



PALM SUNDAY

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Sunday, April 17, 2011

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Lection – Psalm 118:19-29 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 19) Open to me the gates of righteousness,
that I may enter through them
and give thanks to the LORD.

(v. 20) This is the gate of the LORD;
the righteous shall enter through it.

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

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

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

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

(v. 25) Save us, we beseech you, O LORD!
O LORD, we beseech you, give us success!

(v. 26) Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the LORD.
We bless you from the house of the LORD.

(v. 27) The LORD is God,
and he has given us light.
Bind the festal procession with branches,
up to the horns of the altar.

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

(v. 29) O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good,
for his steadfast love endures for ever.

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

Palm/Passion Sunday, as this day is sometimes called, occurs the Sunday immediately preceding Easter and marks the beginning of Holy (Passion) Week and the Triumphant Entry of Jesus into Jerusalem, when palms were strewn before Jesus as he entered the Holy City. It marks a renewed sense of hope and the fulfillment of the Divine promise uttered by Zechariah (9:9-13). It is a time of great celebration and jubilation by contemporary worshippers as it was on this day in biblical history by the citizens and visitors in Jerusalem.

This moment on the liturgical calendar is often celebrated by the African American church with the prominent placement of palms throughout the sanctuary. The fronds or leaves of the palm tree are sometimes pinned in the form of a cross and given to worshipers to wear on their clothing. Longer palm fronds and palm limbs are distributed to worshippers to wave in celebration during the service. In some congregations the palms are blessed and then given to the sick and shut-in members. The remaining palm limbs and leaves are reserved to be burned and the ashes used for the imposition of ashes in the Ash Wednesday Service the next year.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Psalm 118:19-29

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

As a “P.K.” (Preacher’s Kid), I have vivid memories of three benchmark days in the Christian year: Christmas, Palm Sunday, and Easter. Palm Sunday was always marked by the gathering and decorating of the church sanctuary with palms. The smell of fresh-cut palms filled the air and served as a reminder that Easter was soon to come. Palm branches were placed all along the chancel and on the pulpit furniture, pews, and walls of the sanctuary. The Usher Board serving that Sunday would prepare little crosses made from the palm fronds held together with a straight pin. These small token palm crosses were given to worshippers as they entered the church and were to be pinned to their garments.

The Palm Sunday Worship Service was filled with singing songs relative to the palms or the story of the Triumphant Entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. There was invariably a point in the worship experience when the parishioners were called upon to lift and wave their palm branches or long palm fronds while singing, “Hosanna in the Highest.” This ceremony is intended to represent the entry of Jesus into that Jerusalem of which the earthly one was but the figure—the Jerusalem of heaven, which has been opened for us by our Saviour. The sin of our first parents had shut it against us; but Jesus, the King of glory, opened its gates by his cross, to which every resistance yields. The week following was time for Holy Week Revival and all was a mad dash toward the next big event, Easter Sunday.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

Psalm 118 is significant in Christian Biblical Literature for many reasons. Principally, it is significant to note that Psalm 118 is in the center of the Christian Bible. Also it occurs immediately after the shortest psalm (Psalm 117) and just before the longest psalm (Psalm 119).

Psalm 118:18-29 is the climactic moment of the Hallel. The name “Hallel,” a Hebrew word meaning “praise,” is normally applied to Psalms 113–118. For greater specificity this is sometimes called the “Egyptian Hallel.” Psalm 136 is sometimes called the “Great Hallel,” as it reprises the refrain of Psalm 118: “Hodu l’Adonai ki tov, ki le’olam hasdo” (Thank the Lord for he is good, for his mercy endures forever). Another Hallel sequence, forming part of the *pesukei de-zimrah* in the morning prayers, consists of Psalms 145–150. Psalms 113–118 are all thanksgiving songs. Israel sang them as thanksgiving for God’s redemptive deliverance of Israel from Egyptian bondage. The Jews remembered and rejoiced over the Exodus. Israel also sang them in anticipation of the Messiah.

The Hallel is better understood as a Jewish prayer—a verbatim recitation from Psalms 113–118, which is used for praise and thanksgiving that is recited by observant Jews on Jewish holidays.

The Hallel was traditionally sung during the Seder Passover. This activity corresponds with the time that Jesus was making his Triumphant Entry into Jerusalem. There is very little doubt that this series of psalms was being sung at this time. Hallel is usually chanted aloud as part of Shacharit (the Morning Prayer service) following the Shacharit's Shemoneh Esreh ("The Eighteen," the main prayer). It is also recited during the evening prayers the first night of Passover and after the Grace after Meals in the Passover Seder service.

Psalm 118 wraps up the series of the Hallel Psalms by speaking of the glorious rescue, protection, and reign of Israel, her Messiah, and her people. It speaks of how all nations will be neutralized and brought into submission through the Messiah. Yeshua will be established without a doubt as the undisputed Messiah. Yahweh's people are saved from disaster and their king from death. Yahweh has made a new day. Yahweh's people have been delivered because of Yahweh's steadfast love. Since Yahweh has brought deliverance (it is the day Yahweh made), the people engage in exhortation: "Let us rejoice in it!"

In following up on his commitment to praise Yahweh throughout his life, the psalmist avers that (even though) Yahweh afflicted him (i.e. bringing him close to death), he did not leave him to die (Psalm 118:18). Instead of thanking Yahweh for the salvation, in which case the mention of Yahweh's afflicting him is a bit out of place, perhaps the psalmist is also thanking Yahweh for bringing the psalmist close to realizing the psalmist's own mortality. By doing so, the psalmist has learned to appreciate life—and every moment available to praise Yahweh.

The psalmist then expresses a tremendous urge to praise Yahweh, as the intense gratitude which is felt for the receipt of his salvation wells up inside. The psalmist almost demands to be let in to the Mikdash (we can imagine him standing outside at dawn, waiting for the gates to be opened) so that he can come in and thank Yahweh. For the last time, the psalmist employs the name Yahweh. It is not a non-chalant thanksgiving that he wishes to offer—he wants nothing more than to thank Yahweh, publicly and in His House (inside the gates of righteousness), for his very life that has been saved. He points to the gates and declares that this is to Yahweh; i.e. it is through these gates that we enter Yahweh's abode, so to speak. The righteous, as before, are those who have been spared and owe thanks to Yahweh.

The rejected stone is somewhat of a double entendre, as the Jews understand the rock to be the Nation of Israel and the Christian community has redacted it to point to a prototype or shadow of the coming Messiah. In either case it is certain that the use of this rejected object is utilized in the most prominent and important place in the construction of the Temple wall. It has essentially become the Chief Cornerstone! It is indeed a miracle and could not have happened without the aid of Yahweh. The psalmist acknowledges this Divine intervention and declares, "It is marvelous in our eyes!"

Interestingly, the entire Hallel until now has been preparatory in nature. The psalmist has declared that Yahweh should be praised, how miraculous and earth-shattering the selection of Israel was as God's chosen, how his people should be blessed, how as an

individual he is committed to publicly thanking Yahweh in his courtyard, how all nations should pay homage to Yahweh . . . but he hasn't yet done anything about it! There's been a lot of commitment to thanks and praise—but very little praise and no thanksgiving.

Now we come to the closing verses, which usher the Hallel to a close with praise and adoration to Yahweh, the most high, for all these things sung about in the full context of the entire Hallel and Psalm 118 in particular. At this point, the psalmist does something that is startling. At the great moment of joy, celebrating salvation, the psalmist turns to God with the most heartfelt petition, pleading for salvation and success: “Hosanna Hashem,” literally, “Save us NOW, O Lord!”

The religious orientation that underscores this odd turn of nuance and mood is ubiquitous in the Psalms. The great joy expressed in the previous four verses, culminating in verse 24, heightens the awareness of the celebrant as to his relationship with God. The great salvation serves to intensify the psalmist's knowledge that one is always in need of divine salvation. Each phrase stands alone; the first plea takes us to life, the second to success (compare this to Psalm 116:8). For that reason, each hemistich is doubled separately.

The final four verses comprise a farewell blessing to the celebrants—a blessing that contains an overt reference to the occasion of the assemblage and pinpoints the location where this set of psalms is being sung antiphonally (in call-and-response form). There is a definite crescendo of praise, as each line is punctuated by doubling (in the recitation tradition).

Celebration

God sometimes does chastise, but God NEVER forsakes! As the sacrifice is being prepared and tied to the horns of the altar in this text, one cannot help but reflect upon the goodness of God and all that God has done for us! This psalmist refuses to be dismissed or ignored. In essence, he declares, “I too have a right to praise God!” The palm-and-coat casting crowd in Jerusalem is comprised of all who welcome the Savior-King into Yerushaláyim, the “City/abode of Peace.” We come declaring, “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!” God has saved and God has delivered. God alone is therefore worthy of our praise.

There is gonna come another day of Triumphant Entry when all of God's daughters and sons shall gather on the banks of eternal redemption with palm fronds of victory in their hands, waving them and declaring, “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!” Just about that time our Savior-King shall mount his mighty steed and its hoof beats shall go galloping thru the New Jerusalem. Each stride shall strike against the golden pavement. On his thigh and on his vesture shall be inscribed that adjectival phrase “King of Kings and Lord of Lords!” Upon his brow shall be that everlasting declaration, “The Word of God!”

I want to be there that day to thank him for how he brought me over and how he brought me through! Like the psalmist I want to see him for myself and tell him, “I thank you that

you have answered me and have become my salvation” (Psalm 118:21). Ohhhhhhh, “give thanks! For the Lord is good and his steadfast love endures forever!” (Psalm 118:29).

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details of this passage include:

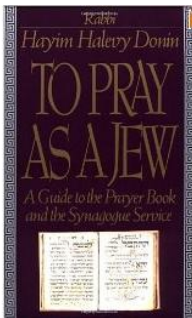
Sounds: Sounds of crowds crying “Hosanna”; the rider demanding entry into the city; the sounds of the animal the psalmist is riding;

Sights: A fortified city with a formidable gate; palm fronds and limbs; and

Smells: The scent of fresh-cut palms.

III. Other Material That Preachers and Others Can Use

1. American composer and conductor Michael Isaacson has composed a full Hallel for SATB Chorus entitled “An American Hallel” with interpolations of expressions of praise and gratitude by past and present Americans. It premiered by the Carolina Master Chorale under the directorship of Tim Koch in the fall of 2009. It can be obtained through Eggcream Music, 4841 Alonzo Ave., Encino, CA 91316; 818-343-6450.



2. To Pray as a Jew: A Guide to the Prayer Book and the Synagogue Service. Hayim Halevy Donin. New York, NY: Basic Books, 1991.

3. Below are fun ideas for Palm Sunday for children (ages 4–7) from Virginia Sigle whose website is biblekidsfunzone.com.



Supplies needed:

- Palm Branches
- Crayons, markers or paint.
- Green fun foam or construction paper (optional)
- Scissors.
- Glue Sticks or paste.

How to Use Palm Branches:

1. **Parade.** Use the big ones for a parade, going around the room singing praises or shouting praises to Jesus.

2. **Play.** Use a donkey mask for someone (or four people) who will be the donkey. The donkey gets on all fours. Someone else (a smaller person) can dress up as “Jesus” and ride the donkey around the room. The other people dress up as bible characters and put down coats and swing their palm branches shouting praises to “Jesus” as he rides by.

Other Options

- Color or paint palm branches.
- Cut out the palm branches. Cut slits in branches to make “leaves.”

Optional (for sturdier palm branches):

- Use the palm branch pictures as patterns. Print them on card stock.
- Cut them out.
- Place branches on foam or construction paper.
- Trace around the palm branch shape. Cut out. Cut slits to make “leaves.”

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3. Palm Sunday Game. Use the small branches to hide around the room or play area outside (like an Easter egg hunt). Give a specified amount of time for the children to look for the palm branches. Mark on the other side what the person wins when they find it, or just decide ahead of time what the winners will receive (small toys, candy, etc.). Have extra on hand for those who didn't find any palm branches, or "help" them find some during the game.

