

# *His Love Endures Forever*

Psalm 118

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“With boughs in hand, join in the festal procession.” These words are in Psalm 118, and they envision a procession, perhaps a parade, where people are waving the boughs in their hands in celebration and in honor...of...the one who comes in the name of the Lord. “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.” For a people grounded and rooted in the Hebrew Scriptures, it makes perfect sense that on a day many years later when one came in the name of the Lord, people would grab hold of the boughs and join in the festal procession, shouting, “Hosanna in the highest! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest!”

Knowing there is a connection between a psalm that was written sometime in the ancient history of Israel and the entrance of Jesus into Jerusalem on what we know as Palm Sunday seems worthy of note. In no way taking away from the significance and the incredible blessing that we have in knowing Jesus, God has always been about the business of blessing his people. That much we know from the opening and closing verses of the psalm. “Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his love endures forever.” Forever...he is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. We don’t find out until the end of the psalm that this is a festal procession, that people have joined the festal procession with boughs in hand, but if that is so, think what those early verses might be. Person after person steps forward with their bough in hand and shouts out praise and adoration to the living God.

- In my anguish I cried to the Lord, he answered me by setting me free
- The Lord is with me; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?
- The Lord is with me; he is my helper; I will look in triumph on my enemies
- 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
- All the nations surrounded me, but in the name of the Lord I cut them off
- They surrounded me on every side, but in the name of the Lord I cut them off
- They swarmed around me like bees, but they died out as quickly as burning thorns; in the name of the Lord I cut them off
- I was pushed back and about to fall, but the Lord helped me
- The Lord is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation

Was this an orderly procession, each one stepping forward with bough in hand to proclaim their wonderful part of the story of God's salvation, and then politely and demurely stepping back to allow the next person to have a turn? It might well have been just what it says it is, a festal procession, teetering on the verge of chaos as shout upon shout rose from a joyful crowd about how God had been at work in each one's life. I favor the nearly chaotic scene, because that is what I have always imagined Palm Sunday's festal procession was. We call today Palm Sunday because in the Gospel of John we are told the crowd was waving palm branches. The importance of Palm Sunday is attested by the simple fact that every single one of the gospel accounts records the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. As we heard earlier in Matthew's account, the crowds that went ahead and the crowds that followed Jesus as he made his way to Jerusalem on a donkey were shouting, shouting I say, Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!"

What sets the procession apart in Matthew is that now the eternal and immortal God has become human and dwelt among us. The Word has become flesh. God has come in human form, and his name is Jesus. What that means is now as people shout their words of praise they are people who have been touched by the hand of Jesus. Isn't that beautiful? Isn't that wonderful? Here are these throngs of people waving their palm branches and telling their story. Because this story is good news, I believe they were shouting and singing and crying out at the top of their lungs.

Those waving palms and shouts of praise would have made for one magnificent and majestic parade. What a festal procession as Jesus rides into Jerusalem, seated on a donkey. When I think of those palm branches my mind runs to another parade, a parade I have never seen in person but one that lives on in my imagination. That parade is the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade. From that parade came the movie "Miracle on 34<sup>th</sup> Street." I sat with my siblings on the old couch in our basement watching our black and white television and following with the greatest interest the question of whether the kind old man in the movie might really be Santa Claus. When the movie comes to an end with the cute little girl finding just the home she had asked Santa to provide, there is a cane tucked away in a corner, a sign that old Kris might not be as crazy as everyone thought.

A cane tucked in a corner as a sign that someone might be exactly who they said they were. On this Sunday of celebration, the cane is not the sign, but the palm branches might be. A throng of people gathered together for a triumphal entry into Jerusalem of the one they believed was the Savior. And each and every one of them had in their hand a palm branch. They shouted...

- I was blind, but now I see!
- I was covered with leprous sores but now my skin is as white as snow!
- He opened my ears!
- He made me walk!
- He called me to be a fisher of men!
- He took me from a life of collecting taxes to a life of sharing blessings!
- He took my two little fishes and fed 5,000 people!
- He spoke to the winds and the waves and he saved my little boat!
- He stopped my bleeding.
- He raised my daughter from the dead.
- He set me free from the demons that had me tied up in knots.
- He preached and his words brought life.
- He showed me compassion and he cared.

As each one shouts, as each one celebrates, their shouts and their cries are accompanied by the waving of a palm branch. In my mind I imagine that with each healing, each blessing, each miracle, as Jesus touched and taught and hugged and healed, when that encounter came to an end and he moved on, the one who had been touched, the one who had been taught, the one who had been hugged, the one who had been healed might have watched Jesus travel along and when he disappeared from their view they looked down at the ground and what do you think they saw. A palm branch. Right there at their feet. Ding, ding, ding...the bells go off in their mind. He was who he said he was. Jesus is the Messiah. So one by one the leper and the lame, the fishermen and the tax collector, ones with names like Levi and Peter and ones who will forever remain nameless but whose testimony will always be true, they picked up their palm branches and they followed him. And now they were assembled and they were waving their branches.

I like the image of a palm branch being left behind after Jesus visits, because it opens the door to the possibility that we might still find palm branches left behind in our lives, even now, even two thousand years later. Just like Jesus was there for all those in need, he still shows up now, and he leaves a simple sign of his presence. He leaves a palm branch.

Have you ever found a palm branch, a sign that Jesus had been there? When we served an inner city church in Fresno, California, I got involved teaching a bible study at a women's shelter. The shelter was called Evangel Home. I would go once a week and meet with a group of 8-10 women. These women were part of a year-long program designed to help them learn some basic life skills, heal from past wounds, and get a new start. Evangel Home describes their mission this way: "A home where the cycle of crisis ends, where lives are reconciled to Jesus Christ, where families and relationships are restored and where the future holds hope for

the next generation.” With that type of a mission statement I shouldn’t have been surprised to find a palm branch at Evangel Home.

One morning in the spring of 1993, I showed up at Evangel Home to teach the weekly study and was startled when two of the women snuck up behind me and blindfolded me. They told me to keep quiet and no one would get hurt. Of course, they were giggling out loud when they told me this, so I didn’t have any fear. But I did have questions. What in the world was going on?

The women led me into our meeting room, took off my blindfold, and then all the women together shouted out, “Surprise.” Before me was a table filled with fresh baked cookies and cakes. There was a pile of presents on the ground. A basket was filled to overflowing with baby diapers. And the room was decorated with balloons and streamers fitting the finest baby shower you could imagine. The ladies knew Julie was about ready to deliver Alex, our youngest child, and they wanted to join in on the celebration by throwing me a baby shower. It was a really beautiful expression of love, and I still have pictures from that day that sit next to my desk.

This was my first ever baby shower, and so I really didn’t know what to expect. At one point they sat me in front of a big bowl filled with cotton balls. They showed me a basket next to the bowl, and said my job was to use a spoon and get as many cotton balls from the bowl into the basket as I could in one minute. I looked at them like they were goofy. I said, “That will be simple.” They all giggled. Then they took out the blindfold again, and said, “You have to do it blindfolded.” When they started the clock I was furiously spooning cotton balls from the bowl to the basket. I must have been an ace at this, for they cheered me on with great zest, oohing and aahing at my prowess. The louder they cheered the faster I worked with my spoon. When the minute was up, I yanked off the blindfold to see the results of my labor. The bowl was empty. But so was the basket. And there were no cotton balls to be seen anywhere. At this point all the ladies dissolved in laughter. They had played a trick on me. They switched bowls, and the whole time I had an empty bowl in front of me. I was working furiously to move the cotton balls, never realizing the futility of my efforts.

As I look back on my exercise in futility, I think the women at Evangel Home might have had a deeper appreciation for what I was going through in that one minute party game. Each of these women had spent years of their lives caught in desperate situations, trapped in cycles of hopelessness and despair. They weren’t blindfolded and trying to spoon up cotton balls, but they were reaching, grabbing and grasping after an elusive prize that always evaded them. I was glad to play the fool for them that morning. My experience with these women had taught me that each of these women, instead of giving in, had continued grabbing, had continued

reaching out, had continued to believe that there was something out there, someone out there, who could meet their deepest need. And one day they had reached out and grabbed hold of something, grabbed hold of someone, who brought hope and healing to their broken lives. One day they reached out and grabbed hold of Jesus. Or as they told it in such tender and touching ways, Jesus reached out and grabbed hold of them. I left that baby shower with quite a haul, diapers and toys and enough blessings to fill one man's heart for many, many days. I was so touched I looked back before I left and it was then that I saw it. Right there on the sidewalk. A palm branch. Of course, Jesus had been there. Hosanna in the highest! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!

I wonder if you might have discovered some palm branches scattered along your journey of life. Have there been moments when this man named Jesus wasn't just riding his donkey into Jerusalem, but he veered into the path of your life? Call me crazy but it seems like Jesus has a way of riding that donkey into the halls of hospitals, into places of work, into schools and playgrounds, out on sandy beaches and on the top of soaring mountains. And everywhere he has been there are the remainders of his presence, the palm branches and the echoes of hearts that have been touched by his grace, hearts that cry out, "Hosanna in the highest!"

Just the other day, I found a palm branch in Walmart. I don't know how it got there. Well, that's not right. I guess I do know how it got there. A guy called church. He is homeless. Luba said he has been calling the church for nearly ten years. He calls or stops in to see if we have gift cards he can use for food. Many of you will periodically donate a gift card to one of the local stores, and as we have them, we make them available to people. Your gift of \$25 or \$50, sometimes \$100 really makes a difference.

Anyway, this guy called church and had a long talk with Luba. He is sick and is going to have to have surgery. He's going to stay in the hospital and then rehab after the surgery, so as much as it is a bummer that he will have surgery, for that period of time he will have a bed and warm meals. Homelessness, chronic homelessness, is tough. He was supposed to have surgery right away, but then he called and said it was postponed to May. Since weather is warming up he plans to sleep outside. Apparently he has a tent he uses, but it is beat up. So he asked Luba if there was any way the church could help him get a new tent. Again, many of you donate to the pastor's discretionary fund and so we have some money available to help folks. While Luba was talking to him I started doing the math, and I was figuring a tent is a couple hundred dollars. But then I hear Luba ask him on the phone how much a three man tent costs and he says \$30. Thirty dollars? For a guy sleeping outside who is homeless? I told Luba I'll go buy the tent. I got up and went right then. Thirty dollars?

As I went to buy the tent, something Luba told me kept running through my mind. The other day this same guy had called Luba. I keep calling him “this guy”, but he has a name. His name is David. The other day David called Luba and he didn’t ask for anything. He didn’t ask for a gift card. He didn’t ask for a tent. He just called to talk to Luba. They’ve been talking once in a while for nearly ten years. That day David said, “I’m not calling to get anything. I just needed someone to talk to.” And then he said to Luba, “I consider you my friend. You and the church are always there for me.” We didn’t solve homelessness. Luba hasn’t fixed every problem in this David’s life. But on a day when a man named David needed to talk to a friend, he called the church. He talked to Luba. Something about that strikes a chord deep in my heart. So there I was shopping for a tent in Walmart, reflecting on how precious life is. I found a three man tent. David was wrong. The tent was not \$30. No, it was \$24.99. I pulled out the tent and went to buy it, just praying that David would know his life matters, just giving thanks that in the midst of all the brokenness in this world, David felt like the church, and Luba, the dear woman who represents our church in the office, was his friend. When I pulled the tent from the shelf, guess what fell to the ground. It had been stuck under the tent on the shelf. It was a palm branch. I whispered to myself, “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest.”

Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Blessed is Jesus. His healing and hope touched people on all walks of life. His purpose and plan inspired people to live new lives, to love God more faithfully, to love others more deeply, and to serve others with humility. All of that goodness, all of that grace swelled up in a parade of epic proportions. All of that goodness, all of that grace swelled up in a festal procession. Those whose lives he had touched lifted up their palm branches and sang songs of praise and adoration.

I can say with confidence that the only palm branches are not in the Walmart store across the street from our church or in a woman’s shelter in the downtown area of Fresno, California. The palm branches are spread and scattered all over this world and in each one of our lives, because there is no place we are that Jesus is not already there. What I’m saying is I hope and I believe his palm branches are there for you. Maybe you haven’t seen it yet, but friends, have faith. Jesus is with us. Jesus is with you. And if you have seen those palm branches...if you have walked away from an experience of his mercy, of his kindness, of his healing, of his blessing,...if you have walked away from an experience like that and in looking down saw a palm branch, well, don’t leave it there on the ground. Pick it up. Pick it up today. Pick it up and join the parade. Pick it up and join the festal procession. Pick it up and join in saying, “Hosanna in the highest! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!” For these words are trustworthy and true. His love endures forever