

## Called to Deep Hope

Imagine what it feels like to be in a boat on a river. Are you by yourself or with other people? What kind of a boat is it? How fast are you traveling? How fast is the water moving? What are you seeing along the way? Are you getting sprayed with water or staying dry? How much control do you have over the direction and speed of travel?

In 1982, some friends and I vacationed in Wyoming. Our trip included two excursions on the Snake River. The first was a two-day float trip. We soaked in the scenery – mountains, trees, birds, and animals. It was a wonderfully relaxing time. The second was a half-day whitewater trip. We got soaked even though we all remained in the raft. There might have been scenery – I do remember seeing rocks and water. I was a wonderfully exhilarating time.

When I think of the Passover festival in Jerusalem in Jesus' day, I equate it more with a whitewater trip than with a float trip. I visualize throngs of people being swept along the narrow streets. The story of Jesus entering Jerusalem for the last time before his arrest is familiar to us. We've seen artistic depictions of it. We've watched it acted out in movies. We've even participated in re-enactments of it, albeit on a small scale.

John's account is quite short. Listen to it again. Attempt to lay aside your assumptions about this and imagine it with fresh eyes.

*The next day the great crowd that had come to the festival heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, shouting, "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord—the King of Israel!" Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it; as it is written: "Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion. Look, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey's colt!"*<sup>1</sup>

I wonder what someone who was in Jerusalem the day Jesus rode into the city saw, heard, smelled, and thought? How many participated in the procession? How many watched it go by? How many of the people in Jerusalem that day didn't even know this procession took place? What about the people who weren't in Jerusalem? How did they hear about it? Did they hear about it? How many reporters were there interviewing people and taking notes? How was the event portrayed in the evening news? How was the story edited to fit the political or personal viewpoints of the ones reporting it? I wonder.

It's likely Psalm 118 was on the minds of the Jewish people who were in the city that day. It was used every year in their Passover celebrations. The psalm contains verses that may be familiar to us well. We use it every year on Palm Sunday, but we don't always read the entire psalm. Let's spend a bit of time with it, thinking about its early use and seeing how it might connect with our experiences and our faith.<sup>2</sup>

The psalm was written to be used in a procession as worshippers made their way to the temple. The temple complex had outside courts where everyone could gather – Gentiles as well as Jews. The temple itself had entrances called gates through which Jewish people could enter, including both men and women. It had an outer court where women could be and an inner court where only men were allowed. There were halls where only priests could go. The high priest was the only person allowed to enter the most holy place.

Psalm 118 begins with a call to thanksgiving, gathering the people together.<sup>3</sup> The repeated response to the leader's call testifies to the abiding goodness and grace of God. The assurance of God's steadfast love provided hope to the worshippers in the temple. It continues to provide hope to us.

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<sup>1</sup> John 12:12-15, *New Revised Standard Version*

<sup>2</sup> Background on Psalm 118 comes from Fred B. Craddock, John H. Hayes, Carl R. Holladay, and Gene M. Tucker, *Preaching Through the Christian Year: Year C* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1994), p. 167 and James Waltner, *Psalms, Believers Church Bible Commentary*, Herald Press, 2006, pp. 568-574.

<sup>3</sup> Psalm 118:1-4

The main body of the psalm is the testimony of an individual who has survived a distressing crisis.<sup>4</sup> It was often used to celebrate a royal figure or triumphant leader who returns after victory in battle. This person comes to the temple to give thanks for the Lord's answer to their cry for help.

The testimony begins with a declaration of what the Lord has done.<sup>5</sup> In distress, he cries out to God, who answers by setting him in a wide, open space. God's help gives him room so that he no longer feels trapped. These verses contrast refuge in God with confidence in human beings, even those with privilege and power. The original writer couldn't put their faith in kings. The Jewish festival goers couldn't put their faith in their Roman occupiers. We can't rely completely on institutions, organizations, or governments. Ultimately, our peace and security are found in God.

The psalmist continues by describing the experience of being oppressed by enemies – of being surrounded, squeezed from every side, pushed hard to the limit.<sup>6</sup> The idea of being surrounded by bees is not very appealing! But the enemies were consumed as quickly and thoroughly as blazing thorns. The Lord's strength and might saved the singer of this psalm.

The experience of being surrounded and unable to break free is common to everyone in every place and time. The threat might be to our physical bodies – attacked by people, animals, microbes, weather, or disasters. The threat might be to our relationships, emotional health, beliefs, livelihood, or way of life.

I wonder when you've been surrounded or pushed hard. I wonder how you have found help, how you have been saved. Sometimes help comes when circumstances change, and the threat is removed. Sometimes help comes when we change and are better able to withstand the threat. Sometimes the threat exposes aspects of our lives – flaws or habits or perceptions – that need to change in order for us to live as God wants us to live. Sometimes help comes from people caring for us and standing in solidarity with us. Sometimes help strengthens us and increases our endurance so we can withstand the threats that continue. In every case, God is with us – helping us, saving us – even if we're not aware of it at the time.

The individual testimony in Psalm 118 ends with a reference to the Israelites' victory at their exodus from Egypt, the miraculous story handed down from generation to generation.<sup>7</sup> The psalmist links his deliverance from imminent death to this great story of salvation.

Up to this point the thanksgiving has been recited outside of the temple. Now the singer asks for the gates to the temple to be opened so all God's people can be inside.<sup>8</sup> The condition for entry calls for righteous living. Once inside the worshipper expresses gratitude to God, the source of salvation.

The procession now moves into the inner courts of the temple. The congregation responds with happy shouts and songs.<sup>9</sup> They proclaim that what appears to be worthless has now taken the place of honor. This is God's marvelous work. It's a cause for celebration. It motivates them to continue to look to God for deliverance and blessing.

The earliest Christians used the verse about the rejected stone as proof that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah. Other people continued to wait for the Messiah because Jesus neither looked nor acted like the conquering king for whom they had hoped.

As followers of Christ, we declare that Jesus is the Messiah. But we do our fair share of rejecting too. We reject people who for one reason or another we deem unworthy in our sight and maybe even in God's sight. For a variety of reasons, we fail to join in the work God calls us to do. Maybe we lack the desire or energy to listen to God's voice. Maybe we let our preconceptions, prejudices, or stereotypes prevent us from seeing what God is doing. Maybe we're too comfortable or privileged to realize that things aren't the way they should be. Maybe we let other people's voices drown out God's voice.

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<sup>4</sup> Psalm 118:5-21

<sup>5</sup> Psalm 118:5-9

<sup>6</sup> Psalm 118:10-14

<sup>7</sup> Psalm 118:15-18

<sup>8</sup> Psalm 118:19-21

<sup>9</sup> Psalm 118:22-25

Please Lord, save us. Please Lord, assist us in finding our hope in you. Please Lord, help us to define success according to your will.

As the procession ends, the priests – or maybe a choir – blesses the leader as they enter the sanctuary.<sup>10</sup> New Testament Gospel writers identify Jesus as “the one who comes in the name of the Lord.” These verses are the reason Christians around the world read portions of Psalm 118 on Palm Sunday.

Three of the gospel writers – Matthew, Mark, and John – add the word *hosanna* to the words of blessing. *Hosanna* means “save us,” expressing the people’s desire to be delivered from Roman oppression. John reports that when Jesus was riding into Jerusalem even his closest disciples didn’t understand the way in which this would happen.<sup>11</sup> We, too, don’t always see God at work until we reflect on past events. This is often because God brings results and works in ways that differ from our expectations.

Psalm 118 ends the way it began, with an individual proclaiming thanksgiving to God and the congregation affirming God’s steadfast love.<sup>12</sup>

Let’s return to our images of being in a boat on a river. Let’s think about how the theme of being deep in a current connects with the readings from Psalm 118 and John 12.<sup>13</sup> How do we find stability in the whitewater? How do we connect to the deep hope God offers, the same kind of hope exemplified by deep, still water or by seeds planted deep in good, rich, well-watered soil?

Each year on this day, I’m struck by the contrasting crowds we read about during Holy Week. How can the cheering crowd who blesses Jesus turn into the jeering crowd who demands that he be put to death? They could be two completely different groups of people, but it seems likely that some, maybe many, people both cheer and jeer. None of us can say with certainty which crowd or crowds we would have part of if we were in Jerusalem that week.

We’ve all been carried along with a crowd and done things that we look back on with feelings of accomplishment. We’ve also been swept along with a crowd and done things that we look back on with feelings of regret. We’ve seen crowds of celebration turn into crowds destroying property. We’ve seen crowds of protest turn into crowds invading public buildings. We’ve also seen crowds demanding justice whose demands bring about changes that benefit individuals, groups, and society as a whole. I wonder what crowds each of us are part of right now. What currents are pulling us along?

As Jesus rides into Jerusalem in John’s telling of the Palm Sunday story, we feel the pull of seemingly competing currents. There’s the pull of the crowds and their lofty expectations, the lack of understanding of the disciples, and the inevitability of the journey to the cross. The path Jesus began will carry him to garden, trial, hill, and tomb.

As competing expectations swirl on the surface, what is the deeper current that carries Jesus along? How do we identify the movement of God even in the urgent pace of life? The cornerstone of Psalm 118 draws us into what is deeper, a steady current to give us hope that closed tombs are never the final word of the story.

As we follow Jesus into Holy Week, let us seek the deep, steady current of God’s steadfast love, calling us to deep hope in the One who comes in the name of the Lord. Amen.

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<sup>10</sup> Psalm 118:26-27

<sup>11</sup> John 12:16

<sup>12</sup> Psalm 118:28-29

<sup>13</sup> Portions of this conclusion are adapted from Lent 6 focus statement and sermon starter, Lent-Easter Worship Resources, *Leader*, Winter 2020-2021, ©2020 MennoMedia, pp. 46-47.