

“This is the Day”
A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church
Psalm 118
August 6, 2017 - Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

I have a Facebook friend whom I do not know very well in real life. In real life, we are acquaintances. On Facebook, we know a lot about each other’s politics and views on religion. In real life, I’m not sure, exactly, what he does for a living. On Facebook, I know that he is suffering mightily.

This man’s wife is dying from breast cancer. His two daughters — one in high school and one in middle school — have been troopers. He has been overwhelmed by the support of friends and family and his church. He has also expressed his deep grief and anger in heart-rending posts.

Over the weekend, he posted in simple white letters on a black background, the following: “I am looking forward to meeting God one day and punching him in the face.”

Well, that left this particular Facebook friend of his in a pickle. Do I “like” this status? Do I “love” it? Or give it a sad face or angry face? Do I comment? Or do I not do anything at all? That last one sent shivers down my spine. There’s so much to consider here. I’m a pastor. A reverend. A Minister of Word and Sacrament in the Presbyterian Church (USA)! If Facebook has taught me anything, it’s the need for a wildly outsized impression of one’s own importance.

“You are my God, and I will give thanks to you; you are my God, I will extol you.” The psalmist takes us on quite the journey in this psalm of thanksgiving. It starts and ends with the same words: “O give thanks to the Lord, for God is good, for God’s steadfast love endures forever.”

Then the psalmist launches into a tale of salvation. The speaker was in distress, a tight spot, the walls were closing in, and God provided space. The Lord - YHWH, the God of Israel - was on the psalmist’s side. “It is better to take refuge in the Lord than to put confidence in mortals...[and] princes.” — nobody ever wants to inscribe *that* on a government building. When things were bad, God showed up. “The Lord is my strength and my might; God has become my salvation.”

Victory has been given to those at the right hand of God. “I shall not die, but I shall live, and recount the deeds of the Lord.” The psalmist yearns to enter the gates of righteousness in order to give thanks. And here come the thanks: “I thank you that you have answered me and have become my salvation.” Having received salvation, the speaker joins other voices: “This is the Lord’s doing; it is marvelous in our eyes. This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.”

Then, in the midst of all this rejoicing and thanksgiving, we get this: “Save us, we beseech you, O Lord! O Lord, we beseech you, give us success!” That “save us” piece right there in Hebrew is where we get the cry “Hosanna!” on Palm Sunday. Save us, O Lord. We are celebrating how you saved us, and yet we ask you to save us.

Blessings are given to the one who comes in the name of the Lord. God has given us light.
“You are my God, and I will give thanks to you; you are my God, I will extol you.”

So what we’ve got here is a beautiful psalm that emerges after a great moment of salvation. God has rescued the speaker and the companion voices that join in later. Psalm 118 has come to be associated with Passover for Jews, and with both Palm Sunday and Easter for Christians. In our Adult Sunday School class this summer, we’ve talked about how the psalms often feel like they’re written by completely different people with completely different personalities and unreconcilable theology from one psalm to the next. How could these words of victory and praise be written in the same hand that cries out in despair, or curses rival kingdoms, or seeks to comfort the afflicted?

And then we have looked at our own lives, and our own experiences, and our own emotions, and we have wondered if these psalms were composed by the same voices, just with brutal honesty in different times and circumstances. The psalms don’t feel the need to tie everything up and put a bow on it. They let emotion hang out for the world to see: anger and fear, hope and jubilation, confusion and doubt.

In Psalm 118 the psalmist trusts God fully and rejoices. But the psalmist knows suffering. The psalmist knows what it is like to fear. That cry — “Save us!” — that cry comes from experience. Victory is ours. God has seen us through. But we have seen trouble. And we know that trouble can always come back. The people of God are in constant need of God’s steadfast love showing up and enduring.

The Passover is a celebration of freedom and God’s action to secure it, but heaven knows there has been tragedy of the cruelest kind for the Jewish people since. So Psalm 118 is open-ended. It manages to relish in restoration while looking to the future without a hint of naïveté. That allows future prayers of the psalm to connect it to their present suffering, their present joy, or their present plea for salvation. The Gospel writers put these words into Jesus’s mouth and the mouths of his followers. For the early Christians, the “stone the builders rejected” — the salvation that has become the cornerstone — is Jesus. When he arrives, the crowd shouts “Hosanna!” and “Blessed is the one!” and they bind the festal procession with branches.

“This is the day that the Lord has made.” Today, for the psalmist, that day is one of relief and victory, so, “let us rejoice and be glad in it.” And yet, there are other days. And the Lord has made those too.

The day that the cancer came back was a day the Lord made.
The day a donor match was found was a day the Lord made.
The day the bombs fell was a day the Lord made.
The day aid workers arrived with food and supplies was a day the Lord made.
The day the accident happened was a day the Lord made.
The day the child was born was a day the Lord made.
The day the teen mustered up the courage to come out to their family
and live fully as God had made them was a day the Lord made.
The day the family rejected them was a day the Lord made.
The day when nothing interesting happened at all — that too was a day the Lord made.

My friend’s wife — the mother of two who was planning so many more days with her family — will die on a day that the Lord has made. And well-meaning people will feel uncomfortable and say trite things

that make no sense. And my friend will be kind to them, but I know he'll be boiling inside. He'll be asked to celebrate her life, and he will want to do that, but he won't want to give God any of the credit.

The great 20th Century rabbi, theologian, and mystic Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote that "Any god who is mine but not yours, any god concerned with me but not with you, is an idol."¹ I am rejoicing. You are despairing. My God can handle a punch to the face. I know that to be true.

The switching voices of Psalm 118 — from “With the Lord on my side I do not fear” to “Save us” and “let us rejoice” to “You are my God, and I will give thanks to you” — reminds me that the community of faith, when it's functioning properly, is really good at pinch hitting for one another. We cover one another's notes. When you are exhausted, I sing your part. When I lose my voice, in my stead you declare God's steadfast love endures forever. When you are breaking apart because of one of the days the Lord has made, we let you be how you need to be — even if you need to be away — and we love you with our own weary hands and we shout aloud without asking you to believe it today “I shall not die, but I shall live, and recount the deeds of the Lord.”

With this fall bringing the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation, the words of the reformers keep popping up all around me. Psalm 118 was Martin Luther's most-loved psalm, and that verse — *I shall not die, but I shall live, and recount the deeds of the Lord* — was his favorite. He wrote “all the saints have sung this verse and will continue to sing it to the end.”²

This is the day that the Lord has made. We rejoice, for we see more salvation than despair, though despair puts up one hell of a fight and sure makes a ton of noise. We rejoice, for God's steadfast love endures forever, and even if we don't see it where we'd like to see it, we manage to find children of God willing to share it with us in quirky churches and other assorted imperfect places. We rejoice, for we are a people called to not die, but to live, and that song must be sung to the end. Amen.

¹ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Who Is Man?*, 71.

² Luther's Works, vol. 14. 87