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Psalm 118
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Today is Our Day

I mentioned recently that I used to live for one day. One day when I did this or that, then life would be great. Until one day I realized I was wishing my life away always waiting for that “one” day. As I reflected on today’s psalm, I wondered what was it that shocked me back into living more for today?

It began when I was serving in the Navy during the First Gulf War during the winter of 1991. Our ship was the northernmost ship in the Persian Gulf, the one closest to enemy territory in Kuwait. We served as a forward lookout post for the carrier air group which was about 150 miles south of us. For over two months, we operated in mine infested waters and were always within 90 seconds of a missile air strike from the Iraqi air defense force.

My job as head fire fighter and damage control assistant was to prepare the crew in the event that we hit a mine or a had a missile strike that could have sunk us. The threat was real and there were no promises that something devastating wouldn’t occur. It seemed as though death was literally knocking at my door. My collateral job was also as the protestant lay chaplain. So at night I would retreat to the outside weather decks, place my hands on the ship, and pray that God would deliver us from our enemies.

It was then that I began to realize that “today” is the day the Lord has made. Not tomorrow. Not when we got home from the war. Not when I eventually got out of the Navy. But that day!

Anyone who has come face to face with death understands what I’m talking about.

The psalm that Dian asked us to reflect upon is Psalm 118. When Dian faced open heart surgery for heart valve and unexpected aortic replacement earlier this spring, verse 24 really spoke to her. “Today is the day the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it.”

Turn with me to Psalm 118 as we feast upon the Word of the Lord.

Psalm 118

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

2 Let Israel say,
“His steadfast love endures forever.”

3 Let the house of Aaron say,
“His steadfast love endures forever.”

4 Let those who fear the Lord say,
“His steadfast love endures forever.”

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.

9 It is better to take refuge in the Lord
than to put confidence in princes.

10 All nations surrounded me;
in the name of the Lord I cut them off!

11 They surrounded me, surrounded me on every side;
in the name of the Lord I cut them off!

12 They surrounded me like bees; they blazed like a fire of thorns; in the name
of the Lord I cut them off!

13 I was pushed hard, so that I was falling,
but the Lord helped me.

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.

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.

Let us pray. Prayer of Illumination.

There are several things that I want to do this morning. First I want to look at the psalm's technicality, its placement in the psalter, its structure, and its imagery. Then I want to consider how it might have been used in the context of worship before and during Jesus' day and now in our day. And finally, we'll consider how it speaks to us today.

So first let's lay the technical foundations of Psalm 118.

Psalm 118 is part of a group of five psalms in the psalter, 113 to 118, known as the Egyptian Hallel Psalms. "Hallel" in Hebrew simply means "Praise Yahweh!" It's where we get the word hallelujah. These psalms were written as praise songs sung in connection with the Passover and other Hebrew festivals that reflected upon God's redemption of his people, particularly from their bondage in Egypt.

Jews and non-Jewish God fearing gentiles traveling to Jerusalem for the high holy days would sing songs on their way up to the temple mount in Jerusalem. You always went "up" to Jerusalem because of the ascent up the hill of the city and to the temple mount. Being that this was a regular part of the festival worship

liturgy, Jesus would have been very familiar with this psalm and would have sung it as he celebrated the high holy days with his family and disciples.

The psalm consists of a communal call and response to worship in verses 1-4. The personal testimony of the king or one who had been delivered from danger in verses 5-18. The arrival at the temple and call to open the gates in verse 19. The response of the gate guard in verse 20. The worship in the temple courts in verses 21-27. A personal declaration of faith and praise of Yahweh in verse 28. And a final doxology or communal call and response of thanksgiving in verse 29.

Think of this this way.

A priest would sing an opening line, “O Give thanks to the Lord, For he is good.” The congregation would respond with the refrain, **“His Love Endures Forever.”** Let’s try that now.

Then a soloist, perhaps the king, would sing their personal testimony of how God had delivered them from danger. The soloist would then ask to be let into the temple gates, “Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them and give thanks to the Lord.” The Levite priests who guard the gates would reply with a challenge, “This is the gate of the Lord; the righteous shall enter through it.” The temple priests would then open the gates through which the congregation would enter into the temple courts.

The people would worship inside the temple courts by presenting their thanksgiving offerings which they had brought with them. That would generate a personal testimony in response of God’s goodness which would prompt a final doxology where the priest would sing “Give thanks to the Lord for he is good.” And the congregation would respond “His Love Endures Forever.”

The Thank Offerings would have consisted of three parts. The first part was the fat of a choice animal would be reserved for the Lord. The second part was the tithe or best parts of the animal which were given to the temple priests. And then the third part of the animal was what the people were to share as part of their communal feasting. Everything was consumed. Nothing was left until the next day. It was a HUGE party!

One bible scholar mentioned that the king’s testimony could also be broken down into three parts. The first part could represent one who had fought in battle or those who had been falsely accused by others and how God delivered them from their enemies. The second part could represent those who were literally fighting in war or some other kind of battle. And the third part could represent those who faced death by injury, sickness, or devastation and how God healed them. Whatever the personal testimony when the psalm was originally written, the beauty is that it sort of transcends circumstance and speaks for anyone who has faced life’s difficulties and over came them.

Verses 8 and 9 sound like a Proverb inserted into the psalm. “It is better to take refuge in the Lord than to trust in man. It is better to take refuge in the Lord than to trust in princes.” Maybe these were priestly affirmations or congregational responses to the king’s personal testimony. Kind of like saying, “Amen brother.”

Verse 22 regarding the stone the builders rejected have become the capstone is quoted to several times in the New Testament in reference to Jesus Christ.¹

In verse 24, we hear this reminder to live in the moment as the congregation is caught up in the worship and the feasting going on in the temple. Truly there was no better place to be than there at that moment.

Then we hear a very familiar reference to Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday as accounted in each of the four gospels. “O Lord, save us! Hosanna. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest.”² We also see the palm branches referenced here. “With boughs in hand, join in the festal procession up to the horns of the altar.”

Psalm 118 was said to be Protestant Reformer Martin Luther’s favorite psalm. He wrote, “This is my psalm, my chosen psalm. I love them all: I love all Holy Scripture, which is my consolation and my life. But this psalm is nearest my heart, and I have a familiar right to call it mine. It has saved me from many a pressing danger, from which nor emperor, nor kings, nor sages, nor saints could have saved me. It is my friend; dearer to me than all the honors and powers of earth.” Luther certainly faced serious opposition from the pope and others who thought he was spreading heresy throughout Christendom.

The beauty of the psalm is that that we don’t know from what dangers or evils the psalmist had been delivered. And so it opens up the way for those experiencing all sorts of suffering to see themselves within it.

Psalm 118 is grounded in who God is as good and steadfast in love.

The Hebrew word for good is *tove*. It has a very wide range of meanings such as beautiful, best, better, bountiful, cheerful, at ease, fair word, be in favor, gracious, joyful, kindly, kindness, loving, merry, or pleasant. The translation we chose for today summarized this to mean good.

The Hebrew word for steadfast love or mercy is *chesed*. It also has a very wide range of meanings such as favor, good deed, kindly, loving-kindness, merciful kindness, and mercy. Again our translation settled on steadfast love.

And the Hebrew word for eternal is *slam*. It means always, ancient time, any more, continuance, eternal, for, everlasting, long time. We’ve settled on forever.

If we could summarize what this is saying perhaps we recall something that Christie Mistrot has taught us before during one of her children’s messages.

¹ Matthew 21:42; Mark 12:10; Luke 20:17; Acts 4:11; Ephesians 2:20, 1 Peter 2:4,7

² Matthew 21:9; Mark 11:9; Luke 19:38; John 12:13

“God is good, all the time. All the time, God is good!”

But sandwiched in the middle of the psalm is one line that seems somewhat out of place. Verse 24. “This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.”

As I said earlier, when one is faced with a certain adversity or life threatening danger, the gifts of today seem more apparent. In that moment, we are not dwelling on the past. Nor are we worrying about the future. We are simply focused on the gifts that are all around us.

So the psalm seems to beg the question, “How can we live more presently in the now?”

I’d like to offer a few suggestions for us to try.

The first is try to focus thoughts on the now. Don’t worry about the future. Don’t dwell on the past.

Jesus said, “Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to your life? Since you cannot do this very little thing, why do you worry about the rest?”³

James, Jesus’ brother, said, “Now listen, you who say, ‘Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money.’ Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say, ‘If it is the Lord’s will, we will live and do this or that.’”⁴

The Prophet Isaiah said, “Forget the former things. Do not dwell on the past.”⁵

The Apostle Paul said, “Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.”⁶

Now I don’t think that either Jesus, James, Isaiah, or Paul are saying that we shouldn’t plan or look to the future with hope, excitement, and anticipation. But I do think that they would encourage us to hold onto our plans very loosely because truly we don’t know what tomorrow holds or what other plans the Lord might have in mind for us.

The next thing that helps us to live more in the day is to practice gratitude.

The Apostle Paul said, “Give thanks in all circumstances; this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.”⁷ Think about good things that are happening despite our

³ Luke 12:25-26

⁴ James 4:13-15

⁵ Isaiah 43:18

⁶ Philippians 3:13-14

⁷ 1 Thessalonians 5:18

situation. Write them down. Keep a gratitude journal to remember all the things for which we are grateful. I especially encourage us to do that if life is particularly hard. Gratitude can help us reframe our circumstance to see that there is more good than what may seem apparent.

The next tip is to do less and slow down. This is especially hard for doers like me. I like getting things done. That's why Home Depot is the place that feeds me get'r done addiction. Their motto is "Where Doers Get Things Done." Perfect, right? Except when you are a doing addict, like me.

On the contrary, the wisdom writer of Ecclesiastes calls out to us, "Better one handful with tranquility than two handfuls with toil and chasing after the wind."⁸

Which leads us to our next tip...Stop multi-tasking. Practice doing one thing well. Then move onto the next. When I was doing my bathroom remodel earlier this summer, I had multiple projects going on at once. I found that if I worked on one thing at a time, I achieved a much better result. But if I tried doing too many things at once, I didn't do anything particularly well.

Again the Apostle Paul said, "Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters."⁹

Finally learn to say no! For those of us who are people pleasers, this can be the hardest thing to learn. Because we hate letting people down. But for our sanity and spiritual health, saying no to even some really good opportunities might be what is best for us.

The important thing about these tips is to put them into practice before danger or adversity strike. That way we can be more ready to live in the moment, remember who we are and whose we are as God's beloved children, and recall what God has done and how God's goodness and steadfast love transcend our current situation.

So may we give thanks to the Lord in every and all circumstances. May we rejoice and be glad today. And may we see how that might help us reframe what is going on, so that we can praise God once again.

"This is the day that the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it!"
Amen.

⁸ Ecclesiastes 4:6

⁹ Colossians 3:23