

## “GETTING THROUGH THE GATES”

Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29      April 2, 2023

Palm Sunday

One of the board games my grandchildren like to play is Clue Jr. It is very similar to the original game of Clue in that one wins by guessing who did the crime, where the crime took place, but instead of looking for a murder weapon one has to figure out what animal was stolen. I’ve seen another Clue version where the young detectives must find a missing cake. No matter what edition you choose you still have to role the dice, land on spaces, and put together the clues to solve the mystery.

Well believe it or not, **Psalm 118** is a bit of a mystery game and it’s some missing clues. There are hints to its origins but not specifics. We don’t really know who it is talking about, what the details of the person’s experience were, nor the original historical context of the psalm. There are references to Exodus events, to a military victory, and even a possible coronation procession, but there are not enough clues for even scholars to put it all together. Moreover, the theme varies throughout the psalm, phrases are added that seem out of context, and when the gospel writers adapted it to Jesus’ entrance into Jerusalem, it just served to complicate things.

What we do know is by the time of Jesus it was used as a pilgrim psalm, a song sung by those traveling to the high festival of the Jewish Passover in Jerusalem. It was a song of celebration for they had reached the end of their journey. The Temple destination is before them and all they need do is pass through the city Gates.

Part of the psalm is a call and response to open the gates. **“Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them and give thanks to the Lord.”** The psalm also stirred up the Messianic hopes of the people. They dreamed of the God who saved them in the past would do so again, this time from the oppression of Rome. It wasn’t by chance the crowd was singing this psalm when Jesus enters Jerusalem. It was part of their festival tradition.

**WHO IS AT THE GATE?**

If you have ever gone to an airport, or tried to enter another country, you must pass through a gate. The uniformed gatekeeper usually asks three questions; **Who** are you, **what** is your business here, and are you **bringing** anything forbidden in? The first is an **Identity** question which is proved with a passport. The second is a **Purpose** question, why are you entering this country: business, pleasure, to visit loved ones. The last is a **Safety** question, do you have something that is harmful or against the laws of our land. To make sure these questions are answered there are luggage scanners, id checkers, and armed personnel to enforce everything.

**Who is at the gates of Jerusalem?** Unfortunately, our lectionary leaves out verses 3-18 because they give shape to the people who have journeyed to the gate. While no one person is specifically identified, there are three groups of people named – the people of **Israel**, the **Priests**, and the **Gentile Converts**. All have traveled to reach this gate.

Secondly, these verses tell us about a nameless someone who has gone through the wringer. He is described as One who was in great need, one who was facing death, one who was rejected, one who thought all future hope was lost, and most importantly, one who had been rescued.

All of these folks have gathered at the gate to celebrate, to give thanks to Lord, and to bear witness to who God is and what God has done. **“O give thanks to the Lord, for God is good; and his steadfast love endures forever.”** These gate people are affirming God’s goodness, faithfulness, and grace. That is why we gather this morning too, to celebrate Christ’s goodness, faithfulness, and grace to us.

### **WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF A GATE?**

My second question is what is the purpose of the Gate? Once there was a young mother who was complaining to her neighbor about the constant needs of her young children. She just wanted a break. The neighbor replied, **“Have you ever tried a playpen?”** **“Oh, that’s a good idea”**, said the mother. A month later, the neighbor saw the young mom outside and asked her how the playpen was working. The smiling mom replied, **“It’s great. I get in and they can’t get to me for hours.”**

The purpose of a gate is to create a boundary between two spaces. A baby gate keeps your crawling toddler from falling down the steps. A steel bar gate keeps the cows in the pasture. An iron gate stops cars from entering your driveway, people going into a museum, or even crossing a bridge. Of course, many gates are just decorative, such as a small picket fence. It might keep your little chihuahua in, but not much else out.

The Gate these festival pilgrims arrived at was most likely the **Eastern Gate**, better known as the **Golden Gate**. This gate was part of the Jerusalem city wall; thus, it was a huge stone block boundary and part of their security system. It kept raiders out and citizens safe within. However, this particular gate was more than a city boundary. Its significance was what was on the other side of that gate; **The Temple of Jerusalem**. In Jesus' day, this would have been the 2<sup>nd</sup> Temple also known Herod's Temple.

The gate wasn't the destination, the Temple was. To the Jews, this was more than a place of worship. They believed the Temple was the place where God's presence dwelled. It was the earthly place that connected heaven and earth. That's where the pilgrims wanted to be. But the gate played a role. The psalmist writes, "**This is the gate of the Lord; the righteous shall enter through it.**" The Golden Gate had two doors that had names. One was called **The Gate of Mercy** and the other was called the **Gate of Repentance**. Together they were sometimes referred to as the **Gates of Eternal Life**.

It was a clear message, that the only way to enter into God's presence was through God's mercy and grace which was embraced through repentance and humility, people who recognized their need for God and put their trust in God. The righteous are not self-righteous but made right in their relationship with God by God's grace. Which really answers my last question. Who holds the key to the Gate of Eternal Life?

### **WHO HOLDS THE KEY TO THE GATE?**

Almost any gate I have ever seen has some kind of locking mechanism. It could be as simple as a latch or as complex as a keypad. Some gates you can open by simply lifting a handle and others you need an electronic swipe card. But a gate by definition can either be open or closed. So, who holds the key to open the Gate of Eternal Life? God and God alone.

The whole focus of the Psalm is on the Lord God, who is mentioned in almost every line. This psalm tells of God's salvation, God's mercy, God's goodness, God's chosen cornerstone, God's new day, God's steadfast love, God's given light. Everything is about what God has done and who God is. **The Powerful, saving, faithful love of God is at the heart and core of the text.**

The only thing the pilgrims of old and the faith pilgrims of this day can do is humbly respond in praise, thanks, testimony, blessing, and the waving of branches. The Psalmist reminds us that worship (and I would dare say life) is really about God, not us. It's easy to get so caught up in the elements of worship that we miss who we are worshipping. In life, we can be so focused on ourselves that we miss the presence of God. We don't come here with thankful hearts and testimony because we treat God like a sidenote. Too often we live as though life depends all on ourselves and end up creating a self-righteousness, instead of depending on the righteousness of God. Sadly, we put up gates trying to keep not only others but God on the other side.

The good news there is a key, and his name is Jesus. Jesus once said, **"I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly."** I can't help but wonder if Jesus wasn't thinking about the Golden Gate when he said this. I wonder what Jesus and the disciples thought when he passed through the Golden Gates on this day, we call Palm Sunday. That gate was made of stone, set in the walls of Jerusalem. But Jesus is the living and true gate, through which all people enter the eternal presence of God. In him, in this cup and this bread, earth and heaven meet. We come not to a gate to keep people out, but to an open table that has been set for all who would accept God's mercy. **"Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord."** Amen.

**First Presbyterian Church in Hawley**  
**Sunday, April 2, 2023**  
**Second Scripture Lesson**

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**Psalm 118: 1-2, 19-29**

<sup>1</sup>O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his steadfast love endures forever!

<sup>2</sup>Let Israel say, "His steadfast love endures forever."

<sup>19</sup>Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them and give thanks to the LORD.

<sup>20</sup>This is the gate of the LORD; the righteous shall enter through it.

<sup>21</sup>I thank you that you have answered me and have become my salvation.

<sup>22</sup>The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.

<sup>23</sup>This is the Lord's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes.

<sup>24</sup>This is the day that the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.

<sup>25</sup>Save us, we beseech you, O LORD! O LORD, we beseech you, give us success!

<sup>26</sup>Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the LORD. We bless you from the house of the LORD.

<sup>27</sup>The LORD is God, and he has given us light. Bind the festal procession with branches, up to the horns of the altar.

<sup>28</sup>You are my God, and I will give thanks to you; you are my God, I will extol you.

<sup>29</sup>O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever.

This is the Word of the Lord.

**Thanks be To God.**