

Psalm 118 / Palm Sunday / 4.17.19
“Olivet,” by Rev. Natalie Webb

I’ve heard the psalm you all recited many thousands of times. It’s one of my favorites. I still remember the first time I heard it. And for many many years, I’ve watched over pilgrims and priests, children and kings as they journeyed up the Temple Mount, climbed the great southern staircase, or entered into the eastern gate (both of which I happen to have the most beautiful view) with this song on their lips: “O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good. His love endures forever.”

Many of these travelers first journeyed along my winding pathways, beneath my precipices and through my valleys, resting alongside the cool streams at my feet, stopping to pluck a wild fig or find shade under one of my olive trees. As they made their way to the Holy City, I listened to their prayers, their hopes, their fears. My limestone and flint body has soaked in the stories and songs and lives of many travelers, who I’ll admit were mostly unaware that I was listening and watching. In Hebrew, I am called *Har ha-Zeitim*. My Greek name is *Oros Elaion*. You know me as the Mount of Olives, but you may call me Olivet.

I sit just to the east of Jerusalem, and I rise even higher than Temple Mount, so I have seen and heard it all. Before Yahweh’s Temple was built, a young rebel, David, found sanctuary from his enemies in my forests. I watched this poor shepherd boy who hid in fear among my trees and caverns later take his place as Israel’s king and make Jerusalem a great and important city. I wondered if he ever looked across at me, remembering his former distress and rejection? Some say he is the one who wrote today’s psalm.

The first I heard it was some years after David’s death, at the victorious return of Judah’s army after battle. There were so many kings and leaders and so many battles in those days, that I can’t remember who was the first to sing it. (After a few millennia, one tends to forget some names.) But I remember it being a joyful and spontaneous and, to be honest, unexpected return.

The priests and people ran out to meet the victors, calling on all people to “give thanks to the Lord, for he is good.” The crowds called back with conviction, “his steadfast love endures forever!” The young and ruddy leader sang of God’s salvation in what should have almost certainly been defeat, “They surrounded me like a hive of bees, they blazed like fire, but the Lord helped me.... I shall not die, but I shall live, and recount the deeds of the Lord,” he said. After regaling the crowds with this terribly exciting tale, the young leader led the people up to the Temple gates to make a sacrifice of thanksgiving.

The whole thing turned into a city-wide procession, giving thanks to God, not just for victory, but for taking what looked hopeless, worthless, all but left for dead, and doing something marvelous: “The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone,” they sang as they celebrated, in awe of the God who lifts up the lowly; the God who delivers when it seems all is lost.

The forces that surrounded us on every side (from local Canaanite cities to superpowers like Egypt and Assyria) were indeed like a hive of bees constantly swarming (their heralds and delegations travelled in and around my foothills, too), so there were many narrow escapes and

unlikely victories when this song was repeated, and eventually, it became a regular part of worship at the Temple.

How many times did I look across the valley that separated us and watch the ritual performance? The priests and people chanting back and forth to one another, the king reciting the old leader's story of near death and defeat, and the people's thanksgiving for God's salvation.

How many more times did I hear pilgrims chanting this song in their caravans, giving thanks to God while crossing over my paths on their way to a festival? Perhaps most often, I heard this psalm muttered underneath an individual's breath – sometimes the whole psalm and sometimes just a piece. Old women recited the warrior's words as their own as they prayed for deliverance from the swarming bees of illness, pain, loneliness. Young women chanted "You are my God, and I will give thanks to you... you did not give me over to death..." on their way to make sacrifices not after battle, but after childbirth. (Which it seems may be a kind of battle of its own...) Many young men, rebels and reformers, gave themselves shots of courage, repeating the words, "With the Lord on my side I do not fear. What can mortals do to me? The Lord is on my side to help me." Children sang the refrain to themselves, "O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, his steadfast love endures forever," carving this confession and hope in their minds and hearts. People of all ages, when they caught a glimpse of the Temple in the distance after many days of travel, echoed the Psalm's words: "This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it."

I knew the psalm by heart long before it was sung of *him*. It was time for the festival they call the Passover, and my roads and byways were buzzing with activity. I watched people and animals flood into Jerusalem from every corner of the earth, as they did each year. I was so focused on the hubbub of the Holy City to my west that I almost didn't notice the commotion in the small town of Bethany at my eastern foothills. Crowds of people were flocking *out* of Jerusalem as well as into it, creating a bit of a traffic jam in some of my narrower roadways. These eastward travelers going away from the city had a sense of urgency and excitement and wonder. They whispered about a rabbi who could heal the sick, give sight to the blind, and even call dead men out of their tombs. Rumor had it that the rabbi would soon be on his way to the festival. Grand stories were traded and grew as they were repeated throughout my hills, fields, and valleys. But not all who came from Jerusalem were well-meaning. Whispers of rebellion and heresy and plots of betrayal spread, as well.

Then all at once, there was a stillness, as if every person, every animal, every tree, and the wind herself stopped and held their breath as the rabbi, the dead man, and the crowd from Bethany looked up at me and set out with grave intention on my path to Jerusalem. When they came to the highest point in the road, at the village of Bethpage, with Jerusalem on the horizon, the rabbi climbed onto a colt, and I heard someone start singing my favorite psalm: "O Give thanks to the Lord for he is good; his steadfast love endures forever... Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!" The crowd burst into shouts of "hosanna!" and I offered the branches of my palm trees, bending them low to the ground, and commanding my trees to release them easily to the joyous procession. They covered my roadway in a carpet of green fit for a king, and they continued to sing, "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!" and "The Lord is God, and he has given us light. Bind up the festal procession with

branches, up to the horns of the altar” and “The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.”

Under his breath, I heard the rabbi, Jesus, recite solemnly, “The Lord is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation... I shall not die, but I shall live, and recount the deeds of the Lord.” His heart was much heavier than that of the first young warrior I heard singing this psalm. Instead of a victorious general returning home from battle, this young Jesus looked as if he were walking *into* a fight, despite the joyous crowds dancing and waving branches around him.

The crowds were different, too. No priests or temple scribes came out to meet him and lead the chanting of the psalm. Instead, he was hailed as King by formerly blind men, beggars and thieves, housewives, fishermen, and women of ill repute. As the procession descended into my foothills, and crossed through the valley to the Temple Mount gathering more and more people as it went, it was just as big a crowd as that first returning army. But this army carried no weapons, and they brought back no spoils of war. This was a victory march of fools.

“Blessed is the *king* who comes in the name of the Lord,” they cried out. Jesus followed the path of so many kings before him – the procession and the palms, the singing and the grand entry – but his kingship looked remarkably different than the rulers in Jerusalem. Something was off about this narrative. I knew there would be no joyous welcome once inside the city gates, but instead a confrontation with the powers that be. If Jesus claimed to be king, what of the Roman governor? What of the Temple priests and the current royal court?

I began to wonder... Who is really Lord here? (The powerful politician or the traveling rabbi?) Where does God’s rule and authority lie? (In the Holy City, or outside of it?) What does the true king look like? (A great warrior and protector, riding in on his noble steed? Or a teacher, storyteller, healer, riding in on a donkey?) And who are the true priests? (The respectable and credentialed elites at the temple? Or the band of fishers and misfits shouting the ancient hosannas on my roadside?)

As I pondered this scene, I found myself wishing the procession would stop. This wasn’t the way it was supposed to go, but on he went, with equal parts intention and trepidation, as if he knew he was riding to the end, but had some hope that it would be a new beginning, as well. Little did I know. But, I’m getting ahead of myself...

Over the course of the week following his grand and dangerous entry, I kept watch over Jerusalem. And I became a kind of refuge for him in his final days – a place of silence and solitude where he could get away at night from the threats and expectations of the Holy City. I provided a soft place for him to lay his head, I listened to his prayers as he cried out to his Father: “If you are willing, remove this cup from me.” My gardens soaked up his tears and sweat and blood, as he moved closer and closer to the end. Always moving forward with intention, not content to save his own life, but working with purpose to save the lives of others. I watched him fellowship and laugh with friends in the midst of betrayal, love in the face of despair, walk a path of suffering and anxiety, always holding on, if only by a thread, to the promise of new life and God’s steadfast love.

As you keep watch this week once more, as you remember the pain and the glory, the confrontation and the grief of this Holy Week, may you join the pilgrims and priests, children and kings, rebels and misfits who sang and continue to sing, “Blessed is the one who comes in

the name of the Lord.” With triumph or with trepidation, may you join in the true king’s procession. Amen.