

Who doesn't love a parade. One of my favorite parades is the Rodeo Parade down in Tucson. It typically takes place on 3<sup>rd</sup> Thursday of February and is the kick-off to the Tucson Rodeo. What makes it unique is what powers this 2.5-mile-long line of parade entries. You'll see horse-drawn coaches, outfitted riders, folk dancers, and marching bands. But you will not see any electric or gas-powered vehicles. It is one of the largest non-motorized parades in the world. One of the funniest features of the parade is what follows the last entry of the parade. It's a necessity after all of those horses have passed through. An armada of street sweepers follows the last entry of the parade.

Yep, I love parades. And I think this is part of why I love Palm Sunday so much. Every year finds worshipers like you and me waving palm branches while singing and shouting, "Hosanna!" Even churches that may not always include children in worship do so on this most festive day of the Christian Calendar. Children of all ages are invited to walk or even run down the aisle waving their palms as the congregation sings, "Hosanna!"

I've been in churches where everyone in the congregation gathers outside the sanctuary with their palm branch in hand. The music begins and all who are gathered sing loud hosannas, wave their palms, and joyfully enter into the sanctuary. There's quite a cadre of worshipers in this parade. Feet that can march, feet that need a wheelchair, feet that need walkers, canes, or even a service dog. All who want to are encouraged to participate.

There's something about a parade that brings energy and life, as we give thanks for the community gathered together, moving, singing, celebrating. In the Palm Sunday parade we reenact the story of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem to confront political and religious leaders. But that confrontation won't be today. Today we hold off for a few moments before facing the difficult days that follow with Holy Week.

Psalm 118 was used in liturgical processions into the temple in ancient Jerusalem. It is a psalm heard by Christians on Palm Sunday. Verse 24 reminds us of the reason for rejoicing. "This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it." Being reminded of God's creative work might be just what we need as we move through Holy Week. To help us reflect on

what is most important to remember. What we are most thankful for. Each day in this coming week brings with it a moment of remembrance. Remembering God's work in us and through us as we recall Jesus' life and teachings.

It is the joy of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem that we savor as we move through the difficult moments lying before us this week.

The invitation of this psalm is to join our voices with friends and family in offering our own prayers of thanksgiving. As we leave the sanctuary with our palms, we are invited to take the joy of the day with us, to rejoice that we can give thanks to God for his, God's faithful, God's steadfast love that is so freely given to us.

As I mentioned, Psalm 118 was used when Jewish worshipers entered the temple. It is the last of a section of psalms (113-118) that are known as the Hallel or praise psalms. They were read when Jews made their pilgrimages to Jerusalem for Passover, Shavuot (aka Pentecost), and Sukkot. One other fun fact about this psalm. It is the most quoted psalm in the New Testament. All the gospel writers, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, include a quote from this psalm as Jesus enters Jerusalem.

When today's Psalm was read a few moments ago, did you notice its rhythms, its movements from individual to corporate response, the phrases that were repeated.

Psalm 118 begins with the singular voice of the individual, "O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his steadfast love endures forever!" The first four verses are the "Invitation to Worship". The response for this invitation "his steadfast love endures forever" is repeated in each verse.

In verses 5-18 we find the first major section of the psalm. Here the voice of the individual is heard describing the situation being faced. Being in a narrow place, experiencing distress, enduring the hatred of enemies, feelings of being surrounded, of falling. This is a dire situation.

In verse 14 the psalmist borrows words from Miriam, Moses, and the Israelites after crossing the Red Sea, "The Lord is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation." As God

was with the Israelites in their dire situation, the psalmist is assured of God's saving presence. The author of the psalm starts this section verse 5 with this confident statement. "God set me in a broad place." This section closes with a faithful declaration, "But I shall live."

Verses 19-29 make up the second major section. It begins with the voice of the individual. "Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them and give thanks to the Lord." By verse 24 we are in communal worship mode. This is where we find those oh so familiar words. "This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it."

Today we will use Psalm 118:24 as our focal verse, looking at it from 4 translations and 2 paraphrases.

From the Common English Bible: This is the day the Lord acted; we will rejoice and celebrate in it."

From The Jerusalem Bible: This is the day made memorable by Yahweh, what immense joy for us.

From Pamela Greenberg's The Complete Psalms: This is the day that our Source of Joy has made; Let us exult and rejoice in it.

From the NRSVUE: This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.

From The Message: This is the very day God acted-let's celebrate and be festive!

From The Manhattan Psalter by Sister Juanita Colon: This day was made in heaven; let's enjoy and revel in every minute of it.

Close your eyes and imagine Jews hearing this ancient song of the Israelites as they celebrate Sukkot in the fall. Sukkot was a festival celebrating the harvest and the exodus from slavery in Egypt. And Christians on Palm Sunday hear these words as they enter the sanctuary celebrating and giving thanks for another day that God has provided.

According to Walter Bruggeman, in the time of the Israelites, this psalm could have served as a “model prayer for the worshipping community”. We have expressions of needs from God along with the assurance of God’s faithful response. We have offerings of thanksgiving and vivid descriptions of God as the “Source of Joy”. God is the one who made this day, a day in which God acted.

The author of this psalm serves as a witness to God’s “involvement in the world and the community of faith” and is committed to showing how “the individual story of salvation provides an example of God’s beneficent engagement with the world.” This prayer of thanksgiving is an invitation to us as a church family to join in the voices of the many who have uttered this prayer. A prayer where we acknowledge God’s presence with us.

Today we as faithful witnesses read this psalm so we too can speak of the ways God is present and engaged with our world. As we wave palms and shout “Hosanna!” in praise and thanksgiving, we remember Jesus, who entered Jerusalem to face his enemies and bring life into our death-dealing world.

Now let’s talk about the parts of this psalm that connect to the theme of Thanksgiving and Palm Sunday. First, we see repetitive thanks for God’s hesed, God’s steadfast love. This creates an invitation for us to consider what we’ve been taught about the nature of God.

Maybe you’ve grown up being taught to see the God of the Old Testament as a God of judgement and revenge. Yet, we do not see that in Psalm 118. Instead we see a God of Love, we see a God who listens and respond. We do not see a God to be afraid of. Stephen Montgomery says this in his reflection of Psalm 118. “God’s steadfast love is the very essence of God’s character, which is revealed in acts of liberation and deliverance. The Hebrew root of “steadfast love” refers to a mother’s womb. God’s strong, compassionate, fiercely steadfast love. This strong, persistent and fierce love lives with us and in us today.

Verse 5 holds the other connection of Thanksgiving and Palm Sunday. As we read today, “In tight circumstances, I cried out to the Lord. The Lord answered me with wide-open spaces”.

Listen to how Eugene Peterson interprets this verse in the Message. “Pushed to the wall, I called to God; from the wide-open spaces, he answered. God’s at my side and I’m not afraid; who would dare lay a hand on me?”

God was with our psalmist in the most difficult moments of his life, hemmed in by distress, seeing no way out. On this Palm Sunday we are invited to connect with similar events as we enter into Holy Week. Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem would have been in a very wide place, a place full of activity with pilgrims arriving for Passover. But the wide space of Palm Sunday quickly narrows as local officials determine to shut down his voice for good.

As we move through Holy Week and on towards Easter Sunday, look for how God’s presence also shifts. From broad to narrow and back to broad through Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. It’s on Easter, we will be able to say together. “This is the day the Lord acted; we will rejoice and celebrate in it.”

We start Holy Week with Palm or Passion Sunday. Just as Jesus entered for the last time, we are invited to enter this week. To walk with Jesus. To move slowly through Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. To celebrate Easter with gladness and joy. To remember the acts of Jesus.

For our spiritual practice today and the three days leading up to Maundy Thursday try this. As you go about your day, pay attention to the places where you see God acting. What acts cause you to celebrate and give thanks? Don’t rush past this moment. Pause and offer a silent prayer of thanks.

You can also remember God’s acts through taking pictures. Where you see evidence of things, people, or places you are thankful for, take a picture. And then this Wednesday take a few moments to review the pictures you’ve taken. What are the themes? Which images do you want to remember? Then read Psalm 118 again while looking at these images. May they lift up your hearts in thanksgiving as through them you see evidence of God’s steadfast love.