

The First Reading is from Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29

¹ O give thanks to the LORD, for the **LORD is good;**
his **steadfast love endures forever!**

² Let Israel say,
“The LORD’s steadfast love endures forever.”

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 the **LORD is good,**
for his **steadfast love endures forever.**

One: The Word of God

All: Thanks be to God

The psalmist declared, “God’s steadfast love endures forever!” I imagine the psalmist isn’t new to the faith. The words suggest that the psalmist has experienced some valleys as well as some mountaintops of life. This declaration isn’t made lightly; it is made with heart-felt conviction that trusts in God’s willingness to endure life with the psalmist. This psalmist’s declaration is the hope that fueled the people of God as they waited for the Messiah.

If we recount the history of the Israelites, from the exodus to the exile, we know that they endured the wilderness. They enjoyed the splendor of their temple constructed in Jerusalem. Yet, their temple was destroyed and they were carted off into exile. Eventually they were able to return, rebuilding the city wall and the temple. But, now God’s people live under the oppressive rule of Roman Empire. Throughout their history, scripture recounts for us that God’s steadfast

love is always present, never giving up, always reaching out, forever ready to embrace them. "God's steadfast love endures forever," indeed!

As we turn to the Gospel reading for this Palm Sunday, the long-awaited Messiah has turned towards Jerusalem. Hear now God's word to us as Jesus leaves Jericho and makes his way to Jerusalem.

The Second Reading is from Luke 19:28-40

²⁸ After Jesus had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem. ²⁹ When Jesus had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples, ³⁰ saying, "Go into the village ahead of you, and as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here. ³¹ If anyone asks you, 'Why are you untying it?' just say this, 'The Lord needs it.'" ³² So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them. ³³ As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, "Why are you untying the colt?" ³⁴ They said, "The Lord needs it." ³⁵ Then they brought it to Jesus; and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it. ³⁶ As Jesus rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. ³⁷ As Jesus was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, ³⁸ saying,

"Blessed is the king
who comes in the name of the Lord!
Peace in heaven,
and glory in the highest heaven!"

³⁹ *Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, order your disciples to stop."*

⁴⁰ *Jesus answered, "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out."*

One: The Living Word of God

All: Thanks be to God

The Message is entitled, "Stones Will Speak"

What we have come to know as Holy Week has arrived. The emotional roller coaster is poised and ready to begin. The triumphant joy of Christ's entry into Jerusalem today will spiral out of control by Friday. Shouts of 'Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord' will turn to "crucify him." Saturday will be steeped in an eerie silence, even though we know it will be shattered by the empty tomb awaiting us on Sunday morning. But, let's for the moment, stay in the splendor and joy of this day, the day of joyous praise and celebration.

Listen again to the psalmist's jubilant declaration, "O give thanks to the Lord for the Lord is good; God's steadfast love endures forever! Let Israel say, 'God's steadfast love endures forever.'" And I'll add, "Let the people of the First Presbyterian Church of Redlands repeat after me, "The Lord is good." **"The Lord is good."** "God's steadfast love endures forever." **"God's steadfast love endures forever."** Or as Eugene Peterson translates, "God's love never quits!" **"God's love never quits!"**

This is day of exuberant joy and in our joy will we reaffirm these truths for our lives? Will we say without a shadow of a doubt that God is good? Will we say without hesitation that God's

steadfast love endures forever? Will we declare these truths no matter what might befall us or in spite of whatever our circumstances might be in the moment?

I believe that without this declaration neither you nor I will make it through this week, let alone through whatever life brings us. Together, God's goodness and steadfast love, is our foundation. This is the foundation upon which we are to build our lives as people of faith. It is the foundation that fueled the people of God as they waited for the Messiah.

Do any of you remember how Luke starts his Gospel? He begins by saying that he carefully investigated what many had written down. After careful investigation, he produced an orderly account (what we know as the Gospel of Luke) for Theophilus, so that Theophilus may know the truth concerning what had been fulfilled among them through Christ. Therefore, it shouldn't surprise us that our passage today is steeped in allusions from the Hebrew Scriptures, from Genesis to First and Second Kings, from Psalms to Habakkuk and Zechariah.

Jesus was the one fulfilling the expectations of long-awaited hope. The people of Israel believed Jesus would restore the Davidic line. Jesus would restore the kingdom of Israel to its previous glory. Jesus would be king and the Roman Empire would have no more influence. The people of Israel would once again be on the map as in their glory under King David and King Solomon, over 1,000 years before Christ. Oh, the expectations were grand and crowds of people were swept into the exuberant procession as Jesus entered Jerusalem on the back of a colt, according to Luke, which is a young donkey.

What I find intriguing about this passage is the level of detail about how Jesus obtained this particular colt that he rode into town on. The first thing to note is the peculiarity of Jesus' actual choice of animal. Why a young donkey? Conquering kings would have chosen warhorses for their victory processions, not donkeys! Jesus' choice should have prompted an awareness that maybe Jesus' rule would not be as the people expected. Jesus would not be a king who ruled with military power and might, but one who rule by self-emptying and laying down his life for the sake of the world. Yes, Jesus was someone other than who the people of God expected.

The processional drew the attention of the whole city, including the ecclesiastical law keepers known as the Pharisees. They worked hard to maintain peace between the Jewish faithful and the Roman Empire. With shouts and accolades suggesting that Jesus was king, they were more than a little nervous. What would Pilate or Herod think? Would they think the Pharisees were scheming to overthrow Rome's authority with a political uprising? This could be bad for them and for every Jew. This crazy processional with all its talk about Jesus as king, needed to stop before it made waves that came crashing in on them. So, some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Jesus, "Teacher, order your disciples to stop." Stop! Stop this nonsense otherwise we are all going to be in trouble with the empire!

Jesus response is quick and to the point, for his purpose was clear. Jesus' face was set towards the cross even though his own disciples did not fully comprehend what was to come. Jesus was ready to do whatever needs to be done in order to show the world another way of being. Jesus knows that if this processional is stopped, if his disciples stop proclaiming and praising God, then even the stones – inanimate and lifeless stones – would spring to life and speak the truth about who Christ is and what Christ's purpose is for humanity and all of creation.

As I pick up this stone this morning...how will this stone speak? Place yourself in the sandals of the Pharisees and ask yourself, "What would you think of Jesus' comment?" Would

you think he had screw loose? Would you think he was just being dramatic? What would you think of his comment?

Let me tell you of a stone that spoke! When I worked in the corporate setting as a manager of others, discussions of faith were not something that I initiated because of my position of power. I didn't feel it was appropriate to use my position of power to press my faith upon others. So, what did I do? I placed this stone on my desk. When I was new to a position or had visitors in my office, the stone on my desk would eventually draw a person's attention. It probably seemed out of place. It was obviously a weird item to place on one's desk. Photos were common. Work accolades were common. Degrees were common, but a stone? This stone must have a story and so people would eventually ask me, "What's up with this stone on your desk?"

My response went something like this: "The stone is a reminder for me of the chief cornerstone of my life, Jesus Christ. I place the stone on my desk to remind me to walk in the way of Christ each and every day." I never had to initiate a discussion about my faith because that stone spoke and it spoke volumes!

As I prayed with this passage this week though, it became clear to me that we are not to leave it up to the stones, even a stone on my work desk! I am to speak up and speak out about Christ in my life. You are to speak up and speak out about Christ in your life. We are to speak of God's deeds of power in our own lives, in this church and throughout the world. We are to joyfully share the Gospel with others. Jesus doesn't want our lives to point to anyone or anything else other than God's steadfast love and amazing grace. And if for some reason, we stop proclaiming the good news, Jesus will find others, for he said to the Pharisees, "Even stones will speak."

This same message goes for churches like ours, too. Whether churches are small or large, rural or city centered, well-funded or not, churches are never to stop voicing the wonders of Christ to others. Or as Thom Rainer reminds us, "When the preferences of the church members are greater than their passion for the gospel, the church is dying." When churches are more interested in preserving themselves and their particular institution, Jesus will raise up other stones to proclaim the power of the gospel at work in the world to transform lives.

You might remember that the Center for Spiritual Living stepped in and offered their facilities to house the emergency cold weather shelter for women when the Set Free location was closed. Prior to their offer, I really didn't know much about them or the building they have on Church Street just north of Interstate 10. So, let me share with you what I have learned from their website about who they are:

"We teach New Thought philosophy that brings religion and science together and offers you practical and tangible spiritual tools to transform your personal life and make the world a better place. People of all races, sexual orientations and spiritual paths - Christian, Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim and others are ALL WELCOME in our diverse communities."

So, this community wouldn't be considered a Christian Community, but they certainly have embodied Christ's words, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." Their decision to house the Women's Cold Weather Emergency center was simply based on their purpose, "To make the world a better place." This community decided to invest their time in making the world a better place for women seeking shelter from the cold here in Redlands and in the process their lives were transformed.

The President of their organization, Ed Torres, shared at the Redlands Charitable Resource Coalition meeting this past week that they decided not to end their season with these women when the cold weather shelter season ended on March 31st. Instead, they opened the doors of their Center for another month and maybe even longer. Yet, instead of just continuing to provide housing and food for these women, they sat down to listen to these women, and with the women's help, devised a program where these women now have ownership of chores, cooking meals, and supporting one another. The Center is now focused on working to connect the women with resources, which will hopefully lead them to more permanent housing. I have to tell you that the Center's efforts humbled me, because the Center for Spiritual Living set aside whatever they may have had on their agenda this season, and invested their time, energy and talents in women they did know who were in need, with the generosity of many volunteers and churches like ours who provided overnight stays and meals.

The Presbyterian Outlook Editor Jill Duffield writes about this particular liturgical day, "I want to be utterly present on Palm Sunday. I want to be among the crowd, unable to hold back my joy and praise, unashamed to show my gratitude for the grace and mercy given to me." And then she writes, "I want to be ready to hand over whatever I have simply because the Lord needs it. No questions asked."

The Center for Spiritual Living brings together diverse faiths under a philosophical, not theological rubric, but for me they embodied Duffield's desire, "To be ready to hand over whatever I have simply because the Lord needs it."

On this Palm Sunday as we peer into the days ahead and the cross that looms, I wonder if we are ready to hand over whatever the Lord needs of us? Are we ready to unashamedly declare the reign of God is at hand through our words and deeds? You see, Jesus doesn't want our life together as a church to point to anyone or anything else other than God's steadfast love and amazing grace. And if for some reason we stop proclaiming God's steadfast love and goodness, Jesus will find others, for he told the Pharisees that even stones will speak up! As the prophet Isaiah said, "The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of the Lord will stand forever." Yes, the word of the Lord will stand forever because God is good and God's steadfast love endures forever! [Pause]

Even the stones will speak! Let us not leave it to the stones, my friends. Let us embody with our very lives the way of Christ. Ready to hand over whatever the Lord needs from us to more fully usher in the reign of God here on earth. Amen.