

Psalm 118

A Song of Victory

¹O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good;
his steadfast love endures forever! *His steadfast love endures forever.*

²Let Israel say,
"His steadfast love endures forever." *His steadfast love endures forever.*

³Let the house of Aaron say,
"His steadfast love endures forever." *His steadfast love endures forever.*

⁴Let those who fear the LORD say,
"His steadfast love endures forever." *His steadfast love endures forever.*

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

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

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

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

⁹It is better to take refuge in the LORD
It is better to take refuge in the LORD

It is better to take refuge in the LORD, than to put confidence in princes.

It is better to take refuge in the LORD
It is better to take refuge in the LORD

¹⁰All nations surrounded me;
in the name of the LORD I cut them off! *in the name of the LORD I cut them off!*
¹¹They surrounded me, surrounded me on every side;
in the name of the LORD I cut them off! *in the name of the LORD I cut them off!*
¹²They surrounded me like bees;
they blazed like a fire of thorns;
in the name of the LORD I cut them off! *in the name of the LORD I cut them off!*
¹³I was pushed hard, so that I was falling,
but the LORD helped me.
¹⁴The LORD is my strength and my might;
he has become my salvation.

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

¹⁷I shall not die, but I shall live,
and recount the deeds of the LORD.
¹⁸The LORD has punished me severely,
but he did not give me over to death.
¹⁹Open to me the gates of righteousness,
that I may enter through them
and give thanks to the LORD.
²⁰This is the gate of the LORD;
the righteous shall enter through it.

²¹I thank you that you have answered me
and have become my salvation.

²²The stone that the builders rejected
has become the chief cornerstone.

²³This is the LORD's doing;
it is marvelous in our eyes.

²⁴This is the day that the LORD has made;
let us rejoice and be glad in it.

**²⁴ *This is the day that the LORD has made;
let us rejoice and be glad in it.***

²⁵Save us, we beseech you, O LORD!
O LORD, we beseech you, give us success!

²⁶Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the LORD.^[d]
We bless you from the house of the LORD.

²⁷The LORD is God,
and he has given us light.
Bind the festal procession with branches,
up to the horns of the altar.^[e]

²⁸You are my God, (*You are my God*) and I will give thanks to you;
you are my God, (*You are my God*) I will extol you.

²⁹O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good,
for his steadfast love endures forever.

for his steadfast love endures forever.

for his steadfast love endures forever.

for his steadfast love endures forever.

John 12:12-16 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

Jesus' Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem

¹²The next day the great crowd that had come to the festival heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. ¹³So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, shouting,

“Hosanna!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord—
the King of Israel!”

¹⁴Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it; as it is written:

¹⁵“Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion.

Look, your king is coming,
sitting on a donkey's colt!”

¹⁶His disciples did not understand these things at first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written of him and had been done to him.

March 25, 2018 (Palm Sunday)

John 12:12-16; Psalm 118

Sweet, Sweet Victory

Kerra Becker English

I'm not sporty enough to know many sports related analogies, but this week's readings really reminded me of the days when Tim Tebow was grabbing football headlines. In case you don't remember Tebow, he was known for spontaneously getting down on one knee in prayer both before games and especially in the end zone, so much so that it was defined by Urban Dictionary as "Tebowing." He's been known for saying to sports announcers, "First and foremost, I have to give glory to my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ – and also to thank my teammates." Love it or hate it – he has been very public about his strong commitment to Christianity, and as I interpret it, he is willing to attribute his worldly success to God's showing favor on the faithful. According to Tim Tebow, God seems very pleased with his football career!

But praising God for our wins was not something invented by football players. Psalm 118 is a victory prayer. The palm branch parade is a celebration of Jesus' big arrival. Jesus has come into Jerusalem with a triumphal entry – at least that's how most scripture headings regarding this event describe it. Blessed is the one who does whatever he or she does – in the name of the Lord.

Give that concept an American twist and take it through the next few logical steps, and you'll end up with a theology that suggests that the righteous always end up on top, and the unrighteous, not so much. It's the pull yourself up by your own bootstraps mentality with a little religious moralism thrown in for effect. These are the pious prayers of the all-stars, the well-to-do, and the holier-than-thou types. These are the folks that claim that their success in life is all due to their unflappable faith in Jesus. That is, until it gets flapped. It's easy to point to heaven and be thankful after the game-winning score, but a little harder to point to heaven and be thankful when your life is falling apart, or when you are Jesus, and after *your* parade, you will be arrested, tried, convicted and executed all as an innocent man.

The ability to give God the glory, according to scripture, isn't as dependent on circumstance as we have been conditioned to believe. It's not that the winners are always blessed and the losers are always cursed – as our culture so often subtly implies. It's that humankind does what humankind was meant to do when we notice the awe and wonder of life and give thanks to our Creator from that place of human frailty and smallness in a vast and spectacular world. Won victory over your enemies? Thanks be to God. Distressed to the point of depression and sure of your impending death? Thanks be to God. It's a festival day with palms and fireworks, wine, good food, and celebration? Thanks be to God. It's just another miserable day that the

Lord has given you to do the same things that bored you to tears yesterday? Thanks be to God.

The Psalmist doesn't think the same way we've been taught to think. No, THIS victory prayer has the long view in mind. God's steadfast love is forever. And if God's steadfast love is forever, then we also have to try to make sense of those times when God's favor might not be quite so apparent. In fact, this poet starts with us in the ditch, in the basement of our lives. "Out of my distress I called upon the Lord." Then the next verses clarify that only God can be our refuge because you can't put your confidence in other people, even other important people. They won't save you. You can't put your trust in national security. It will be threatened – it doesn't matter who you are or where you come from. We may be able to thank the Lord for our salvation – but it's only because the stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone in God's eyes. Our worldly rejection elicits God's compassion – aren't we lucky?

Now, we can pray for success, and we do, lots of times, if we are honest. "Let me get this job." "I hope she tells me that she loves me back." "Let my favorite team get the trophy." "I hope I get the good parking place at the grocery store." But it all comes back to the same line, over and over again, "God's steadfast love endures forever." It doesn't matter if I personally achieve all my goals and have my life go exactly as planned. Uh-uh. God's love keeps on flowing into the world with or

without my permission. And God's love isn't nearly as discriminating as I think it ought to be, and it isn't always shown to me in exactly the ways I might want.

You see, we surely have the same kinds of questions as those early prayer writers. We notice how people and princes have let us down. We are familiar with the power plays that happen among nations – even though our nation has enjoyed a pretty long run of feeling powerful – at least in my lifetime. As awesome as it is to see someone publicly witnessing to their faith in a moment of pride and celebration, I long to hear more from the Christians who find it difficult to keep the faith because of the way the world just IS. I want to hear the prayers of those who say, “Out of my distress I cried to the Lord,” and then I got up of the couch, dusted myself off, and went out into the world to make it better – with God's help.

It is a monumental occasion to see kids, teenagers, of every race, every income bracket, every kind of community flooding the streets of Washington DC and Richmond Virginia, and making their voices heard in various school districts small and large to say that they've seen enough, experienced enough, have simply had “enough” of gun violence. I hear their plea. Columbine happened one month after my oldest son was born, and shootings AT SCHOOL have been happening every year since. My son is in college now, and my younger daughter has grown up with yearly active shooter drills in her classroom. These young people are shouting their distress, crying it to the Lord. How will we hear them and respond? The adults might need to

start adulating or else tell them to their faces that a few lives taken here or there doesn't matter. What's it going to be?

It's important in this transition in our church calendar as Lent rolls into Holy Week, to be reminded that the triumphal entry into Jerusalem doesn't end well. Jesus' 15 seconds of heroic fame won't last long. Jesus has been healing people, restoring them to salvation, and teaching as this psalm does, that God's steadfast love endures forever. And maybe even for those things he will be welcomed into Jerusalem with shouts of Hosanna. Nevertheless, we know that the crowd will turn on him rather quickly. When he no longer appears to be the hero they wanted him to be, their voices will soon start shouting, "Crucify him." How will we know the presence of God's steadfast love during the events of Jesus' last days – when even Jesus himself feels forsaken? It helps that we know the outcome of the story – that at last we will be able to say that Jesus has conquered death and has risen. His palm parade of worldly glory will be absolutely nothing compared to what actually happens when God's glory is revealed and the possibilities for transformation in God's love are identified in their true nature as limitless. But in that scary meantime, we watch, we wait, we pray, we march, and we take refuge in the Lord when the people and powers and principalities are threatening to undo our lives completely. So, we do pray for success, victory, and glory – but in God's time and in God's ways. And it's hard to wait and watch when the tragedies of life are completely overwhelming. But we trust, like the psalmist, like

Jesus, that God's love hasn't left us before and will not leave us now, even in the darkness. Amen.

Benediction:

The Christian faith, while wildly misrepresented in so much of American culture, is really about death and resurrection. It's about how God continues to reach into the graves we dig for ourselves and pull us out, giving us new life, in ways both dramatic and small.

Or as the apostle Paul has said, Anyone who finds themselves in Christ – a new creation! The old life has gone, a new life has begun. Go – and start living your new life – today.

– Nadia Bolz Weber