

Sermon on Psalm 118 – St. Paul’s Ev. Lutheran Church 4.15.18
3rd Sunday of Easter – Pastor Nate Scharf

Psalm 118 – selected verses -

“Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his mercy endures forever.” “Let Israel, the house of Aaron, and those who fear the LORD say ‘His mercy endures forever.’ When in a narrow place I cried to the LORD, he answered me in a spacious place. The LORD is with me. I will not fear. What can man do to me? The LORD is with me; he is my helper. I look in triumph on my enemies. It is better to take refuge in the LORD than to trust in man or princes...All the nations surrounded me, they surrounded me on every side, they were like bees swarming around me, but I cut them off in the name of the LORD. You pushed me back to fall, but the LORD helped me. The LORD is my strength and my refuge, he will be salvation for me. I will not die but live, and will proclaim what the LORD has done. The LORD disciplined me severely, but didn’t give me over to death. I will give you thanks because you answered me. And you will be for me salvation. The stone the builders refused, it is the cornerstone. The LORD did this and it is marvelous in our eyes. This is the day the LORD has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it. Hosanna. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD. The LORD Is God and has caused his light to shine on us, bind the festival with boughs up to the horns of the altar. You are my God and I give you thanks. Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his mercy endures forever.”

At all school chapel on Friday mornings down at our Lutheran Elementary school, after the devotion, prayers, hymn, the pledge of allegiance and singing God bless America, Mr. Thiesfeldt gets up and gives the announcements and sends the classes off with this verse from the psalms, *“This is the day the LORD has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it.”* And every day it is right to confess that because it is a day to thank God for his grace to us. But as I look around the gym at all the kids and staff knowing what some of them are dealing with, and as I know my own heart, some days – I don’t feel much like rejoicing. It’s too busy, or there’s too much sin and pressure going on in my life, not enough is going well at the moment for me to really say that with my whole heart. I am struggling with my own anxiety and insecurities. I don’t feel it. And don’t even get me started on Minnesota’s Spring of Deception, aka Winter 3.0. This Psalm and that verse is true even if I don’t feel it much, or experience the opposite.

As you read Psalm 118 and look at a hymn of praise by an individual, maybe King David, who felt the pressure of enemies, of being in a narrow place pressed down on every side, feeling disciplined by God, and you see someone who was delivered from all of that and breaks out in praise and song to God. He encourages all of us to praise the LORD as well, and to know and find in the LORD what the psalmist found: deliverance and rescue. We can at least understand that and be happy for him and praise the Lord.

For a couple decades there was a really popular talk show on TV hosted by Oprah Winfrey. From time to time she would give away gifts to audience members or send a worthy couple or person on an all-expense paid trip. Then there would be a buzz around the workplaces and schools about what Oprah gave away the day before. One of the most memorable shows was in 2004 when she gathered 11 teachers from the audience and called them up on stage. Then a door open and in rolled in a brand new car. Each of those 11 hard-working teachers was informed that they would receive a new car. I don't want any of our teachers at St. Paul's, New Ulm Public, MVL or MLC to get any ideas here. There are no new cars in the narthex. But on the show the cameras panned the audience and they went crazy. I think a few people were even crying a bit out of excitement for the 11 deserving teachers who received this wonderful gift.

But sometimes when we are hard pressed we celebrate for others, but deep down inside all we can think of is how hard it is or terrifying it is for us. What is the problem? Is it a sin that you struggle with which seems to always get the upper hand? Is it lust in all its awful forms – online pornography, glances once, twice maybe more at someone else or acting on those? Is it ignoring God's commands about marriage and the commitment he commands before taking advantage of its blessings? Is it greed and discontentment with what God has given you and you want more so you rip others off whether face to face or with the click of a button, or you blame your spouse or family member for it never being enough. Is it hardships you are dealing with - some of your own doing and some that you had no control over? Is it feelings you can't shake – worry for your family, your health, worry that you've offended God too many times or in such a way that you can't be forgiven? Maybe you've got everything in line in your life, but there is that one glaring thing that maybe no one knows about – but it's just not right. And it looms large. Our sins are too heavy. Our thoughts keep us up at night and permit us no rest while awake or sleeping. And these thoughts and

worries swarm around you like a bunch of bees. You feel hard pressed on every side with no way out and it seems like it won't change, nor can it.

So you hear the psalmist with his words and his encouragements and his song of praise over deliverance. And you smile that "good for you" smile, but you don't feel much like smiling. Do yourself a favor and take another look at the psalmist. Where is he looking? At himself? No. He is giving a testimonial of sorts, but in all these phrases he is praising the LORD, he is looking to the LORD, and what the LORD has done, still does, and will do for him, how he rescued him, how his mercy continually covers him. There is that beautiful phrase in the psalm, *"The LORD has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes."*

The psalmist said, *"I will not die but live and will proclaim what the LORD has done."* There are sometimes you feel like you are going to die, wish you were, or at least you deserve it. Everything is against you. But look out away from your sinfulness, away from your sinful heart and to Jesus who continually repeats this phrase, *"Peace be with you, Do not be afraid"* in his resurrection appearances. Why? Our sinfulness, our doubts, our fear of a righteous God and our inability to carry out God's law or perform it well enough cause us great fear and worry. And sin should cause terror. But Jesus came to bring peace to terrified hearts. Jesus died on the cross for your sin, your sinfulness, for what you lacked, for what you committed, for how you failed. And where our hearts say, no, Jesus isn't for you, Jesus comes into the locked doors of your heart and he says, *"Peace."* He paid for your sin on the cross. And he brings you out of yourself or all the problems that persecute you and he brings you into the spacious place of his mercy and forgiveness. He clothes you with his life of perfection, his righteousness so you can stand before God. So you can live freely and serve in joy and not in panic or terror waiting for a shoe to drop. God goes with you and guides you on his path.

The psalmist opened and closed his psalm of praise with the words, *"give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, his mercy endures forever."* This is for you. Trust in your Savior Jesus and his work for you, his mercy to you, a sinner. Realize that all the psalmist said applies to you too, even though you may not feel it at the present moment. In verse 10 of Christian Scheidt's hymn, "By Grace I'm Saved," he writes "By Grace! May sin and Satan hearken! I bear my flag of faith in hand, And pass – for doubts my joy can't darken – The Red Sea to the Promised Land. I cling to what my Savior taught, and trust it, whether felt or not." Go and

live. Leave your sin and shame at the cross and live. Trust in our God's love for you and his guidance to live in this life. Rely on his power and strength to deliver you from temptations, to provide a way out under your suffering, to sustain you in the stresses and difficulties of this life. Count on his mercy and forgiveness for you though enemies buzz about like bees. Pray to him and cast your anxiety on him. He is good. His mercy endures forever. This is for you too!

After Oprah gave 11 cars away to those teachers, she said there was another car to give away. She handed out little gift boxes to all the rest of the audience members. She said that the box with a key in it, got a new car. At the same time all the rest of the audience members opened their boxes hoping that they might find the one key. But to their surprise, each box had a key in it. They each got a new car. A new car would be cool, but far better is God's forgiveness of my sins through the blood of his Son. Far better is God's approval of a sinner like me because Christ's righteousness covers me. Far better is God's promises that stick to me since my baptism. Far better is receiving God's forgiveness as I take and eat the body of my Lord and drink his blood in the Sacrament – proof that all of this freedom, love and victory that the psalmist talks about is mine.

It's no wonder everyone on the Palm Sunday road burst out in phrases from this psalm as Jesus came to them, rejoicing in their salvation with "*Hosanna*" and "*Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD.*" Now like the disciples who met the risen Lord, with a fuller understanding of who Jesus is and what he did for us, let us continue that song of praise and return thanks because this is for all of us. *O Give thanks unto the LORD, for he is good. His mercy endures forever.*
Amen.