesn't just mean it was created like any other day. They're talking specifically about that day – the day of their victory over their enemies. This is the day – this day of victory is the day that the Lord has made. Some translators suggest a better translation might read: This is the day God has acted.^{vi} Either way, it's a celebration; it's worship.

Then we get to verse 25, which seems out of place. Here they are, celebrating their victory, and they cry out, "Save us, we beseech you, O Lord! O Lord, we beseech you, give us success!" Haven't they already been saved? Isn't that the whole point of what's going on here? Haven't they already succeeded? Maybe everything isn't as over as we thought. Maybe this is about their recognition that things like this most recent crisis happen all the time and so will happen again. The various commentators I read only agreed that no one really understands why this verse is here. But what we do know is that the Hebrew word that's translated here as "Save us, we beseech you" is better known to us as we hear it in the Palm Sunday story, when the crowds cry out, "Hosanna!" *Hosanna* means *save us* or *deliver us*. There's an urgency to it - an intensity about the word. It's better translated "Save us now." It's a cry for help.

This is what the people shouted at Jesus as he rode that colt into Jerusalem. They were crying out to him to save them – to deliver them. And just like the people of Psalm 118 recognized in their king that he came to them in the name of the Lord, so the people on Palm Sunday recognized in Jesus that He was from God. So they shouted, quoting directly from Psalm 118 and thus implying all that was in Psalm 118, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!"

The psalm closes with more words of worship – words that declare who God is and who he is to them. Verse 27 opens with the words *the Lord is God*. Verse 28 opens with parallel words that take that generalized statement, *The Lord is God*, and make it personal: *You are my God*. Isn't that what worship is supposed to be? A declaration of who God is *and* of who God is to us? Don't we need to both declare the objective truths of God *and* our own experiences of and relationship to God?

I wonder if you have any stories that lead you to worship. Have you ever experienced God's deliverance, or just his presence, in such a way that you found yourself worshipping like the people of Psalm 118 worshiped? Have you ever heard someone else's story of God in their own life such that it drove you to worship? This is the root of a Spiritual Discipline you may not realize is a Spiritual Discipline. I'm not talking about worship. For sure, worship is a Spiritual Discipline, but the one I'm talking about today is the Spiritual Discipline of celebration.

The spiritual disciplines are tools that help position us to know God. And what better way to know God than to intentionally celebrate who he is and what he's done? I'm not talking the kind of celebration that's singing a particularly joyful or moving song. I'm talking the kind of celebration the people of our city participated in when the Raptors won the NBA Championship back in 2019. I'm talking the kind of celebration I imagine is going to happen when Ukraine drives Russia out of their borders. I'm talking the kind of celebration high school students experience when they graduate. Of course, all those things are huge events, and we're not going to have huge events all the time. But what if we felt about God the way we felt about the Raptors in 2019? Can you imagine?

It starts with telling our stories. They may not be big stories. They don't have to be big stories. They don't have to be on par with victory in war. The point is to tell the stories, even if just to ourselves, to start. Tell them in such a way that we see God's involvement clearly. The point is to practice the discipline of celebration, which means practicing the discipline of telling our stories and noticing God at work in those stories. Maybe we take Psalm 118, and we use it as a template for our own stories, especially verses 10 – 14 in which the psalmist goes back and forth between telling what was going on and then declaring God's activity in the midst of it.

Maybe it's about doing celebratory things in conjunction with talking about what God has done. Maybe next time you tell someone a story about God in your life, you bring cupcakes to eat together – or whatever it is you eat or drink when you celebrate. Maybe it's not cupcakes; maybe it's champagne. Maybe you toast to God. Maybe you throw a party and tell people it's because of something God did. Maybe you take time to dance as you recount the deeds of God in your life. Whatever you do, let's try practicing the Spiritual Discipline of celebration this week. What better week than the one we're in – the one in which we remember what Jesus did – the one in which we remember his death and his resurrection. Maybe as we choose intentionally to celebrate, we will be amazed anew by the great act of God stepping into time and space to save us from sin and death.

ⁱ John 12:13

ⁱⁱ Matthew 21:9

ⁱⁱⁱ Mark 11:9

^{iv} Luke 19:38

^v This song was written by Les Garrett. It first appeared in "Scripture in Song" published in 1967. © 1967, 1980 Universal Music – Brentwood Benson Publishing. C.C.L.I. Song #32754.

^{vi} See John Goldingay. *Psalms, Vol. 3: Psalms 90-150*. (Grand Rapids, Baker Academic: 2008), 362. See also J. Clinton McCann, Jr. *A Theological Introduction to the Book of Psalms*. (Nashville, Abingdon Press: 1993), 168.