

"So, What Have We Learned During Lent?"

(A Sermon for the Fifth Sunday in Lent)

Text: Psalm 118:24 [Jeremiah 14:1-9; Mark 8:11-21; Galatians 4:21 – 5:1]

Subject: What Do We Learn About Each New Day?

Desired Response: Begin each new day with rejoicing.

How To: (1) Thank-you notebook. (2) Prayer at meals. (3) First thoughts in the day. (4) Find a song.

How Long: Put into practice now in preparation for future.

Sermon in a Sentence: God intends that His people rejoice in the privilege of each new day.

Worship Theme: God's gives us joy in our daily lives, as we acknowledge who He is and what He has done.

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Over the course of the last five weeks, we have walked along the pathway of Lent. This time has intended to give us an opportunity to carefully consider the lessons that God would teach us, as we wait in eager anticipation of the events of Holy Week. In general, we have each experienced Lent in a somewhat different way. But, as we approach the last few days of this precious time in the church year, we do well to ask ourselves this question: "So, What Have We Learned During Lent?"

In our Scripture that serves as our Sermon Text for today, we need to examine what we can learn from a similar season of self-examination that concludes with a time of great celebration. Hear these words of the Psalmist from Psalm 118:

Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his love endures forever.² Let Israel say: "His love endures forever."³ Let the house of Aaron say: "His love endures forever."⁴ Let those who fear the Lord say: "His love endures forever."

⁵ When hard pressed, I cried to the Lord; he brought me into a spacious place. ⁶ The Lord is with me; I will not be afraid. What can mere mortals do to me? ⁷ The Lord is with me; he is my helper. I look in triumph on my enemies. ⁸ It is better to take refuge in the Lord than to trust in humans. ⁹ It is better to take refuge in the Lord than to trust in princes. ¹⁰ All the nations surrounded me, but in the name of the Lord I cut them down. ¹¹ They surrounded me on every side, but in the name of the Lord I cut them down. ¹² They swarmed around me like bees, but they were consumed as quickly as burning thorns; in the name of the Lord I cut them down. ¹³ I was pushed back and about to fall, but the Lord helped me.

¹⁴ The Lord is my strength and my defense; he has become my salvation. ¹⁵ Shouts of joy and victory resound in the tents of the righteous: "The Lord's right hand has done mighty things!" ¹⁶ The Lord's right hand is lifted high; the Lord's right hand has done mighty things!" ¹⁷ I will not die but live, and will proclaim what the Lord has done. ¹⁸ The Lord has chastened me severely, but he has not given me over to death.

¹⁹ Open for me the gates of the righteous; I will enter and give thanks to the Lord. ²⁰ This is the gate of the Lord through which the righteous may enter. ²¹ I will give you thanks, for you answered me; you have become my salvation. ²² The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; ²³ the Lord has done this, and it is

marvelous in our eyes.²⁴ The Lord has done it this very day; let us rejoice today and be glad.²⁵ Lord, save us! Lord, grant us success!

²⁶ Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. From the house of the Lord we bless you.²⁷ The Lord is God, and he has made his light shine on us. With boughs in hand, join in the festal procession up to the horns of the altar.²⁸ You are my God, and I will praise you; you are my God, and I will exalt you.²⁹ Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his love endures forever.

This is, indeed, the Word of the Lord.

[Congregation responds: "Thanks be to God."]

Which of the following two characterizations best describes the kind of person you are?

One: Normally you don't particularly notice things like sunsets or birds singing or the stars coming out at night. When you travel the scenery just passes by.

Or...

Two: You relish the arrival of flowers in the spring; you see beauty in a fresh blanket of snow. You even enjoy walking in a light drizzle of rain.

Did you identify with one of these two descriptions? Let me attempt several other contrasts.

On one of the old-time television interview programs, the host asked a woman from the studio audience if, in the morning, she woke up grumpy. "No," the woman replied. "I usually just let him sleep."

How do you wake up in the morning? Grudgingly, reluctantly, not really sure you want to rejoin the human race for another go at things? Or do you awaken with a glad heart, happy to be alive, and grateful for another day and the opportunities it affords?

What about eating? Are you among those who hardly recognize the taste of what's been served because your mind is elsewhere? Are meals strictly a secondary function, wasted time unless you can talk with a friend or read a newspaper or a book? Or, do you think mealtimes are important in themselves? If necessary, you silence your phone during supper so the family, without interruption or hurry, can enjoy one another and what has been lovingly prepared.

What about Sunday mornings? Do you resent having to get ready for church, sometimes feeling jealous of your neighbor who's sleeping as you pull out of the drive with nothing but a fast cup of coffee to keep you until noon? Or do you look to the Lord's Day as the high point of your week, the best of all days, the time to meet with fellow believers in God's house, joining voices together in praise? Is Sunday so important to you that you begin getting ready for it on Saturday evening through prayer, reading the sermon text for the next day, and a good night's sleep?

Well, I can't say into which group you fit, but I do know that the God who made us intended for human beings to find joy in His world and in Himself, as well. The old catechisms say "the chief end of man is to love God and enjoy Him forever."

Yet in our over-busy, highly competitive, human-centered world, I question whether most people have retained the simple joy of rising in the morning and looking forward with pleasure to a new day. Too many, I fear, have little or no appreciation for the beauty of the home God fashioned for His earthlings. They live with almost no conscious sense of His immanence.

In direct contrast to this negative attitude are the words of Psalm 118:24:

"The Lord has done it this very day; let us rejoice today and be glad."

You may be more familiar with the way the Authorized King James Version renders this verse:

"This is the day that the Lord hath made, we must rejoice and be glad in it."

If you look at the context, the reason for this rejoicing is that God has made provision for the redemption of His chosen ones through the sacrifice of His Son, Jesus. Notice the preceding verses, beginning with verse 22:

The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes. The Lord has done it this very day; let us rejoice today and be glad.

"Ah, that sounds like another one of the King David's spiritual saccharine pills," I can almost hear someone say. "If I were a handsome king who was praised by everyone, had a houseful of servants, unlimited finances and all the spouses I wanted, I'd probably look forward to getting up in the morning, too."

Well, wait just a minute! This is **not** one of David's psalms. Psalm 118 was written after Israel's exile in Babylon, and it was probably sung at the dedication of the new temple. It was certainly used on some such very special occasion. And, the text is not without reference to hardships. Notice verses 5-7:

"Out of my distress I called on the LORD; the LORD answered me and set me free. ... The LORD is on my side to help me; I shall look in triumph on those who hate me."

Even more sobering is the fact that scholars believe this is the psalm Christ sang with the disciples at the Passover feast, as recorded in Matthew 26. In fact, Matthew 26:30 reads:

"And when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives"

The truth is we ought to read Psalm 118 several times.

First, we should read this Psalm and see it through the eyes of those present when the rebuilt temple was officially dedicated. Imagine the excitement as the great multitude of returned exiles sang, in verse 19:

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

Then, we should read Psalm 118 a second time, thinking of what it would have meant to Jesus as He sang these words in the upper room on that last night He lived. Take verse 26, for instance. Remember what the people cried earlier in the week as He entered Jerusalem on a donkey?

Matthew 21:9 records that they shouted:

"Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"

What emotion did Christ feel when He sang Psalm 118 verse 6 with the Twelve:

"With the LORD on my side I do not fear. What can man do to me?"

Or verse 17:

"I shall not die, but I shall live, and recount the deeds of the LORD."

Or look at verse 22:

"The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone."

And verse 24, yet again:

"This is the day which the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it."

Finally, we should read through the Psalm for ourselves, recognizing that these are not naïve, simplistic thoughts, but eternal words from God.

Concentrate on the text I've chosen, verse 24. It says:

"Let us rejoice (in this day) and be glad in it."

In other words, let us anticipate God's divine Providence over all that transpires today. As these hours unfold, may we experience His closeness and delight in His goodness. May our mindset be to celebrate the fact that God is alive and active in our world.

This attitude is in striking contrast to those who are apparently oblivious to the ever-present touch of God in their lives. Worse yet are those who complain in spiritual blindness. His overwhelming care would be very obvious if their eyes were open. But unfortunately, they live on the premise that they are on their own. God does not enter into their thoughts.

Since Psalm 118 was the favorite of Martin Luther, let me retell an oft-repeated story.

His wife, Katie, tired of one of Martin's extended periods of gloomy depression, appeared dressed in black.

"How come?" he asked her.

"Oh, I'm mourning a death," she replied.

"Whose death?" Martin asked.

"God's." Katie asserted.

"God's not dead." Martin insisted.

"Oh, really now?" Katie responded. "The way you've been acting of late, I figured He must be. Certainly it appears as if He no longer cares for you."

Her point was well-made.

We can laugh at this domestic drama from the past, but what has been our attitude of late? Do we manifest an appreciation of God in our lives? Or, can the day pass without once being consciously aware that He is very good to His children? The Psalmist says that each new morning brings the privilege of again experiencing the marvelous hand of God on our lives. And I'm just repeating his message. In a sentence, I'm putting it like this: "*God intends that His people rejoice in the privilege of each new day.*"

Granted, some hearing these words are in travail, even as Christ was when He sang them that evening before He died. If such is your case, I'll let the Lord apply His words to you as He desires.

For the many of us who have no real cause to weep, but for some reason seem unable to rejoice in the fact that God is alive and active in our world, let me suggest the following:

First, starting now, let's begin a thank-you notebook by writing down ten items for which we are grateful to the Lord. That's right, I'm asking us—both you and me—to write down ten items for which we are grateful to the Lord. Put another ten down tomorrow—and more if we want to, but never less than ten. I will guarantee that, by writing down ten items each day, before the week is over we'll be surprised at how much more conscious we are of the Lord's goodness toward us. The second week we'll probably feel ashamed about all we previously took for granted.

By the end of the month, we'll be noting not only answers to prayer, but the many good gifts of life—health and a job and freedom and a church home and friends and beautiful children or grandchildren or great-grandchildren. Before long we'll begin to see beauty in the world around us: the pair of Canada geese that flew overhead so gracefully, the neighbor's litter of cute new puppies, the breeze that felt so good when it came, and the needed rain.

Second, when praying before a meal, let's give thanks by name for each item we'll be eating. Tell the Lord what we like about what we've been served. Food is one of God's gifts to humans. Why gulp it down like the family dog and not even remember what we've swallowed?

Third, first thing up in the morning tell the Lord, "Because You expect me to rejoice in this day, I will." Again, "Because You expect me to rejoice in this day, I will."

Now, all of you say it with me right now, please: "God, because You intend that I rejoice in this day, I will." And, again: "God, because You intend that I rejoice in this day, I will."

We should write that sentence on a piece of paper and place it by our beds so we will read it when we wake. "God, because You intend that I rejoice in this day, I will."

Last, we should find a song that expresses this basic thought and sing it. For example, this lovely hymn that begins:

"When morning gilds the skies my heart awakening cries: May Jesus Christ be praised!"

There's a praise song with these words:

"Love Him in the morning when you see the sun arising."

Or, we could ```````` sing the words of John Reginald Heber's famous hymn:

"Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty! Early in the morning our song shall rise to Thee."

Or, we could try Harriet Beecher Stowe's hauntingly beautiful hymn:

"Still, still with Thee, when purple morning breaketh, when the bird waketh and the shadows flee; fairer than morning, lovelier than the daylight, dawns the sweet consciousness, I am with thee."

That says it well, doesn't it? You get the idea.

"God intends that His people rejoice in the privilege of each new day."

We have just a few days left in our time of Lent. But, it's time enough for us to formulate an answer to the question: "So, what have we learned during Lent?" Among the answers, I hope you will join me in making the point of today's sermon one of those things that we have learned during this precious time of introspection. Namely that *"God intends that His people rejoice in the privilege of each new day."* Amen.