

April 5, 2020

Psalm 118

# “Calvary’s Climb Confronts Us With . . . A Story to Tell”

Pilgrim Lutheran Church  
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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Read and meditate on Psalm 118 and you will discover that this Psalm has **A Story to Tell**, not in the sense of a fairy tale, but in the sense of historical record - a prophecy of what would be. It's about Jesus of Nazareth. It contains many references to the events of Holy Week before they even happened. After it's introduction, Psalm 118 falls into two main parts: death and resurrection - the Savior's trust in the face of his sufferings, and his joy when God delivers him. As a side note, it most likely was the last hymn that Jesus and his apostles sang together on Maundy Thursday evening. A most appropriate Psalm to define for his followers all that had been happening and all that was going to happen during Holy Week.

During the imperial diet of Augsburg in 1530, while hiding in the Coburg Castle to preserve his own life from murder, Luther wrote an extensive commentary on Psalm 118 - our sermon text for this Palm Sunday. In his preface he writes: "This is my psalm and it is dear to me. Although the whole Psalter and indeed the Holy Bible is very dear to me, yet this psalm in particular I call my own for it has been of great service to me and often delivered me from great distress ..." We also are in great distress, are we not? People wanted to kill Luther because of his faith and confession in Christ alone for the forgiveness of sins and the hope of heaven. We are currently facing possible death due to a virus - great distress. While distress may take many shapes and forms, the distress of dying and how you die is at the top.

There really isn't anything new to all of this. It's always death in the end. Are we shocked that any number of us may die from a virus? I guess when we get all caught up in the hustle and bustle of living down here we can easily forget the end of it all. The books of our lives may have many chapters with many differing details, but the last line is always the same isn't it? It all ends with the word "died." What we really, really don't want to hear are the nasty words of Paul in Romans 6:23, "the wages of sin is death." Death naturally comes to those who have rebelled against the love and care of the Triune God. The United States government is trying to preserve as many lives as possible. Thinking of returning to the future hustle and bustle of living down here they are giving back to the country two trillion dollars. But for those of us who will survive the outbreak and cash the check for the dollars returned, we still face the wages of sin.

On the wall of the room in the Coburg Castle where Luther prayed at least three hours a day and worked for at least another three, were the words of the seventeenth verse of our Psalm: "I shall not die, but I shall live, and recount the deeds of the Lord." These words pop out as the central message. The words apply specifically to Jesus. They also apply to all those who believe in him. Along with our Savior, because of his sufferings, death, and resurrection, we are able to say with him, "I shall not die, but I shall live, and recount the deeds of the Lord." And we will recount his deeds forever as the most precious true story ever told.

"I shall not die!" For me these words take me to what our Savior said right before he raised Lazarus from the dead. It was neat for me to go back and read Luther only to discover that the words took him to the same place as me. He wrote: "The dying live; the suffering rejoice; the fallen rise; the disgraced are honored. It is as Christ himself says [in the Gospel of John], 'he who believes in me, though he die, yet

shall he live! [And whoever lives and believes in me will never die]!” Here are words that are astonishingly comforting for all those who are in distress, but who also understand the real and ultimate distress of death. The Savior shall not die. And believers in the Savior shall live forever!

Today, **Calvary’s Climb Confronts Us With ... A Story to Tell**. The story of our Savior is ultimately our story. When Jesus peacefully rides into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, he rides to save us from sin and death. The defining event before Palm Sunday and Holy Week is the account of Lazarus. When Jesus came to Jerusalem and the large crowds came out to meet him, it was in the context of the raising of Lazarus from the dead that incited the people to cry, “Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel!” John tells us very plainly in his Gospel (John 12:17-18), “The crowd that had been with him when he called Lazarus out of the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to bear witness. The reason why the crowd went to meet him was that they heard he had done this sign.”

So, when the crowds were saying, “Hosanna!” which means “Lord, Save Us!” they were focused on a Savior to save them from death, as Lazarus had been saved. We are like a maiden in desperate need of a great champion to save us from a dragon. The dragon of sin and death has us in his claws. Have you ever noticed that humanity is always looking for a deliverer? And humanity frequently finds what it thinks are champions to defeat sin and death. Some bow to the scientist, others bow to the technological genius, others cry out to the politicians who promise everything, still others look to the medical mind who is searching for the cure, and there are still those who look to an explorer who might find a fountain of youth. But notice what the Savior in our flesh says when facing distress. He says: “Out of my distress I called on the Lord; the Lord answered me and set me free. The Lord is on my side; I will not fear ... It is better to take refuge in the Lord than to trust in man. It is better to take refuge in the Lord than to trust in princes.”

We would do well to say the same. If our champion rests in his Father in heaven, and teaches all who have his flesh to rest in the same, we would be wise to do just that. And our Father in heaven has sent a true prince to save us. Look at the surprising way he saves. The dragon of sin and death is hungry to eat the maiden. But our deliverer throws himself into the mouth and belly of the dragon so that he is filled, and must lose his appetite. The dragon has no understanding of what he has eaten. Our champion is more than one of us. He is the Son of the living God giving himself to reverse the wages of sin and death. He is the gift of God who brings eternal life. His divine nature is like a sharp sword in the belly of the dragon. His divine nature cuts inside the dragon and pierces into his heart so that the dragon himself must die and threaten us no more. And when the slashing is done, our champion walks out of the dragon alive.

Jesus is the everything of the universe. He is the all in all. Apart from him there is nothing whatsoever. Apart from him there is only the forever haunting realization that one does not have him. That is truly forever hell. But since he is all in all, and because he gives himself to us through faith, what he has done, we do with him. Even though we die, we live. Even though we are swallowed by the dragon of sin and death, his belly has been sliced open for us to walk out. As Jesus comes to the gates of heaven, we say along with him the words of our psalm, “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. I thank you that you have answered me and have become my salvation.”

To this unbelieving world, Jesus is no cure for a virus. They do not see him in the good scientist or a healing doctor. He does not fit into the blueprint for a kingdom on earth, because his kingdom is an eternal kingdom and not of this world. And though he is the King of kings there is no palace, no building to his name. Jesus is the stone that the builders have rejected. Nevertheless, the stone that the builders have rejected has become the cornerstone, by which all that lasts is built. He is the only real cure for all of our infirmities and sorrows. Only in his cross do we find forgiveness for all our rebellion and escape from death. He is the blueprint for all that will be. He is the palace and our dwelling place forever.

He doesn't look like much when he rides to the city of Jerusalem, but this is the one who raised Lazarus from the dead. Lazarus was a sign to all who would have the gift of God - eternal life. Jesus is the Lord's doing and it is marvelous in our eyes, for we have been given eyes to see. Everyday then is a day to rejoice and be glad, for the Lord has made an everlasting day in the one who has died and has been raised from the dead so that we might be raised with him. Therefore, with the crowds we can't contain ourselves. We shout with them: "Save us, we pray, O Lord! O Lord, we pray, give us success! 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."

Indeed! He has made his light to shine upon us in whatever darkness we may face down here, even a virus. He is our champion. He is the festal sacrifice bound with cords to the horn of the altar - our strength to live - the everything given to us. He has been thrown into the belly of the dragon to slice open a gate of righteousness whereby we enter into his glory. We shall not perish. Though we die, we shall not die! We will live! Now that's **A Story to Tell!** In the words of Psalm 118, "Oh give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever! Let Israel say, 'His steadfast love endures forever.' Let the house of Aaron say, 'His steadfast love endures forever.' Let those who fear the Lord say, 'His steadfast love endures forever.'"

Amen.

Pastor Brock Abbott