

“Blessed”

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia
Season of Lent, Palm Sunday, April 10, 2022
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Scriptures: Psalm 118: 19-29 Mark 11: 1-11

Worship Theme

Giver of light, your steadfast love endures forever.

Save us, we beseech you!

Open our hearts to the Blessed One who comes so humbly, entering Jerusalem and our lives.

We lift voices and hopes, proclaiming,

“Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!”

*Open before us the gates of your justice, that we may enter your holy temple,
confessing in heaven and on earth that Jesus is Lord.*

Psalm 118: 19-29

¹⁹ Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them
and give thanks to the Lord.

²⁰ This is the gate of the Lord; the righteous shall enter through it.

²¹ I thank you that you have answered me and have become my salvation.

²² The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.

²³ This is the Lord’s doing; it is marvelous in our eyes.

²⁴ This is the day that the Lord has made;
let us rejoice and be glad in it.

²⁵ Save us, we beseech you, O Lord!
O Lord, we beseech you, give us success!

²⁶ Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.
We bless you from the house of the Lord.

²⁷ The Lord is God,
and he has given us light.

Bind the festal procession with branches,
up to the horns of the altar.

²⁸ You are my God, and I will give thanks to you;
you are my God, I will extol you.

²⁹ O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good,
for his steadfast love endures forever.

Mark 11: 1-11

When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples ² and said to them, “Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it. ³ If anyone says to you, ‘Why are you doing this?’ just say this, ‘The Lord needs it

and will send it back here immediately.”⁴ They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, ⁵ some of the bystanders said to them, “What are you doing, untying the colt?” ⁶ They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it.

⁷ Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. ⁸ Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. ⁹ Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting, “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! ¹⁰ Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.

Litany of the Palms

Please rise in body or spirit, hold high your branches or arms, and repeat after me.

Hosanna!
Hosanna!
Hosanna in the highest heaven!
Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!
God save us!
Hosanna!
In Christ we are united!
Christ comes for all people!
All ages!
All races!
All creeds!
All classes!
All nations!
The rich!
The poor!
The LGBTQ!
The straight!
Men, women, and children!
All people, united in Christ!
Hosanna!
God save us!
Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!
Amen!

[“Litany of the Palms” adapted from an original litany by the Rev. George E. Calvert (1928-2005) while serving in East Harlem, NYC as Pastor, Church of the Son of Man and Pastor, Church of the Living Hope.]

Sermon

A Word About the Word

Blessed

Early one brisk April Sunday morning a man was in bed, sound asleep.
His mother entered his bedroom and said,

“Son, it’s after 10 AM.

You need to get up and get ready for church.

Get dressed to get blessed.”

“Well, I’m not going to church. Give me one good reason I have to go.”

“I’ll give you two,” she said.

“One, it’s the Lord’s Day and two, you’re the pastor!”

A Word About the Word

Blessed

Bless-ed

Blest

Pilgrims journeyed to Jerusalem to welcome Jesus.
They came to witness His triumphant entry into the city,
They planned to follow Him into the Temple of God.
As He rode into Jerusalem they raised branches and their voices,
shouting a favorite line from Psalm 118.

“Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!”

Seen in this light, it is understandable that Christians interpret “Blessed is the one...”
as a messianic introduction of the Christ,

welcoming, proclaiming, testifying that Jesus is the One,
the Chosen One who comes in the name of the Lord.

That He is.

We celebrate and receive with joy this ever-loving gift of God,
the Christ Child, Emmanuel, God-With-Us,
Mighty God, Wonderful Counselor, Prince of Peace.

Then there is this:

Jesus of Nazareth, the happy disciples, the crowds at the city gates and along the road
grasped the original meaning and intent of the phrase from Psalm 118:

“Blessed is the one who comes (into the temple) in the name of the Lord.”

“...into the temple...” – unwritten, unsaid, unspoken,
yet there it is, the pause between the notes.
You see, taken in its fuller context,
much of Psalm 118 is an affirmation
of the blessings everyday folks receive and experience
upon entering the temple of God.
Inferred by the overall context of the Psalm
is that *“the one who comes (into the temple) in the name of the Lord...”*
is blessed.
Here we speak of both the Messiah and the whole people of God.

God’s Big Love is at work through the Word and the Christ
and the Beloved Community of Faith,
calling us to triumphantly enter into the newness
of Life and Life Everlasting.

In the Psalm and in Christ and in the Church,
God is at work to elevate and exalt.
Despite opposition and oppression and obstacles,
the Word and the Messiah and the Church of Jesus Christ promise
that we shall “not be overtaken by death, literal or otherwise.”

[John Hayes, Preaching the New Revised Common Lectionary]

A Word About the Word

A rabbi friend shared with me that in the Hebrew Scriptures
the meaning of being blessed
is to be made more than what you presently are.

When you are blessed,
you are exalted and elevated by the grace of God.
God’s blessings magnify, amplify, exemplify
gifts and graces planted deep within.

The Psalmist sang and the people testify that
“the one who comes (into the temple) in the name of the Lord...” is blessed.

To enter the temple, the House of the Lord,
is to enjoy the gathering who acknowledge the One Who Created and Creates.

To enter the sanctuary
is to make yourself vulnerable and available.

To enter into God’s sacred space and holy place
is to open oneself wide to be blessed.

Bountifully blessed.
Lovingly blessed.
Divinely blessed.

To be blessed...

Here in the sanctuary of the Lord
we sing of being blessed in the presence and by the grace of God:

*Praise God from Whom All Blessings Flow
Blest Be the Tie that Binds
Blessed Assurance, Jesus is Mine
Counting Every Blessing*

Counting every blessing,
exclamations of joy are raised in the Temple,
like when we read from the Holy Scriptures about...

...When Elizabeth encountered Mary, she exclaimed with a loud cry,
*"Blessed are you among women
and blessed is the fruit of your womb!"*

*Mary responded, "My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior
for God has looked with favor on the lowliness of [this] servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is God's name." (Luke 1: 46-49)*

In these pews and hallways and gathering spaces
our offering and receiving of blessings
are so much more than a common, polite exchange.
We extend blessings to one another,
acknowledging and connecting
with the holiness that resides within.

Here we embody what we first overheard in Ruth Chapter 2:
*"And behold, Boaz came from Bethlehem.
And he said to the reapers, "The LORD be with you!"
And they answered, "The LORD bless you."*

Whether opening worship or going forth,
we often express in word and song Aaron's prayer of blessing:

*“The LORD bless you and keep you;
the LORD make God’s face to shine upon you and be gracious to you;
the LORD lift up God’s countenance upon you and give you peace.”*

Here in Christ’s Church the practice of Miss Manners politeness is ever-present, as well.
After someone sneezes,
 we practice a thousand-year-old cultural tradition
 because once upon a time we imagined
 that when someone sneezed the Sprit of God left their body.
So, to restore the holy spirit, after every *achoo!* we say, *“God bless you!”*

A Word About the Word

How many of us struggle, wrestle, ponder
 whether there is a place for us in the House of the Lord?

The first Trappist monk of Gethsemane in Kentucky
 was engaged in a conversation with a visitor.
The abbot listened as the visitor to the monastery
 expressed how unsure he was
 whether to even enter into the sacred space.
“I never go to church, abbot,” said the visitor. *“There are too many hypocrites there.”*
“Oh, don’t let that keep you away,” smiled the abbot.
 “There is always room for one more, you know.” [Rev. Bruno M. Hagspiel, SVD]

The visitor’s uncertainty whether or not to enter
 is a gentle reminder that the Church into which we are invited to belong
 is not a museum for saints.
Here we enter into a hospital of healing for sinners,
 the broke and broken, the lost and the last.
Here into the temple of hope and hospitality
 we stumble and bumble and fumble our ways forward,
 unsure what to expect,
 not always positive if we have the right words,
 unsure about dipping in our toe to test the temperature,
 breaking the Bread and sharing the Cup
 alongside fellow hypocrites and sinners and fools for Christ,
 only to discover that we are blessed.

A Word About the Word

Consider how Jesus Christ used the word “Blessed” in His teaching and preaching.

Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount

opens with a powerful, profound litany
we know as The Beatitudes.

² *Then [Jesus] began to speak, and taught them, saying:*

³ *"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

⁴ *"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.*

⁵ *"Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.*

⁶ *"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled."*

(Matthew 5: 2-6)

Beatitude is a Latin word to describe a statement in the indicative mood
declaring people to be in a privileged, fortunate circumstance.

Jesus of Nazareth did not invent the beatitude form;
similar language can be found elsewhere
in wisdom literature and prophetic writings.
Jesus would have been familiar with the form and the content.

In religious writings set down prior to Jesus,
beatitudes declare the present and future blessedness
of those who are in dire circumstances
and who will be vindicated
in the eschatological coming of God's kingdom.

These words of hope are not instructions;
they are declarations.

These blessings are not practical advice for successful living;
beatitudes are prophetic statements grounded in the faith and conviction
that God is alive and present,
that God's Beloved Community
is coming, is not yet here, is drawing ever nearer,
and yet...
and yet is already being realized in the here and now.

Our prophets and wisdom teachers understood
that as people of faith we live
in the blessed balance of the already and the not yet,
and that is okay.

So, when Jesus preaches and teaches in Galilee,
unpacking the blessings of God,
He begins with a litany of beatitudes.

Jesus Christ pronounces a blessing on authentic disciples
in the Christian community.

Coming from the lips of Christ,
the beatitudes speak directly

to the character and destiny of his beloved disciples.

The difference between the beatitudes of wisdom literature or the prophets
and those of the Living Christ
is that Jesus' Word brings into being what he declares.

What He states, what He blesses, what He promises *will come to fruition.*

Let's hear that again.

What Jesus states, what Jesus blesses, what Jesus promises *will come to fruition.*

He unconditionally declares that *those who are merciful will receive mercy.*

Those who are meek shall inherit the earth.

Those who are peacemakers shall be called children of God.

Those who mourn will be comforted.

Jesus declares to the whole people of God,

"Rejoice and be glad, for great is your reward in heaven."

A Word About the Word

Growing up in Spanish Harlem the son of a preacher was a fascinating combo.

Once when a friend was cursing up a storm, another friend scolded him.

"Don't curse in front of Jamie.

Don't you know his father owns the Church?"

Who owns, who runs, who calls the tune in the House of the Lord?

After Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem,

He entered the Temple filled with the power and authority of God.

There He expected blessings.

Instead He encountered businesses.

He cast out the money changers and overturned their tables,

saying, *"Take away these things!*

You shall not make my Father's house a house of trade." (John 2)

Despite some obstreperous folks whose idea of church runs counter to Christ's,

the religious practice of spirituality is life affirming and world changing.

I cannot imagine my life – and yours as well --

without the abundance of blessings bestowed by Christ's community of faith,

by the churches that model and teach the Faith with joy and sincerity.

I resonate with being a part of a congregation

of disciples from all walks of life

that loves God, loves life,

loves our neighbors, loves the hurt and the hurting.

How about you?

Do you feel blessed?

Are you looking for blessings and grace upon grace?

"Blessed are you who come into the temple in the name of the Lord!"

In Elaine Pagels' introduction to her book on the Gnostic Gospels, Beyond Belief, she tells of learning of her young son's incurable heart condition.

Distraught, disheveled, Elaine Pagels found herself one Sunday morning arriving at a nearby church in her sweaty jogging clothes.

As she stood in the door and listened,

she told herself, *"This is a church that can handle death."*

Let that be us, as well.

May we stand at the entranceway of the sanctuary, dressed to the nines or disheveled, and say to God and ourselves with confidence born of experience and hope:

"This is a church that can handle

the trials and traumas and triumphs of our lives."

This sacred space and holy place is blessed and a blessing

for one and all who come into the sanctuary in the name of the Lord!

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit! Amen.