

Opened: The Gates of Righteousness

Palm Sun. – 04/02/23 – Mt. Calvary Luth.

Text: Psalm 118:19-29 Pastor Keith Besel

vv. 23-24, **“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!”**

Introduction

- ⌘ That second verse; verse 24, has been written, etched, embossed, painted, and stenciled on countless greeting cards, postcards, walls and placards and spoken innumerable times from the lips of people who are both faithful believers and those interested more in what's popular at the moment.
 - ➔ And most often, when it is proclaimed, “This is the day that the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it”, the speaker is referencing that picture-perfect summer day or a day when the rain is gently bathing the land or when the harvest is all in; whatever it is that gets the person to thinking about how they are, at that moment, filled beyond measure with God's countless blessings.
- ⌘ Of course, none of this is wrong, but the author of this Psalm is actually talking about something in particular; about a very specific blessing with these words. It is one certain day; one time each year in the worship life of the ancient believers of Yahweh; a day when the sins of all the people are forgiven on account of the mercies of the coming Messiah.
 - ➔ It was Yom Kippur; the Day of Atonement that recognized some 1000 to 500 years in advance of His arrival, the forgiving and saving sacrifice that the Promised Messiah would make for the souls of all mankind. And now, 2000 years after that life-changing event, we Christians gather by the Holy Spirit's calling to remember as one glorious “day” the Christ's saving work; a “day” that actually spanned the time of seven 24-hour days from Palm Sunday through Maundy Thursday and Good Friday to the day of the Resurrection of our Lord!
 - ➔ Yes, that seven-day “Day” that we have already started here this morning is “the day that the LORD has made”. So “let us rejoice and be glad in [this day]” right now!

I. Rejoice! Heaven's gates are open!

- ⌘ And yet, just as we all did at the beginning of our time together in the Confession of Sins, an honest look into the mirror of our thoughts, words and deeds, smacks us all right between the eyes, doesn't it? And it tells us that this very day and every day; yes, over and again “we have sinned against [our righteous God] in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done and by what we have left undone” (*LSB*, p 151).
 - ➔ So how and why could we or the psalmist ever think it even remotely possible that he/we could pray the prayer of verse 19, “Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them and give thanks to the LORD.”
 - ➔ What are these “gates of righteousness”? Well, the root of the original Hebrew word for “righteousness” is “tsedeq” (צֶדֶק), which refers to an ethical, moral standard and of course in the Old Testament that standard is the perfect nature and will of God. So the “gates of righteousness” refers physically to the entrance into the Temple in Jerusalem. Those who enter those gates are literally and spiritually entering into the perfect and holy presence of Yahweh, the one true God.

- ⊗ Are you and I, or any sin-filled human being at the time of our text or today worthy to enter in through those “gates of righteousness”? And if not, then what must be done so that we can be “made right” or worthy to do so?
 - In our civil society, the legal system of the United States will accept some kind of sacrifice on the part of the offender – whether it be a fine or community service or time in prison to pay for our crimes; to “make things right”.
 - But before the “Holy One of God” (Mk. 1:24), we are impure through and through by our sin. Any and all sacrifices we might try to make on our own will never be enough because they will always reek of our sinful corruption. God’s view of us today is the same as it was in Genesis 6:5 before the flood, “Yahweh saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.”
- ⊗ And yet the psalmist sees in verses 20-21 that “the gate of the LORD” is open to him. “I thank You,” he prays in verse 21, “that You have answered me and have become my salvation.” How was this possible?
 - Even as God knows it is impossible for any sinful man to enter His righteous presence, He still desires that every soul of His creation will receive the gift of salvation and thereby enter into His loving presence.
 - So if we humans can’t open the gates, then it has to be God Himself who opens the gates for us. As Abraham told his son Isaac in Genesis 22:8, “God will provide for Himself the Lamb for a burnt offering, my son.”
- ⊗ And so to that end, God put together a much-needed illustration; a real-life system of sacrifice and worship in His Temple to teach and prepare His people for the one and only perfect sacrifice to come.
 - But we humans of course are dense – always have been. So this lesson was going to take years, actually centuries of repeated practice and sacrifice on the part of the people so that it might finally break through their thick skulls and stick in their hearts. And through it all, God was patient and merciful, even forgiving sins, as those Old Testament believers learned the concept of sacrifice through their own imperfect sacrifices, because they all pointed forward to their final fulfillment in that one promised Sacrifice to come.
 - So, for the people at the time of this Psalm the “gates of righteousness” were opened and they were truly welcomed into God’s presence. They were saved, not by their own acts of sacrifice, but by God’s grace through their faith in the promised sacrifice to come!

II. Gates opened thru blood from God’s Stone.

- ⊗ When the people in Psalm 118 cried out, “This is the Day...” they were referring to the “Day of Atonement”; Yom Kippur, where on one special day each year one goat was offered for the LORD as a sin offering and a second goat, called the “scape goat” onto which Aaron the priest laid his hands on the lamb while confessing and transferring the sins of Israel upon that lamb, the “scape goat” was then led out into the wilderness, never to return. This was a sign that the people’s sins were removed from them “as far as the east is from the west” (Ps. 103:12).
 - Their cry in verse 25 “Save us, we pray, O LORD” in the Hebrew is the word “hoshiah na” (הוֹשִׁיעָה נָא), or as we’re used to hearing it “hosanna!” That cry has been answered by God with a merciful and resounding “Yes, it is done”. You are saved.
 - So, with the “gates of righteousness” mercifully opened for God’s people, they took up the cry in verse 26 as the priests and people would enter into the Temple with their sacrifices, “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD!”

- They had come to know that anything they or we might do in our own name is already starting out in sin and impurity. Hebrews 11:6 says, “Without faith it is impossible to please [God].” And so any entrance into God’s presence is and must always be done “in the name of the LORD”; by His gracious power at work within us. Verse 23, “This is the LORD's doing” not ours and “it is marvelous in our eyes.”
- ⊗ Now, fast forward 500 to 1000 years and we see and hear on Palm Sunday the crowd shouting the very same words as Jesus rides into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey. Whether those people fully knew what they were proclaiming with their shouts of praise or not, this truly was “The day that the LORD had made;” the day to “rejoice and be glad in it!”
 - The Hebrew root of the word, “hoshiah na” or “Hosanna” is “Yeshua” or “Yahweh saves”. It’s the same root and word as “Jesus”.
 - ⊗ So we are remembering and celebrating today “the day” when God Almighty brought all of those centuries of illustration and learning into reality; into fulfillment. This is “THE actual Day of Atonement”; the seven-day Day beginning as “the stone that the builders rejected” (v.22), meaning the Pharisees, Priests and Jewish leaders, in coordination with the Roman officials; as the “Rock of our Salvation” (Ps. 95:1) “became the cornerstone” of Yahweh’s salvation plan and His Holy Christian Church.
 - You think you can’t get blood from a stone? The Stone God sent to build not only His gate but His entire Church, came through those gates of Jerusalem, “in the name of the LORD”; as only He could do, serving as the great High Priest to offer the ultimate sacrifice, and also serving as the perfect, unblemished Lamb; as the sacrifice Himself when those who rejected Him pierced Him through with spike and spear; shedding His holy precious blood as our scape goat and removing our sin forever; as Micah 7:19 says, casting “our sins into the depths of the sea.”
 - Martin Luther says of this: “By using ‘the chief Cornerstone’ [the psalmist] indicates [Christ’s] resurrection, life, and eternal dominion. He uses the parable of a building. When a stone does not fit into the wall or match the others, but disfigures the whole building and is an unfit, useless stone, it must be rejected. Then another builder, a stranger, comes along. He knows well how to use the stone and cries: ‘Stop, you big fools, are you really builders and still do not want that stone? I can use it, not merely to plug a hole or for fill, nor as a common, ordinary stone, but as a cornerstone in the foundation. It shall bear not one but two walls, and it shall do more than all the other stones.’” (AE 14:96).
 - ⊗ And now on “this day” that “Stone” enters through the very gates that He not only built, but that He has opened wide by shedding His righteous blood for us. He is the “Gate of Righteousness”; our gate; our one and only way into God’s holy presence.

III. “I will give thanks to You”, O God!

- ⊗ So today, 2000 years later, you and I take up the cry of the psalmist, “This is the day that the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it!”
 - Yes, the Day of Atonement for you and me is this day; here and now – the 2nd day of April, 2023! For that seven-day Day of Jesus’ triumphal entry, His death and resurrection has opened the “gates of righteousness” so that you and I are now able to cry out as we entered into and remain in God’s holy presence right now, “Blessed is he”; blessed are we “who come in the name of the LORD!” (v.26) Yes, it is in His name; the name of the Father and of † the Son and of the Holy Spirit that we are blessed to be here in God’s Sanctuary and receiving His gifts in His Divine Service to us for the eternal salvation of our souls!

✘ So how do you; how do we respond to all of this? The psalmist gives us good direction in verses 28-29, “You are my God, and I will give thanks to You; You are my God; I will extol you. Oh give thanks to the LORD, for He is good; for His steadfast love endures forever!”

→ God’s love and mercy, begun even before the first day of Creation, throughout all of those years of learning and illustration in the bloody temple sacrifices, and especially when He sent His only Son to suffer, die and rise again for us; His love and mercy endures just as strong as it ever did right now today as He places His hands upon us in the waters of our baptism and in Jesus’ body and blood given in Holy Communion to transfer our sins once again upon the perfect Lamb who was slain, but the Lamb who now stands victorious at the Father’s right hand as our Savior and Advocate today and forever!

Conclusion

✘ This day; the day we begin Holy Week in which we rehearse Christ’s Passion on Thursday and His cross on Friday – “this is the day the Lord has made”. And if, for a brief time on this “day”, our rejoicing and gladness is a little muted, we know why; because our Savior’s work on this “day” was necessary to open His gates of righteousness so that we “may (now) enter through them and (forever) give thanks to the LORD!” Amen.