



Palm Sunday
April 9, 2006

Psalm 118:19-29
Creative Gratitude
M. Craig Barnes

Today is the beginning of Holy Week. But today is not the first time you have heard about Jesus' ride into Jerusalem, or his last supper on Thursday, his crucifixion on Friday, or his resurrection next Sunday. Like old married couples who have heard each other's stories most of their lives, when the pastors speak this week, you could finish their sentences. So why do we tell the story again, year after year? Because Holy Week is the story of our lives. It isn't just about what did happen. It's also about what does happen

Isn't it striking that some people have more than their share of problems, but they seem to always be so content and thankful, while others have relatively easy lives, but they seem to be never content or thankful? Obviously, gratitude has nothing to do with the circumstances of life. It has everything to do with your vision of God. If you are having trouble being thankful, it isn't new circumstances you need. It is a new vision of God. For thousands of years, those in search of a new vision of God have turned to the Psalms.

The Psalms were the ancient hymn book of the Hebrews and the Early Church. Children were taught to memorize them and adults were guided by them in their worship. In times of trouble these Psalms would immediately begin to roll off their tongues as prayers and they would find themselves again in communion with their God. Psalm 118 belongs to a group of Psalms known as the Hallel Psalms, or praise Psalms. "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord." Those words were as familiar to the Hebrews as the hymns *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God* or *Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty* are to us.

The Hallel Psalms were said especially during the festive seasons like Passover. So it is not surprising that when Jesus entered Jerusalem during Passover, the crowd immediately began to break out in this hymn, once again. "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. Bind the festal procession with branches." It was just what flowed up out of their hearts at every Passover. But now they were applying this time-honored Psalm to the arrival of Jesus.

They had seen what he had done in his ministry. Perhaps the crowd that lined the street into Jerusalem included Zacchaeus who had been forgiven his sins, blind Bartimaeus who had been given his sight, and Lazarus who had returned from the dead—all by the miraculous work of Jesus. The people were grateful for what he had done and were simply expressing their delight. We can call this "responsive gratitude." It recognizes the blessings of life and responds with thanksgiving.

Like the people who lined the streets in the Palm Sunday parade, we realize that Jesus has been pretty good to us, and we come to church to join the festal procession of those who give thanks. Do you really have to work that hard to find reasons to be thankful? If you sat down this afternoon and made a list of life's blessings, which is not a bad exercise, you would probably be amazed at how long the list grows. This doesn't mean that there are not also heartaches and disappointments. It just means there are always opportunities to give thanks.

Maybe one day last week you were driving home from work in a foul mood. You complained to yourself that no one really appreciates what you do for that place, and come to think of it no one really is all that appreciative for all you do at home. The traffic is moving slower than normal, which only makes you complain all the more. But then you discover that the reason for the back up is a terrible, terrible accident. You take one look at the mangled cars and you know some people are not going home. Suddenly your complaints have turned to gratitude. You don't have to be particularly spiritual to learn how to offer responsive thanksgiving. You just have to be paying attention. It could be a lot worse. It is a lot worse for someone. Always, there is someone who has it a whole lot worse.

As obvious as that all seems, I am always amazed by how many people refuse to give thanks. They choose instead to focus upon what life has not given them. But that is their choice. Complaint is not natural. Neither is gratitude. What is natural is only that life often gives you what you do not expect. What comes next is up to you. You can respond in either complaint or in thanksgiving. Often, it is the only choice you get to make. Those who choose gratitude, choose not to be victims. They choose to determine their own response to the volatility of life, and to defy their disappointments by finding reason to give thanks. These are great responses.

Responsive gratitude is only the first step in learning how to conduct a spiritual life, however. If you keep praying with the Psalms, eventually they will teach you a deeper more profound form of gratitude to God. That is creative gratitude. Responsive gratitude chooses to find God's blessing in what has occurred. Creative gratitude chooses to find the blessings of God in what will occur. Creative gratitude does not wait to see what the world will come up with next for you and then challenge you to find a reason to still be grateful. Instead, creative gratitude is world-creating. It subverts the pain-filled world we see today by insisting on giving praise to God who is not done with creation.

Remember, these Hallel Psalms were sung at Passover. That gave the Hebrew people an annual experience of being renewed by the formative events of the Exodus when God freed them from slavery and brought them through the Red Sea. This reminded them that God can miraculously change the way it is. He overthrew the most powerful nation in the world in order to create hope for those who had no hope. By reminding us of this, the Psalms do not teach us to simply find some reason to give thanks while still in Egypt. They don't try to make us contented slaves or tell us to be grateful because things could always be worse. No, they call us to envision another way of life. That is ultimately why we are thankful.

Thus, the Psalms are always subversive literature. This is why verse twenty-two claims, "The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone." The Hebrews would sing

this as they approached the temple and they would remember that a people who had been rejected were given a place to worship. And when they remembered, they also envisioned. So as the Hebrews worshiped and gave thanks to God, this small nation surrounded by so many powerful empires was proclaiming a different world—one created by their God.

This means that our thanksgiving has the power not just to recognize the blessings of today but to proclaim a blessedly different way of life coming tomorrow. That is why abolitionist preachers, like Frederick Douglass, used to stand in their pulpits declaring their gratitude that blacks were created free long before slavery was abolished. And it is why Bishop Desmond Tutu used to invite the white Afrikaner police to drop their guns and join the winning side long before the laws of apartheid fell. And it is why the churches of East Germany declared their gratitude that they were free in Christ long before the Berlin wall was torn down. It is why every leader against social injustice has given us not just plans and strategies but great dreams. At the basis of all these new world-creating visions was the day when Jesus rode into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday.

According to Matthew and Mark, Jesus then quoted Psalm 118 himself reminding the people that the stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. That was again subversive language. He was claiming that he was the beginning of something new God was building. He was the new temple, the new meeting place with God.

If you can see that in Christ God is with us and is still about a good work that is not yet completed, then your heart is filled with gratitude. It doesn't matter how painful, lonely, or despairing life may be; your thanksgiving refuses to honor the present so much. It doesn't take the present too seriously because it will not last.

When we read the newspapers, receive the bad lab report from the doctor, lose our jobs, become confused or lost along the way in life, we will still declare our faith by insisting on a creative gratitude that envisions a whole new way of life because a Savior has ridden into our lives. Anything can happen! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!

Benediction: You cannot be thankful and mean, thankful and angry, or thankful and hopeless. But you can be thankful and creative. Amen.