

Text: Psalm 118:14-29

This week, in preparation for Resurrection Day, I read the Lectionary scriptures. I often read these texts as I seek the message of the Lord in my sermon. As some of you know, the Lectionary is a three-year plan of scripture readings, which can be used as a guide for preaching through the Bible. My problem with it is that I like to delve into a subject in some depth which often takes me more than one sermon. But this week I found my inspiration in the Lectionary.

I want us to consider two texts. One is a prophetic look forward to the Messiah and the other is a testimony that looks back at the Messiah. The first text you heard this morning – Psalm 118.

Psalms come in many forms. There are prayers for help; there are confessions of sin, there are prayers of anger and lament and there are many which are full of praise and rejoicing. If we meditate on the psalms they can be a help in expressing our heart-felt sentiments to the Lord in prayer. You can find practically any emotion in the psalms. I have been surprised at times in my life how perfectly a Psalm expressed my feelings to the Lord.

These Psalms are the hymnbook of the Jewish faith and many were then taken into the new Christian churches as hymns. The Psalm you heard this morning is one of those. It is a hymn that was sung at Easter in the early church. [Let me say parenthetically here that I don't like to use the word Easter because it refers to a pagan fertility god. I like to use Resurrection Day.]

Let's look at the Jewish meaning of the Psalm 118. It is part of what is called the "Egyptian Hallel" which are the six Psalms 113 to 118 sung during the Passover meal, the seder. They speak of the wondrous salvation of the Lord from slavery in Egypt, the exodus. The themes are the mighty power of the Lord, His steadfast love -- His hesed -- and His salvation. In recent weeks I have preached on God's power and His steadfast love. It is a continuous and infallible message throughout the Bible.

The Psalm is a liturgy between a person and the responses of the congregation. The One who comes stands at the gates of the temple and tells of His great distress and the salvation of the Lord. The Jews might consider this person to be Israel itself or maybe King David but the early church saw Jesus, the resurrected One who comes in the name of the Lord. I will use this interpretation.

The poem begins with the great affirmation which is said many times in the Psalms

1. O give thanks to the Lord, for He is good; his steadfast love endures forever!

After several verses of corporate praise, Jesus tells of His salvation. Imagine Jesus on the cross.

5. Out of my distress I called on the Lord; the Lord answered Me and set Me in a broad place.

6. With the Lord on my side I do not fear. What can mortals do to me?

7. The Lord is on my side to help me; I shall look in triumph on those who hate me.

8. It is better to take refuge in the Lord than to put confidence in mortals.

My friends, this is a great affirmation for our times -- that we can live by faith and not by fear. Our Lord is a God who chooses to act in human affairs. Paul said it this way in Romans chapter 8: "If God is for us, who is against us?"

Then Jesus describes the fierce attack upon Him. Beginning in verse 14 of our text, He describes His salvation by the right hand of the Lord. This image is a favorite in the Old Testament – the powerful right hand of the Lord. Next comes the mighty affirmation of God's power to overcome death. "I shall not die, but I shall live."

Jesus asks that the gates of the temple be opened to Him and the response is that the gate of the Lord shall be opened to the righteous -- those in right relationship to God. He again gives thanks for salvation.

Next comes the verse that Jesus used to refer to himself:  
22. The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.

Isaiah echoes this statement in chapter 53: "He was despised and rejected of men." God often reverses human expectations and uses those whom mortals have rejected. In the First Letter of Peter, chapter 2, we find this message:

4. Come to Him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and
5. like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

Continuing in the Psalm, the congregation responds with praise.  
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 Him.

The congregation then blesses this One who comes in the name of the Lord. This verse you remember was shouted by the crowd as Jesus rode into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. And then the procession moves to the altar. Jesus gives a final thanksgiving and praise to God. And the congregation ends with the same verse that began the hymn:

29. O give thanks to the Lord, for He is good, for His steadfast love endures forever.

My friends, you can see why this is considered a great Psalm. It is prophetic of the coming Messiah. It also contains so much of our faith. Let me try to list some of the ideas here. The goodness of God and His steadfast love that lasts forever, His powerful right hand, His gift of salvation from death, His help, His strength, His might, His marvelous doings. We come to Him with gratitude and praise and most important, trust that He is on our side. This trust, which is a fundamental attitude of our lives, brings us into right relationship so that we may enter the gates of the Lord. We need have no fear of death because Jesus makes this possible by His own death and resurrection. We can say with Him, "I shall not die, I shall live."

The second text I mentioned is a look backward, a personal testimony about the Messiah. In Acts chapter 10 we read the moving story of Cornelius, a Gentile believer, and his family. An angel comes to him and tells him to send for a man named Peter. Peter at the same time in another town has a vision of a sheet being let down from heaven with many animals in it including those that Jewish laws labeled unclean. And a voice

from heaven tells him to kill an animal and eat. But Peter replies that he would not eat anything that was unclean. Then the voice says to Peter, "What God has made clean you should not call profane." While Peter is struggling to understand this vision, the messengers from Cornelius arrive and ask that he accompany them to Cornelius' house. At this time in history, Jews did not enter the house of a Gentile so we must realize that this is no ordinary invitation.

After Cornelius tells Peter of the angel's visit, Peter gives this personal testimony.  
34. Then Peter began to speak to them: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality,  
35. but in every nation anyone who fears Him and does what is right is acceptable to Him.

36. You know the message He sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ--He is Lord of all.

37. That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced:

38. how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him.

39. We are witnesses to all that He did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put Him to death by hanging Him on a tree;

40. but God raised Him on the third day and allowed Him to appear,

41. not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with Him after he rose from the dead.

42. He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that He is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead.

43. All the prophets testify about Him that everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins through His name."

While Peter was still speaking the Holy Spirit fell on this Gentile household and Peter realizes that they need to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.

And so my friends, we have the prophecy, a great hymn, given to us of the coming of Jesus Christ and His resurrection, and then we have also the testimony after His coming. The message is there for all of us. It is the Lord's doing.

It is fitting this Resurrection Day that we join the early church and end with this great hymn, Psalm 118. Take your printed text please and let us read together the last verse.

29. O give thanks to the Lord, for He is good, for His steadfast love endures forever.

Text: Psalm 118:14-29

14. The Lord is my strength and my might;  
he has become my salvation.

15. There are glad songs of victory in the tents of the righteous:  
"The right hand of the Lord does valiantly;

16. the right hand of the Lord is exalted;  
the right hand of the Lord does valiantly."

17. I shall not die, but I shall live,  
and recount the deeds of the Lord.

18. The Lord has punished me severely,  
but he did not give me over to death.

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,  
and he has given us light.  
Bind the festal procession with branches,  
up to the horns of the altar. {Meaning of Heb uncertain}

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.