

April 2, 2023

Psalm 118:19-29

“Opened: The Gates of Righteousness!”

Pilgrim Lutheran Church  
2155 North Oakland Ave.  
Decatur, Illinois 62526

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Palm Sunday in the church year is the occasion that sets the stage for Holy Week. Everything begins here and leads to the resurrection of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. The triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem is described in St. Matthew's gospel:

They brought the donkey and the colt and put on them their cloaks, and he sat on them. Most of the crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. And the crowds that went before him and that followed him were shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!"

The crowds were excitedly shouting: "Hosanna!" Do you know what that word means? It means, "Lord, Save Us!" and they added: "... in the highest!" This begs the question: what was going on in the hearts and minds of the people that day when Jesus rode into Jerusalem? Perhaps we shouldn't get too bogged down with that question since we cannot entirely know. The real question is this: what does the triumphal entry of Jesus mean for you? What are you looking for in Jesus?

That's quite a question. People look for different things. Some want a Jesus who will change society and make things better - a social justice Jesus. Some want a Jesus who will give them all the things they need and want - a good life Jesus. Some want a Jesus who will run the government the way it should be run - a political Jesus. Some want a Jesus of distorted love who will give them an excuse to sin - a permissive Jesus. Some want a Jesus who will teach us to be better people - a good example Jesus. All of this collectively points to a heaven on earth Jesus - a Jesus of our whim.

We just sang in the sermon hymn: "Ride on, ride on in majesty! In lowly pomp ride on to die. Bow Thy meek head to mortal pain, Then take, O God, Thy power and reign." Now that begins to bring us to the heart of the real Jesus who enters Jerusalem. This is the Jesus who rides on to die for us. This is the Jesus who submits himself to our mortal pain. He rises to power and reigns. His power and rule is one of salvation! And just exactly how does his power and rule reach us? How is this "Hosanna in the highest" for you and me in this life? Luther writes regarding the blessed one who comes in the name of the Lord:

You exalt us when you humble us. You make us righteous when you make us sinners. You lead us to heaven when you cast us into hell. You grant us the victory when you cause us to be defeated. You give us life when you permit us to be killed. You comfort us when you cause us to mourn. You make us to rejoice when you permit us to weep. You make us to sing when you cause us to cry. You make us strong when we suffer. You make us wise when you make fools of us. You make us masters when you permit us to serve.

That's heavy stuff! And most hearts, when they hear that kind of thinking and discover that this is the real Jesus, they conclude that he is not for them. So, they do what the people of the past did to him. They dismiss him, or reinterpret him, and put the real Jesus to death.

Jesus is the one who came in humility and was exalted so that he might humble us to become forever exalted with him! And that brings us to our Old Testament lesson for this morning and the event of Palm Sunday. Our theme for this Palm Sunday is **Opened: The Gates of Righteousness!** It is based on the opening words of our Old Testament lesson (Psalm 118:19): “Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them and give thanks to the Lord. This is the gate of the Lord; the righteous shall enter through it.” And isn’t that what we want?! We plead for him to open the gates. And what gates are we talking about in this text?

In the Old Testament, the gates of the temple are called the gates of righteousness because they are the entrance to the place of our relationship with the Lord who is merciful and compassionate and has in mind our eternal salvation! The Word became flesh. He is the fulfillment of the temple and has opened himself that we may come in and dwell with him forever in glory! Consider these comforting words of Jesus in John 10:9 where he himself says: “I am the gate/door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture.” Those are most inviting words that remind me of the words of Psalm 23: “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul. *He leads me in paths of righteousness* for his name's sake.”

Did you catch those last words? “He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.” Again, our theme for today, based on Psalm 118, which is all about Palm Sunday ... **Opened: The Gates of Righteousness!** And we want them opened! If they are not, we are in a world of trouble. But if they are open, we may walk through them and be with our righteous Jesus forever in a life lived in righteousness! As you can see, it is our unrighteousness that is the problem. It’s sin that keeps us from being with the Lord forever. Righteousness and unrighteousness can’t stay together. That’s why Luther says: “You exalt us when you humble us.”

Our sins keep the gates closed. And if the gates are closed we are lost. We cannot enter into the righteous presence of the loving God who made us. Palm Sunday is about Jesus entering into Jerusalem to solve this problem. And the way he solves the problem is made clear in these words of Peter, “... Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit ... (1 Peter 3:18)” Indeed! The words of the sermon hymn sum it up: “In lowly pomp ride on to die ... Then take, O God, Thy power and reign!” Jesus, the righteous one, comes to suffer for the sins of the unrighteous that we might be brought into the power of his righteousness. He comes to be the righteous sacrifice for our unrighteousness that we might share in the victory of his resurrection.

All of this is expressed in these words of our psalm for today: “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! We bless you from the house of the Lord. The Lord is God, and he has made his light to shine upon us. Bind the festal sacrifice with cords, up to the horns of the altar!” What we call Palm Sunday was the day in which the Jews selected their Passover lamb. How appropriate it was then for Jesus to ride into Jerusalem on that very day. Who knows how much the crowds really understood that day when Jesus entered into the city of Jerusalem, but one thing was for sure: On that Palm Sunday long ago, whether they understood the gravity of what they were saying or not, by quoting our psalm they were announcing “Here

he is! Here is the Savior! Here is the righteous Passover lamb! Here is our salvation! Take him to the altar.”

Jesus was the righteous lamb - the lamb without blemish - that he might take our blemishes for us and open up the gates of righteousness that we may enter in. To be brought up to the horns of the altar means what Isaiah says: “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth.” Led to the slaughter! Blood spilled. Price paid. One sheep to die and rescue all sheep that have gone astray. The Lord has laid on him the iniquities of us all that we may walk through the gates. As it is written in the book of Revelation (chapter 21):

And the one who spoke with me had a measuring rod of gold to measure the city and its gates and walls ... And the twelve gates were twelve pearls, each of the gates made of a single pearl, and the street of the city was pure gold, like transparent glass. And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb. By its light will the nations walk, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it, and its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there. They will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations. But nothing unclean will ever enter it, nor anyone who does what is detestable or false, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life.

**Opened: The Gates of Righteousness!** That’s what Palm Sunday is all about. That’s what Holy Week is all about. Let us give thanks and speak and sing of all that he has done. In the closing words of Psalm 118, “Oh give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever!”

Amen.

Pastor Brock Abbott