

“Thank You, Thank You, Thank You”

Series of Psalms (Lent) – part 5

Psalm 118:15-29

[53-title] You are in the right place this morning. Take a good look around you. You are surrounded by people who are here to love and worship God together, and love and encourage each other. I cannot think of a better place to be than in church on Sunday morning. You might think you are here by accident. You might have needed three cups of coffee just face today. That’s OK. God sees you just as you are right now, and your presence here makes a difference. This sermon is all about thankfulness, so let me just start by simply saying, thanks for coming. I am honored by your presence.

Would you please join me in prayer?

Lord Almighty, Author of Light and Salvation, thank you for your love and mercy. We are gathered as the Body of Christ, the church, to worship you and adore you, to say thank you for all you have done to save us. As we continue this journey through Lent to Easter, guide us by your Holy Spirit to be witnesses of the greatest love story the world has ever known. Show us again the greatness of your salvation in Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. We love you, O God. Amen.

The past few weeks we have been examining the psalms on our journey through Lent. With each psalm, we have found a connection to the Easter story. Psalms cover a wide range of emotions – joy, sorrow, grief, anger, and gratefulness. These are the songs Jesus sang, the prayers Jesus prayed, and they help give voice to our prayers, as well.

[54-victory parade] Today, on Palm Sunday, one week before Easter, it’s natural to think about parades. It’s been a while since I’ve been part of a victory parade. The last one I can remember is the 1996 Parade of Roses. It was sort of a victory parade for us, because our football team had won a lot of games. But that’s not really the image painted by this psalm. I think it closer resembles the victory parades at the end of World War II.

Have you had a moment like that? Have you wanted to shout joyfully? Have you ever been so grateful that you just wanted to run outside and yell “Thank You” to the heavens? Maybe you have, but then again, maybe not. I

want to speak to those especially who have not. Look at how happy these people are. Do you long for that kind of celebration? Don't you want to join those people?

[55-Psalm Sunday crowd] What about the crowd that followed Jesus into Jerusalem? Do you wish you were so filled with joy and thanksgiving that you were shouting, “Hosanna”?

I know I do. I want to feel that joy and gratitude. That's why we read Psalm 118, a psalm of thanksgiving and victory. This psalm took center stage as Jesus entered Jerusalem, as we read in Luke 19:28-40.

[56-60] ²⁸...Jesus went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem.²⁹ As he approached Bethphage and Bethany at the hill called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples, saying to them, ³⁰“Go to the village ahead of you, and as you enter it, you will find a colt tied there, which no one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here. ³¹If anyone asks you, ‘Why are you untying it?’ say, ‘The Lord needs it.’”

³²Those who were sent ahead went and found it just as he had told them. ³³As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, “Why are you untying the colt?”

³⁴They replied, “The Lord needs it.”

³⁵They brought it to Jesus, threw their cloaks on the colt and put Jesus on it. ³⁶As he went along, people spread their cloaks on the road.

³⁷When he came near the place where the road goes down the Mount of Olives, the whole crowd of disciples began joyfully to praise God in loud voices for all the miracles they had seen:

³⁸“Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!”
“Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!”

³⁹Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Jesus, “Teacher, rebuke your disciples!”

⁴⁰“I tell you,” he replied, “if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out.”

The crowds were shouting the words from Psalm 118. They were drawing comparisons between Jesus' entry into Jerusalem and this victory psalm of thanksgiving. Let's take a closer look.

[61 – hands and heart] Psalm 118 is a song for giving thanks to God. It starts in the very first verse: “Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his love endures forever.” (Psalm 118:1) This chant is a response by the people. There were to echo it back to whomever was leading worship.

[62-verses] Skip ahead to verse 15, and you see the people were celebrating victory in battle. They were shouting joyfully. They were giving full credit to God.

In verses 17 and 18, the author expresses thanks that God disciplined him. Have you ever been thankful for discipline? Are you glad that your parents spanked you? Did you say thanks for taking away the car keys, or grounding you? Did you thank your teachers when they gave you a detention or extra work? Probably not, but in this case, the psalmist is telling us, it was a good thing that God disciplined him. It’s unusual, and it’s not the only unusual thing about this psalm.

[63-verses] The focal point of this psalm verse 22. “The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.” That line is followed by a grateful exclamation in verse 24: “The Lord has done it this very day; let us rejoice today and be glad.” You might recognize the NRSV translation better. “This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.”

The psalm conveys to us an element of surprise. Something overlooked became the very thing to save. Who was the stone the builders rejected? For the psalmist, it might have been a prince or king, some military leader who rose from humble beginnings.

[64-Statue of man on horse] The authors of the New Testament have a different idea, though. All four gospels quote Jesus applying these verses to himself. Jesus was the stone the builders rejected. The Jewish leaders were looking for a great prophet who would restore full obedience to God’s law. The people were looking for a powerful military leader who would break the rule of the Romans. They were all looking for strong, mighty, proud leaders. They didn’t expect a simple Jewish rabbi from the backwater town of Nazareth to bring their salvation. Yet Jesus knew this was why he came. He was that stone rejected by his own people. He became the cornerstone, the most important stone in the foundation, from which all others are measured.

[65 - Jesus on a donkey] Salvation is surprising, and it should awaken a wellspring of gratefulness that has us shouting in the streets, “Lord, we praise you!” The disciples and the people who followed Jesus into Jerusalem saw this. They experienced it. They were filled with joy. They shouted, “Hosanna! God save us!” “God, grant us success!” “Blessed is the one, the king who comes in the name of the Lord!”

We don’t see this type of celebration as often as we should, and that bothers me. Why is it?

It starts with a simple reason: we tend to overlook Jesus. This world, for the large part, rejects that Jesus is the Son of the Living God and the only way to the Father. I know that, and that is why I bend my every effort to helping the church proclaim this truth.

[66-Man not flexing] But there is more. The reason we don’t have these Palm Sunday parades is because we don’t usually credit God with the victory. When we overcome something, we tend to say it was just luck or coincidence, perhaps our own skill, talent, or wisdom that provided the victory. We don’t celebrate with palm-waving because we like to steal the credit from God.

We should be confident in God’s salvation, not our own power. We should never rest on our laurels. God doesn’t save us because we are good enough, strong enough, handsome or smart enough. God saves us because we cannot save ourselves. God loves us.

Sometimes we have the wrong image of what victory looks like. We envision a different kind of victory than what God has in mind for us. It was the same thing in Jesus’ time. The people had their differing views of the Messiah.

[67-cross] The story of Palm Sunday and Easter is: Salvation through Jesus should surprise us. We should be amazed that we have victory over sin. We should be awed that God redeems us. We should be thankful that God disciplines us by letting us feel the consequences of our sin. Find a brother or sister in Christ whose life was so down, they thought they’d never recover. Ask them how they overcame, and they will say it was only the grace of Jesus Christ that saved them, because nothing else could. They will say, as I do, “It was in that dark valley that I finally heard Jesus say, ‘Take my hand.’”

Thankfulness escapes us when we look for the wrong type of victory.

We pray, “God, make me rich so I can get out of debt,” instead of, “God, please teach me to rely on you, and teach me to be a generous person with what you have given me.”

We pray, “God, get me out of this relationship,” instead of, “God, if it is at all possible, please help me reconcile and love my enemies like Jesus loved his.”

We pray, “God, take this pain away,” instead of, “God, please use my pain to bring me wisdom, compassion and empathy for others.”

The psalmist knew that God should be thanked for the victory – not the army, and not the king. All thankfulness flows through God.

[68-verse] What kind of victory are you looking for? Is it driven by human standards? Money, fame, numerical growth? Sure, God can grant us financial and material success, but that is not victory in and of itself. More often, God tests us to see what our attitude is in any circumstance, and whether or not we will thank him. We truly know victory when we can say, like the Apostle Paul, “I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances....I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength.” (Philippians 4:11-13)

We should all be grateful to God for saving us. Praising God is a way of saying thanks for what He has done and what He will do.

[69-crosses-thank you] So, how thankful are you today? Do you have an attitude of gratitude? It should permeate the church. We should recognize that our victory is eternal life and salvation from sin, won only by the redeeming blood of Jesus Christ shed on the cross. We should be so grateful, we should never stop smiling. We should be free to lift our voice and pray, sing, and shout about God’s goodness. “His love endures forever!” We should be surprised that there is nothing like the salvation of Jesus Christ. It is truly amazing grace.

“Please” and “thank you” are the two most important words in any language. That includes the language of faith. How are you practicing your thankfulness?

I used to pick on the crowds for deserting Jesus so quickly, then I realized we are all like them. Take this moment of Palm Sunday for what it is – a reminder to give thanks in all circumstances, to lift our voices with all creation and thank God for the gift of salvation. That’s truly what Palm Sunday is about.

Let’s pray.

Memory verse

Psalm 118:1 – “Give thanks to the Lord, for He is good; His love endures forever.”

Reflection questions

1. When have you witnessed a victory parade? Who was in it? How did you feel watching it?
2. Do you feel like God has provided you victory in surprising ways? If so, how and when? If not, why not?
3. Why do people crave a savior who is strong, mighty, and proud? Why are we drawn to those more powerful than us?
4. What kind of Savior is Jesus? Why did he lay his life down instead of conquering by the sword?
5. How thankful are you when God disciplines you? How do you show your gratitude to God for your salvation? What needs to change in your heart to receive the victory of Jesus?