

THE WORD FROM GILEAD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
April 5, 2020; Palm Sunday, Year A

OLD TESTAMENT READING Psalms 118:19-29

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 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 the LORD is good, for the steadfast love of the LORD endures forever.

NEW TESTAMENT READING Matthew 21:1-11

¹ When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, ² 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. ³ If anyone says anything to you, just say this, 'The Lord needs them.' And he will send them immediately." ⁴ This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying,
⁵ "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."
⁶ The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; ⁷ they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. ⁸ A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. ⁹ 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!"
¹⁰ When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, "Who is this?"
¹¹ The crowds were saying, "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee."

SERMON

What goes up...

Rev. Martin McGeachy

Palm Sunday is so interesting, because we put ourselves in the position of waving palms and celebrating and singing "Hosanna," and celebrate an event that while orchestrated by Jesus, was perpetrated by people who would literally within the week turn on him and scream for his murder. And we are those people. We are fickle. Maybe we wouldn't feel like having our savior bumped off, but we turn on him constantly. Have you ever been in church, worshipping and praising with your faith family, and had a

really ugly thought about someone, maybe someone right there with you in the pews? I have. Hosanna, y'all. Crucify him.

Maybe the emotional swing from exultant praise to mob lynching is too far out for you to relate to. Well, I don't know about you, but my thoughts swing from deep, quiet faith and assurance to fear, doubt and anxiety often. And these days, in these times, sometimes it really gets to me.

Did you notice in our Psalm reading, 118, which is a hymn of faith, the one phrase right in the middle that seems oddly out of place?

²¹ ...[Lord,] you have become my salvation. ...

...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!**

...²⁷ The LORD is God, and 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 the LORD is good, for the steadfast love of the LORD endures forever.

I feel like I'm swinging on a vine back and forth, like the people shouting *Hosanna* to Jesus, swinging between *Yaaay, God, I trust you*, and *Help, God, save me—I'm falling!* But actually, curiously, "Hosanna" can mean both of those things. It's an exultation of praise that literally means, *Save us*. Hosanna.

Truly, on most days I feel like we are cruising on "The Love Boat" together with Captain Jesus Stubing at the helm, and I am Julie your Cruise Director, and I can get us all pumped-up-- *yeah y'all sing; Hosanna!* And I feel like a cheerleader writing fun little catchy songs to the tune of *All Glory, Laud and Honor* --which I did this week (and you can find it in our video archive). It was fun. (*singing:*) Love, exciting and new, come aboard, Gilead's expecting you...

And when I'm talking to you, even through the camera, leading worship, I know that my redeemer lives, and all is well. Hosanna. But you know what? Honestly, there are days when I feel like if I'm a character on "The Love Boat," I am one of the extras down in the Boiler Room sticking chewing gum into leaks that keep springing up. There have been times in the last month when I felt energized and positive that I could rise to the occasion that was being presented, and there have been times that I just didn't think I could get out of bed and start this day again.

When all this quarantine business started, I was on a high of trying to figure out how to do everything we've been doing as a church, but in a new way. Sing to the Lord a New Song! But now, weeks later, I get tired much more quickly. My brain is on overload, like I'm trying to learn Japanese while someone's teaching me to juggle. I can't figure another thing out! Yesterday I was so done at one point that I felt like if somebody sent me a green shirt and a blue shirt in the mail, and said to decide which

one I preferred, and send the other one back, I would have to be put in a mental hospital. I Googled *what do you do when you're too anxious and stressed to make a decision*, and of course it didn't say anything I didn't already know--which make me feel annoyed. I was supposed to exercise and meditate and do yoga and think about positive things; but because of the way I was feeling I didn't want to do any of those things, am I right?

But I managed to get up and do all of those things at least a little bit. I did a little exercise. I did some stretching, and I went outside and picked up dog poop in the backyard. And while I did I sang *Open My Eyes That I May See*, which is a hymn that I have memorized. And it is sort of like our scripture in that it is both a hymn of faith and a hymn of need. Hosanna, y'all. I can't sing it without being put in a place of faith, but at the same time it absolutely captures the need that I have. The reason I have it memorized is because I have found it to be very helpful in my prayer and meditation life.

Two weeks ago I preached that we have no need to give in to fear; last week I suggested that we see the beauty springing up in the cracks. This week, I'm saying (to me, mostly) that it's okay to feel like you can't always see the beauty. It's okay to be tired. It's okay to be afraid. It's normal when we're going through something like this. Next week is Easter and there will be resurrection.

I tuned in to televangelist Joel Osteen a few days ago, and he preached on what it's like in the middle of a miracle. We imagine that when the Red Sea parted for the Israelites as they escaped Pharaoh's army, that the Israelites walked through in awe and wonder, singing along with a triumphant soundtrack like a Charlton Heston movie. But more than likely, they were running like mad for their lives, terrified that the walls might come crashing down at any moment. Scripture tells us that God caused a huge wind to part the waters, so it must have felt and sounded like a hurricane in that muddy rut of a miracle. It was only on the other side that they realized they'd been saved, and began to dance and sing. So, too, for us, when we get on the other side of this pandemic, we will see that God was inundating us with miracle after miracle as we slogged through it.

But right now, we may be on overload, and that is totally normal. I made a joke about dying from the coronavirus to my teenage daughter Rachel, and she burst into tears. She was on the edge, and in no mood to make fun of the madness. And I realized I needed to give her permission to be unhappy. Hosanna—hooray and save us, Lord. We praise you and we're afraid. The fickle crowd 2000 years ago wasn't unusual. We also shout hooray, but then need to be saved in the here and now.

*O give thanks to the LORD, for the LORD is good,
for the steadfast love of the LORD endures forever. Psalms 118:29*
Not WE are good, or OUR love is steadfast forever—only the LORD is good, and is forever steadfast in love. We falter, for we are beautifully human, and while we're made in God's image, we need God to move us along.

This week on “The Today Show,” Rabbi Shai Held of the Hadar Institute and Rev. Michael Curry, presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church, spoke with Savannah Guthrie. Rabbi Held said:

No matter how difficult a moment we find ourselves in..., we still have the capacity to reach out and to show love to one another and through that to gain strength for ourselves as well. One of the most radical things that both Judaism and Christianity teach is that we can learn love from our suffering. This is a period of great suffering, and it is also an opportunity for immense compassion and human connection and we have to hold on to the compassion and connection both for the people who need it most, and for the giver, the giver as well as the receiver.

Savannah Guthrie then said that God can handle both our faith and our doubt, and it's important to be honest with God. And she admitted that for her, right now it's sometimes hard to pray. Bishop Michael Curry replied that our prayer is important, cathartic even, to express our doubts fears and angers. God can handle it (and it's Biblical—read the Psalms). He advised us to hang on to our traditions, for they can carry us through when we don't have the strength.

God will see us through, yes; but many are suffering and dying. Of course we're sad, of course we're stressed, because we're made in God's image, and God in Christ cried over the death of his friend Lazarus, even knowing that Lazarus would live again; and he cried over the suffering of Jerusalem, the people who shouted *Hosanna* and *Crucify*.

Yesterday, when I was so tired and uninspired, receiving Mary's video of *The Palms* by Faure, which I've probably heard her play a dozen times over the many Palm Sundays we've shared, I was suddenly lifted. My seminary professor Dr. Shelton said that the job of the church is to pray for us when we don't have the strength to. God can lift us, and we can lift each other, even over video and Zoom.

What goes up must come down. That's the law of gravity. But in the law of God, the truth of the Holy Spirit of Christ, what goes down must come up. In Christ, we must ascend, for there is Resurrection coming.

¹³ No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴ And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

¹⁶ "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. John 3:13-16

Whether you're ascending or descending, up or down, you're where you need to be, and yes, in the middle of a miracle, but not on the other side yet. But we'll get there together. Through the ever-steadfast love of God.

Amen.