

Psalms 118: 1-2;21-29

<sup>1</sup> O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good;  
his steadfast love endures forever!

<sup>2</sup> Let Israel say,  
"His steadfast love endures forever."

<sup>3</sup> Let the house of Aaron say,  
"His steadfast love endures forever."

<sup>4</sup> Let those who fear the LORD say,  
"His steadfast love endures forever."

<sup>21</sup> I thank you that you have answered me  
and have become my salvation.

<sup>22</sup> The stone that the builders rejected  
has become the chief cornerstone.

<sup>23</sup> This is the LORD's doing;  
it is marvelous in our eyes.

<sup>24</sup> This is the day that the LORD has made;  
let us rejoice and be glad in it.<sup>[c]</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Save us, we beseech you, O LORD!  
O LORD, we beseech you, give us success!

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

<sup>27</sup> The LORD is God,  
and he has given us light.

Bind the festal procession with branches,  
up to the horns of the altar.<sup>[e]</sup>

<sup>28</sup> You are my God, and I will give thanks to you;  
you are my God, I will extol you.

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

## Jesus' Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem

**21** When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, <sup>2</sup>saying to them, "Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. <sup>3</sup>If anyone says anything to you, just say this, 'The Lord needs them.' And he will send them immediately.<sup>[a]</sup>" <sup>4</sup>This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying,

<sup>5</sup>"Tell the daughter of Zion,  
Look, your king is coming to you,  
humble, and mounted on a donkey,  
and on a colt, the foal of a donkey."

<sup>6</sup>The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; <sup>7</sup>they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. <sup>8</sup>A very large crowd<sup>[b]</sup> spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. <sup>9</sup>The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting,

"Hosanna to the Son of David!  
Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!  
Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

<sup>10</sup>When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, "Who is this?" <sup>11</sup>The crowds were saying, "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee."

**April 5, 2020**

**Psalm 118; Matthew 21: 1-11**

**Blessed is the One Who Comes in the Name of the Lord**

**Kerra Becker English**

Why are the mystics so weird? When you start to read about the mystics in any religious tradition, the stories are always so odd. It's not just that many of them chose a monastic kind of life – they were the ones known for being too eager to make it even more rigorous. Today we would label them as having a host of mental disorders for choosing such extended periods of solitude, or fasting, or desert living. They talked about having visions and visitations, and demanded audiences with those who would hear the fantastical details of their alternate realities. They whole-heartedly welcomed disease, infirmities, and even death, and often got depressed when they got “better” in their physical bodies. They were truly obsessed with the rituals of the church more so than the teachings. And those who were part of the institutional design of the church sought to have them banished or at least discounted as such weirdos – if not considered completely heretical and burned at the stake. The mystics are always to be found on the fringes of religion – but they can offer corrections and interpretations to the so-called “normal” ways of doing things that help us not so dramatic Christian folk understand our faith on a deeper level.

It is my hunch that now that we've left the gate on the way things “normally” are – the mystics, prophets, and spiritual practitioners of solitude, fasting, and simplistic living will help us as we learn to think differently. At the same time, this is when all the charlatans and false religious guides will also want to cut themselves an even bigger slice of the religious pie. We're no longer in the place where we can just get by with attending church, acting kindly, and singing the hymns we've always sung. Those things are sustaining in times of peace and relative ease,

and trust me, I LOVE that way of being church. It has been a comfort and a blessing to me and to you, and to a whole lot of people who have provided great and formidable acts of loving kindness in our world. But what we are going through right now is going to shift the way we understand the world to work. Ten million already unemployed in the United States...Hundreds of thousands that will knowingly die from this disease, a face-less and ruthless killer...We will be discovering over the next weeks and months that we no longer live in that same place of comfort and familiarity. We can't even be together in the church building in ways that would have provided a sense of security in the past. Christianity, well, all religions really – will have to find a new kind of spiritual voice in the coming chaos – or else be left behind in the rubble of culture that is no more.

Christianity has had it easy in our culture, and it has given back generously to our way of life through those who have followed its better angels. It has been the religion of many “good people” who built the structures of public schools and developed institutions of higher learning. We have learned from our sacred texts that we must create community safety nets through charitable giving that provides food and shelter for the least of these. And after hearing repeatedly the healing stories of Jesus, Christian philanthropists have funded multiple medical breakthroughs and built hospitals to care for the sick, and homes to care for the aging and dying. And at the very same time, American Christianity has carried with it a very dark side that justified the dehumanization of black people through slavery, and allowed the genocide of native peoples as savages. Christians have been known for the kind of exclusivity and power clubs that have sought to prop themselves up at the expense of the humanity of others. Now is the time for a significant choice to be made: Which path will Christianity follow as the heat gets turned up - the one that offers radical compassion, or the one that tries to preserve its own power? And if

Christians take divergent paths – where will you choose to go? Will you listen to the power structures that want packed churches on Easter as a show of invincibility, or will you dive deeply into the spiritual truths that have been sustained over time through the heart and on the edges? Because in the heart and on the edges are the two places where I tend to find Jesus.

Mystical Christianity and those who find themselves drawn to it as I do, see the world differently than those who have always looked through the glasses of power and comfort and thought that's the way the world ACTUALLY looked in real life. The mystics challenge us to take off those glasses and be blessed as those who walk securely in the name of the Lord. Those glasses aren't always so easy to remove. I know. I benefit from them greatly. They are the glasses that make me think "I'll be OK" through this – even though many won't. They are the glasses that dull my memory to how many people don't even have Internet access at home when I complain about the glitches in mine, or that minimize what's available in my refrigerator when I'm looking to what to make for dinner in quite a well-stocked kitchen. Lord, make me aware of those who are really hurting, when what I'm actually feeling is inconvenience. That prayer has circulated a few times around Facebook, and with reason. We are seeing the denial that has long plagued humankind, and is most pronounced in areas of greater affluence. As an old Hindu saying goes: *The surprise of surprises is that although everybody who has ever lived in this world has died, for some reason we think we won't.*

What the mystics prioritize, our world tells us is foolish – solitude, simplicity, valuing the community more than the individual, and embracing death, our own death as part of the reality of this life. Our culture is not one to identify the benefits of experiencing melancholy, let alone giving voice to lament. Given that we love our perpetual state of being "on top," a superpower, THE superpower, we have forgotten how to identify the woundedness of humanity, and lean on

the trustworthiness of God. The psalms remind us of those values and situate us in the place where we can be a part of the vastness of humanity rather than having to believe we are too important or too big to fail. The psalms and the mystics are of one voice, and in spite of the bleak outlook that is often explained in detail, these prayers remain oddly hopeful.

Today we come to Psalm 118 – a psalm that is referenced in the Palm Sunday reading as what gets proclaimed during Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem. Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna – they shout. Save us. And the very next verse says, “When he came into Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking - Who is this?” Who is this weirdo that rides into a festal parade on a donkey? Who is this prophet from the outskirts of town, from the edges who doesn’t fit in in the big city? Who does he think he is? Let’s make fun of him, discredit him, banish him, and ultimately crucify him. He comes into trouble with a simple message: Love God. Love one another. No exceptions. No rules. Just love.

And this Psalm gives us a significant reminder of what that love is like: Give thanks to the Lord (even when there is turmoil). God is good (even when your situation is terrible). God’s steadfast love endures forever. That’s right, forever. Got that Israel? God’s steadfast love endures forever. Got that house of Aaron? God’s steadfast love endures forever. Got that people who live in fear? Yes, for the fourth time, God’s steadfast love endures forever.

In the verses I skipped over, the next section is about crying out again – in distress. We do that. We are doing that now, but the psalmist prays, “With the Lord on my side, I do not fear. What can mortals do to me?” That’s mystical language right there. We absolutely know what kinds of awful, horrible things humans can do to each other, right? We have reason to be afraid. Certainly, Jesus had reason to be afraid – but he arrives in Jerusalem and stages a political protest – a parade in his honor that also points out his humility as he rides in on the youngest donkey he

can find. Jesus comes through the gate of Jerusalem prepared to give up his own life. His disciples have heard it over and over – even though they don't believe him. "Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them and give thanks to the Lord." That's where the prayer goes. And in that verse, I get a vision of Jesus passing through the gate, understanding that his mission is more important than his life, that righteousness matters more than his comfort, and that the thanks he has is directed 100% completely to God – not to his own character as a prophet, not to his gifts as a preacher, not to his popularity with the crowds. The gate that he enters will be the gate that leads him to death – and with righteousness enters through it.

The next lines of the psalm are the ones we hear used about Jesus, and though they were written well before his time, they are applicable to his story. The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. As of old the festal procession brought gifts to the horns of the altar where sins were forgiven, and in this Palm parade, we clamor for our own salvation as well. But I think it helps again to look at this story through the heart and from the edges. Too often we presume that Jesus is doing all the heavy lifting for us, and for sure he does. He goes first. He gives us the example. His message of love is about the same kind of steadfastness as we find in this psalm. But we forget that we must go through the gate ourselves. We must learn to trust God even in strange and awful times ourselves. We must understand that there are more important things than preserving our own lives – as we walk through the gates that make us tremble.

Now I know this can begin to sound like I'm making a plea for us to disregard the virus or to brazenly ignore those little inner nudges that lead us to caution. But that's absolutely not what I hope to convey, so let me be clear. The desire to disregard the real difficulties of our current situation can come from our ego, our own glorification, and it isn't what is needed in a

time of crisis. What I am encouraging is that we take a step deeper into our own story from the perspective of the mystics who, like Jesus, were willing to do the hard things – to listen deeply to their own inner voice in solitude, to trust God in times of previous plagues and disease, to fast from the things that draw attention away from God and toward human pride and arrogance. We are to step through the gate with Jesus this Palm Sunday so we can walk with him on the ultimate journey of faith in the midst of hardship, stress, and brutality. There is no Easter without Good Friday. There is no communion without brokenness and bloodshed. There can't be new life, without going through the death of the old life. We must stare it in the face – and when we do it will change us. That's the transformation that has always been at the heart of the Christian story. What Jesus calls us to do, and I admit just how scary this is, is to take up our own cross and follow. It's hard for me to exactly say what that means because the gate we enter, the cross we bear will be different for each of us. What is the same is the prayer's refrain. Why do we trust in God? Because God's steadfast love endures FOREVER. We don't really have much faith if we think that promise is only true when times are shiny and happy. When we can say that, and mean it, when life is getting really really hard, we will have learned from the mystics that it really is true, as one of my favorites, Julian of Norwich has said, "And all shall be well. And all shall be well. And all matter of thing shall be well." Amen.

For this week's prayer...

This is the day that the Lord has made.  
Let us rejoice and be glad in it.