

19.4.14

“Sabbath Celebration”

Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29

Rev. Adam Hange

This morning we conclude our six-week study of Sabbath, and *this week* will conclude the 40 days of Lent. Before I go further, I want to check-in and ask...

- How has this season been for you?
- How has your understanding of Sabbath changed since we began this series?
- Are you more aware of times when, for instance, you are tempted to multi-task?
- Can you see, more clearly, the forces of exclusion and coercion at work in our world?
- Are you more in-tune your body, and can you sense the anxiety which permeates so much of our world?
- Can you tell when it's affecting you, and do you know how to resist its effects?
- Lastly, do you see, how the practice sabbath-keeping might be transformative in your own life, and in our world?

I hope so. For, we have just this one final lesson in our study of Sabbath - and that is that Sabbath is Celebration. Which fits perfectly into our liturgical calendar, for today we celebrate Palm Sunday! This morning, we turn our attention from the Exodus story, and the Prophets, and, with gladness and joy, we recall Jesus Triumphant Entry into the city of Jerusalem, as described in Luke 19.

It's a little bit of thematic leap, but not that far... for Jesus' welcome into that city is really done in the spirit of the Day of Jubilee - that vision which was the epitome of Sabbath - a day when all would be set right. When debts are forgiven, and land is restored, when the low are lifted up. When peace would for all people, with

justice and joy. And it was with that kind of expectant hope that the crowds welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem as the one who came to save them!

Jesus knew what he was doing that day... Always the teacher, he was giving the crowds a lesson in comparison and contrast - providing a foil between the Pax Romana, Latin for “the Peace of Rome,” a peace that comes through military might and conquest, and “Shabbat Shalom, Hebrew for “the Peace of Sabbath.” As you might remember me preaching last year, there were two parades entering Jerusalem, that day...

While the Roman military made a procession into the city from one side, Jesus and his disciples make a counter-procession into the city from the other side. While one sat high on a war-horse, flanked by well-armed soldiers, the other rode humbly on the colt of a donkey - in fulfillment of the scripture - *“See, your king comes to you, righteous and victorious, lowly and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”* (Zechariah 9:9, NRSV).

One came with the threat of violence. The other employed non-violent resistance. One came with pomp and circumstance, demanding the praise and adoration of the crowds. The other was welcomed with free and spontaneous rejoicing! And on that day, the people sang a joyful song - Psalm 118 - a song they knew well from the Passover Liturgy:

“Blessed is the King, blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!”

The Pharisees saw this as heresy, or treason, or both, and told Jesus to order his disciples to stop! But Jesus said to them, *“I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out!”* (Luke 19:40).

Here’s what was so radical about what Jesus came preaching: He said, the Kingdom was not in the far-off distant future... He said, *“It’s here, now! The kin-dom is at-hand!”* That’s pretty exciting news for people living under

oppression. It's also as sign that all other kings, and kingdoms of this world -should take notice.

And it makes me think of that line from Handel's Messiah - from Revelation 11:15.

*“The kingdoms of this world, have become,
the kingdom of our Lord, and of his Christ,
and he shall reign forever, and ever.”*

Jesus hoped to radically reorder the world according to the vision of Shalom which he had learned through his reading of the holy scriptures.

Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, co-organizer for the New Poor People's Campaign, wrote earlier this week:

“For anyone who says Jesus wasn't political, the week that Christians call holy offers a rebuttal. It begins with an inaugural parade, includes a direct action against public corruption, then ends with Jesus' execution as an enemy of the state.

Jesus died for the sins of the whole world, but that's not why Rome executed him. He started a movement that promised to re-order the systems of this world. The people who benefit from those systems took Jesus out in an effort to maintain control.

To believe in the resurrection of Jesus isn't to believe that Jesus can grant eternal security out of this world. It is to trust that the new world system Jesus points us toward will outlast the rulers & authorities that seem to have all the power.”¹

¹ Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, Facebook post, https://www.facebook.com/pg/jonathan.wilsonhartgrove/posts/?ref=page_internal 4.13.2019.

He came ready to stir things up. If you doubt me, just remember that the very next thing he does after this procession - was to kick over the money-changers tables in the Temple! (Luke 19:45). Jesus was intent on bringing God's vision of Sabbath peace into being - *in the here and now!*

Every good revolution needs a soundtrack, and Psalm 118 was the perfect song for that inaugural procession! The editors of my Bible call it a Psalm of Victory - It is the last of a collection of Psalms known as the Hallel Psalms (Psalms 113-118). Historically, Psalm 118 has served as a festival psalm for both the Jewish and Christian communities - read both during Passover, as the descendants of Israel recall God's deliverance from slavery in Egypt into freedom; and by Christians, as we reenact the drama of Jesus' humble procession into Jerusalem.²

It celebrates the kindness and care of God. It means more to those who are low, than those who are high up! It says, "The stone that the builders have rejected has become the chief cornerstone." For the people who returned from exile, it was reminder that God had not forgotten them. For the Early Christian community, this idea became central to their understanding of Christ's mission in the world.

And from this experience of being exiled, then remembered, springs up a well of gratitude! The Psalmist writes -

*"This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it!
You are my God, and I will give thanks to you; you are my God and I will extol
you!"*

And then, the refrain, *"Give thanks to the Lord! For God is good! God's steadfast
love endures forever!"*

²Kimberly L. Clayton, *Feasting on the Word: Commentary on Year C, Volume II*, editors David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 2009, p. 146.

You can almost picture the crowds singing and shouting out their excitement and hope, can't you? *And*, as Vicki Kemper pointed out in this morning's UCC devotional... the disciples were pretty much clueless to what it all really meant.

They should have understood at least something of what the next week held in store for Jesus, and for them. He'd told them many times what to expect... but they were slow learners.

One thing they got right! - They welcomed Jesus on that day, with joy and celebration! As pastoral mentor and friend sometimes said, "Even a blind squirrel finds a nut once in a while!"

They might not have understood the theological, social, or political implications of what Jesus intended, but they understood it was right to celebrate!

And someone in the crowd must have seen Jesus, and remembered this Psalm - and began singing it, and then more began singing, and till finally all of them were singing along to this anthem - this Psalm of Victory!

In my adolescence I listened to a lot of Christian Rock music. I know that sounds like an oxymoron! But, one of my favorite bands was called, Petra - they were CCM's answer to Aerosmith and Metallica - they had a song, entitled "The King of Glory" taken from this Psalm. You have to imagine some guys all decked out in denim and leather, with big hair, and electric guitars singing - turning their amps up to 11! And singing... "Who is this king of glory, the Lord strong and mighty!" "The King of Glory shall come in!" That's how I imagine it was that day, when Jesus said, if they fall silent, even the rocks will shout!

What they didn't understand that day is that Jesus did not intend to be crowned king. The people wanted to make him into one but that's not what he wanted. He envisioned a different kind of kingdom. A kin-dom that was not of this world.

Incidentally, Psalm 118 was Martin Luther's favorite psalm. He wrote verse 17 on the wall of his study in Coburg castle, where he stayed during an anxious time. During the tumultuous Reformation, Luther's experiences taught him not to place confidence in human beings, in princes or nations. With the psalmist he knew that our only sure refuge, our confidence, is in God alone."³

In the end, our trust is in God - and God's enduring love. The beginning and the ending of this Psalm are the same - the same lines repeated as bookends to the song.

*Give thanks to God, for God is good.
And God's steadfast love endures, forever!*

Good or bad, we tend to think that our leaders hold incredible power - and they do, but Jesus understood - leaders come and go, kingdoms rise and fall... but...

*God's steadfast love endures forever!
Jesus inaugurated a new kind of kin-dom!*

And that was, and is something to celebrate!!!

So let us say,

Blessed is the One who comes by the way of love...
Blessed is the One who walks toward us by the way of grace...
Blessed is the One who calls us to follow in the way of blessing ...
in the path of joy!

Over the next week, the week we call "Holy Week," we will journey again with Jesus to the Upper Room, when Jesus washed the feet of his disciples - and first instituted the Lord's Supper - what we call Maundy Thursday or Holy Thursday.

³ Kimberly L. Clayton, *Feasting on the Word: Commentary on Year C, Volume II*, editors David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 2009, p. 148.

Then on the Friday we call Good Friday, we will journey with him to the Garden of Gethsemane, where he was betrayed and forsaken, before being arrested and taken before Pilate.

Finally, we will journey with him along the long road to Golgotha, where he was crucified and died.

Let us never forget, Easter is Coming - and there is so much to celebrate!