

Erin Hollaar Pacheco
Hope CRC, Oak Forest
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SINGING AN OLD NEW SONG
Psalm 118

Well, throughout Lent, we have been asking “What song shall we sing?” And we have been looking to the Psalms, sitting with the psalms, singing and praying and coloring the psalms...

I hope this has been a helpful Lenten practice.

It still feels like we’ve been in Lent for a year.

I know many are tired and worn down in ways we cannot even name.

Which makes it especially difficult to enter into this Holy Week. Last year, we did Palm Sunday, Good Friday, and Easter services as podcasts. This year’s Holy Week services are less virtual, and more embodied, but still a far cry from ‘normal.’

There are a few of us here with palm branches in our hands...some waving more vigorously than others.

We’re conscious of these empty seats. We miss the rest of you.

And we will miss the choir on Good Friday, and the buzz of a full sanctuary on Easter Sunday. It doesn’t feel quite like a Hope Church Holy Week should.

Yet here we are. Palm Sunday, 2021.

What song shall we sing?

The lectionary today gives us Psalm 118—mostly because, when Jesus rides into Jerusalem, the crowd erupts in this psalm, this song. “Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!”

It’s a joyful, triumphant song that begins and ends with the call to “Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good. His love endures forever.”

Between these bookends is a mix of individual testimony and communal praise. The priests, and Israel, and all who fear the Lord declare his forever love and mercy, his *hesed*. And then one voice rises above the rest to tell the dramatic story of how God delivered them from their enemies. “The Lord is my strength and my defense; he has

become my salvation.” The community responds with shouts of joy over Yahweh’s victory and his mighty hand.

And then, all, together, enter through the gates and join the festal procession up to the temple, to the altar of God, where the priests bestow blessing and all voices are joined in praise. “Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his love endures forever.”

It’s a liturgical psalm—a whole worship service, if you will.

And, with so many obvious connections to Christ, Psalm 118 is quoted in the New Testament more than any other psalm, and in almost every New Testament book.

In fact, it’ll show up again in worship next Sunday. Because, really, it makes the most sense to sing this victory psalm after the resurrection, not before.

But let’s back up.

Walter Brueggemann, in his little book on *Praying the Psalms*, points out that when Christians read the psalms ... we’re in “Jewish territory.” This is Brueggemann:

“Our spirituality is diminished and trivialized if we neglect the Jewishness that belongs to our own tradition and practice of faith. That history that becomes ours in prayer is a minority history, a history of victims and marginal people. But” (he goes on) “we need not romanticize. This history is also a memory of grasping and not trusting and thereby bringing trouble.”

The psalms, the songbook of the Old Testament, arise out of the rich and complicated history of ancient Israel and its God. We Gentiles are grafted into the use of these songs, but they remain deeply Jewish in their language and imagery and context.

What song shall we sing? How about a Jewish one?

Lin Manuel Miranda—not a Jew—grew up as a Puerto Rican kid in New York City, with a deep love for both Broadway and hip hop.

When he came to write the hit musical *Hamilton*, Miranda paid homage to his influences. His songs are sprinkled with quick and subtle nods to Wagner and Eminem, South Pacific and the Last Five Years, Beyoncé and Biggie Smalls and DMX and...

If anyone’s interested, there’s a whole internet rabbit hole waiting there just for you...

You certainly don’t have to catch all the allusions to enjoy the performance. BUT, if you know the same body of work that Miranda knows, if you’re steeped in the same worlds and recognize those little tributes, each of them is like a door to a whole other room.

And you come away with a greater appreciation for the musical—and the genius of its creator.

The Psalms are kind of like that. The more you *get* their cultural context, the more you swim in the same water they're swimming in, the more they have to say.

Psalm 118 echoes a familiar song of ancient Israel. Exodus 15. The "Song of the Sea."

I will sing unto the Lord for he has triumphed gloriously.
The horse and rider thrown into the sea.
The Lord my God, my strength and song, has become my salvation.
This is my God, and I will praise him—my fathers' God, and I will exalt him.

This is the song the Hebrews sing after they cross the Red Sea, after their liberation from Egypt, from slavery, after Yahweh's final triumph over Pharaoh and all the gods of Egypt.

The song of Exodus 15 been called a sort of 'national anthem' of Israel.

A celebration of the moment the nation was born.

Psalm 118 harkens back to that moment, borrows whole phrases from that song, evokes the mood of celebration and long-awaited liberation. God has not abandoned his people, but has risen victorious over the enemy, the oppressor, the nations. God is the divine warrior. "The Lord's right hand has done mighty things! Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good. His love endures forever!"

It's no wonder that this is one of the psalms that the Jewish community sings every year at Passover—at the feast that commemorates that last night in Egypt, with unleavened bread and unblemished lamb and bated breath and the angel of death and the rescue to come.

Psalm 118 leads us back into the Exodus story,

which is to say....

the journey from *liberation*
through the *wilderness*
up to the *mountain of God*

which is to say...

the whole salvation story "in miniature."¹

For it's not a stretch to map onto the Exodus motif the events of Jesus' redemptive work in the world. Indeed, this is precisely what the Gospel writers do, each in their own way. They present

¹ Bryan Estelle, *Echoes of Exodus*, 104.

Jesus as the new Exodus. He comes out of Egypt, comes out of the water, journeys through the wilderness, winds up at the temple in Jerusalem, the mountain and dwelling place of God.

And so, when Jesus rides into Jerusalem for the Passover to the tune of Psalm 118, there is Exodus in the air.

C.S. Lewis, in his *Reflections on the Psalms*, puts it this way:

“If the Scriptures proceed not by conversion of God’s word into a literature but by taking up of a literature to be the vehicle of God’s word. . . And if the Old Testament is a literature thus ‘taken up,’ made the vehicle of what is more than human, we can of course set no limit to the weight or multiplicity of meanings which may have been laid upon it.

If any writer may say more than he knows and mean more than he meant, then these writers will be especially likely to do so. And not by accident.”

And as the crowds greet Jesus with palms and words from Psalm 118— “Hosanna! Hosanna! Blessed is he!”—the gospel writers invite us to listen for new layers of meaning in this old Passover song.

Because Hosanna is not just an expression of praise. It’s also a plea: “Save us!”

Save us from oppression. Save us from our enemies.

Liberate us again like you liberated us from Egypt.

It’s the cry of a people groaning under centuries of oppression. As empires rose and fell, Israel kept finding itself playing the role of puppet state, a shadow of its former glory.

Now under Roman rule, they longed for a warrior King to upend the whole thing and bring the promised messianic kingdom.

Like Yahweh in Exodus 15. Or King David.

Or Judas Maccabees, who, a few generations before Jesus, rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, welcomed by palm branches.

By the time we get to Jesus’ day, Psalm 118 sounds kind of like “The Battle Cry of the Republic” or “We Shall Overcome.” A patriotic song of resistance. It imagined a day of military insurrection. A day when a mighty King would ride through Jerusalem’s gates and declare God’s victory over their enemies. A day of salvation.

Salvation. That word shows up three times in Psalm 118.

In Hebrew, it’s *Yeshua*.

And here he comes. Him whose name is *Yeshua*. Riding on a donkey to shouts of joy and victory, with festal branches waving as the people, on their way to the temple, sing this Passover psalm.

Jesus will not live up to their hopes. His borrowed donkey gets returned. His resistance is stamped out by those in religious and political power, and Roman rule goes unchallenged for decades more. There is no glorious throne in Jerusalem, and no Messianic Warrior King.

Instead, there is an upper room, where Jesus will quietly gather with a handful of friends to celebrate the Passover.

And there, after the meal, following Jewish custom, he will sing Psalm 118.

After the bread that is his body. After the cup which is his blood.

Before Gethsemane, before the whip, before the cross,

he will lift his voice with those of the twelve and sing the old song of liberation, the song with his name, the song with the solitary voice that testifies “I shall not die but live...”

Maybe one of the reasons Psalm 118 shows up so much in the New Testament is because the New Testament writers were just delighted and dumbfounded by how Messiah Jesus reinterpreted and fulfilled this psalm.

Not by defeating empire. But by dying at the hands of empire.

And then defeating death itself.

And if that is the level of our liberation—if the enemies defeated are sin and death and hatred and injustice and indifference and cruelty and pain—then the coming victory, the coming homeland, is nothing less than the making of all things new.

Even if it’s hard to see it now, here, in the wilderness.

One of the quiet gifts that the past year has given us is our shared sense of vulnerability.

I still, out of habit, greet people with an easy “how are you?”

But rarely anymore do people respond with a cheery “Great!” or “Good, how are you?”

That was a typical, pre-pandemic exchange. But now, we’re less inclined to fake it. Now, we say “I’m okay” or “hanging in there”....

We know we're fragile, in all kinds of ways.
And we know that all kinds of things are fragile and fractured in our clumsy, greedy hands.

Which is not a bad way to end a long, Lenten journey...
It's not a bad way to go into Good Friday and Easter...

So what song shall we sing?

This week, I invite you to sing the song of salvation—in your own fragile voice. Sing it in whatever way you know. Go through the motions if you have to. Let your body lead if your mind and spirit are just too tired.

But sing. And listen for how that old song might feel fresh this year.

For the living Christ is walking with you in your story, even as you walk with him in his.

Even through death.

His love endures forever.