

Marching Orders, Part 1

Palm Sunday

March 29, 2026

Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29

¹ Give thanks to the Lord because he is good, because his faithful love lasts forever. ² Let Israel say it: “God’s faithful love lasts forever!”... ¹⁹ Open the gates of righteousness for me so I can come in and give thanks to the Lord! ²⁰ This is the Lord’s gate; those who are righteous enter through it. ²¹ I thank you because you answered me, because you were my saving help. ²² The stone rejected by the builders is now the main foundation stone! ²³ This has happened because of the Lord; it is astounding in our sight! ²⁴ This is the day the Lord acted; we will rejoice and celebrate in it! ²⁵ Lord, please save us! Lord, please let us succeed! ²⁶ The one who enters in the Lord’s name is blessed; we bless all of you from the Lord’s house. ²⁷ The Lord is God! He has shined a light on us! So lead the festival offering with ropes all the way to the horns of the altar. ²⁸ You are my God — I will give thanks to you! You are my God — I will lift you up high! ²⁹ Give thanks to the Lord because he is good, because his faithful love lasts forever.



Please turn with me to Psalm 118. This is a psalm about God saving God’s people, a song rooted in the promise of God’s steadfast love. As this was a song that Jesus and his disciples

would have known and perhaps even sung as they made their way towards and into Jerusalem on that first Palm Sunday, we join with them in spirit as we read this psalm today. And as we journey from the joy of the palm parade to the last supper to the arrest, betrayal, and cross, and on to the celebration of resurrection, we enter into the holiest of weeks. As we prepare to do so, let us pray.

O great God, you are our strength, our life. Open to us the gate of your presence, that we may enter. What others have rejected is holy. But to you alone, O Mystery, we turn...

We open our hearts to all who bear your presence. In awe and gratitude we marvel in your light. We give our hearts of thanks to you, O Infinite Compassion. Amen.

In verses 1 and 2 we read, *“Give thanks to the Lord because he is good, because his faithful love lasts forever. Let Israel say it: “God’s faithful love lasts forever!”* Can you hear the exuberance and joy of

“Give thanks to the Lord because he is good, because his faithful love lasts forever. Let Israel say it: “God’s faithful love lasts forever!”

- Psalm 118:1-2

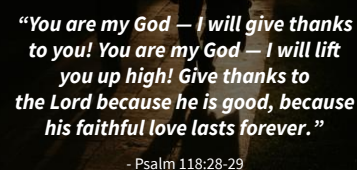
of the psalmist? Even so, these words of joy are barely able to convey the wonder of what God has done. It is not surprising, then, that the New Testament writers heard the events of the passion and resurrection of Jesus captured in the language of this psalm. And like those earliest disciples heard, we who are found in Christ, dying and rising with him, also hear these words as words that can shape our expression of joy and gratitude for what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. In that spirit, read these words with joy. With an expression of gratitude, read these words with me: *“Give thanks to the Lord because he is good, because his faithful love lasts forever. Let Israel say it: “God’s faithful love lasts forever!”* Praise be to God.

The entire psalm hinges on God hearing and answering the cries of his people. Doing so – hearing and responding – God turns mourning into dancing, and the night into day. As we turn to verses 19-29, we join with the king as he leads the people in giving thanks to God for restoring him. There are Holy Week connections throughout these verses. In verses 19 and 20 we read, *“Open the gates of righteousness for me so I can come in and give thanks to the Lord! This is the Lord’s gate; those who are righteous enter through it.”* Palm Sunday! This connection continues in verse 26, where we read, *“The one who enters in the Lord’s name is blessed.”* Indeed, blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.

“Open the gates of righteousness for me so I can come in and give thanks to the Lord! This is the Lord’s gate; those who are righteous enter through it.”

- Psalm 118:19-20

Moving to the last two verses, we again join the psalmist in expressing our joy and wonder, our gratitude and faith, proclaiming, *“You are my God — I will give thanks to you! You are my God — I will lift you up high! Give thanks to the Lord because he is good, because his faithful love lasts forever.”* These words are important to hear both as we begin the journey to the cross and as we live in this world of hardship and suffering.




“You are my God — I will give thanks to you! You are my God — I will lift you up high! Give thanks to the Lord because he is good, because his faithful love lasts forever.”
- Psalm 118:28-29

These words of praise remind us that God is good and that God is an active agent in daily life. Through God’s faithful love we find the source of our salvation. With our salvation rooted in the hope that we have in Jesus Christ, we daily live in a world where resurrection really did happen. The God of salvation remains on the move, however, redeeming and restoring the world to himself in Jesus Christ. As we personally experience Christ’s saving love and grace, the kingdom of God takes root in our hearts and compels us to new ways of being and behaving in the world, characterized by justice, righteousness, and peace.

As we become people of justice, righteousness, and peace, our very lives direct people’s attention once again to the God who loves us, whose steadfast love endures forever, who is at work in our lives and in our world making all things new, who alone is our hope and our salvation. So today, as the children and youth come forward to hear a message the leads into our palm parade, may we declare once again, *“Give thanks to the Lord because he is good, because his faithful love lasts forever.”*

Thanks be to God. Amen.



“Give thanks to the Lord because he is good, because his faithful love lasts forever.”
- Psalm 118:29

Marching Orders, Part 2

Matthew 21:1-11

¹When they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage on the Mount of Olives, Jesus gave two disciples a task. ²He said to them, “Go into the village over there. As soon as you enter, you will find a donkey tied up and a colt with it. Untie them and bring them to me. ³If anyone says anything to you, say that the Lord needs them.” He sent them off right away. ⁴Now this happened to fulfill what the prophet said, ⁵Say to Daughter Zion, “Look, your king is coming to you, humble and riding on a donkey, and on a colt the donkey’s offspring. ⁶The disciples went and did just as Jesus had ordered them. ⁷They brought the donkey and the colt and laid their clothes on them. Then he sat on them.

⁸Now a large crowd spread their clothes on the road. Others cut palm branches off the trees and spread them on the road. ⁹The crowds in front of him and behind him shouted, “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessings on the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!” ¹⁰And when Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred up. “Who is this?” they asked. ¹¹The crowds answered, “It’s the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.”



As some of you know, Kristin and I are about to go on a trip. That means we are going to have to pack a bag – or a backpack to be more specific. How many of you enjoy packing for a trip?...

For me, for us, we’re worried about two things: packing too much and forgetting something that we’ll need. There is a weight and size limit on flights in the UK and in Ireland, so we have to be aware of the weight and size of our backpacks. That’s the easier part. The harder part is making sure that we pack everything we might need on our trip. That’s the stressful part.

As Jesus prepares to go to Jerusalem, do you think he or the disciples wrestled with such questions? Did they worry about what to bring, about bringing too much, about forgetting something important? They were going for the Passover festival, so there were some things that they'd definitely need, right? And then, added on top of this possible stress was the very real anxiety about going to a place where Jesus and the disciples were considered agitators and questioners of the status quo and the powers that be.

In the midst of this, as they were almost to Jerusalem, Jesus singles out two disciples and gives them a task to accomplish. Jesus tells them, *"Go into the village over there..."* He then follows it up with some instructions about commandeering a donkey and a colt, adding, *"If anyone says anything to you, say that the Lord needs them."* Sounds like a pretty solid plan, huh?

"Go into the village over there..."

- Matthew 2:2

"Go into the village over there..."

- Matthew 2:2

*"If anyone says anything to you,
say that the Lord needs them."*

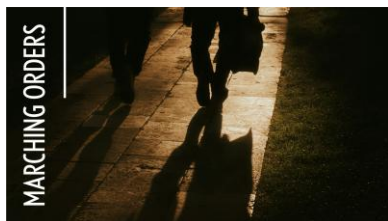
- Matthew 2:3

It actually is a plan. It is a plan first spoken of by the prophets Isaiah and Zechariah, hundreds of years before this day. Long ago, the prophets wrote, *"Look, your king is coming to you, humble and riding on a donkey, and on a colt the donkey's offspring."* The two disciples go and retrieve the donkey and colt. Of course, they do – Jesus told them to and it had to happen this way so that Jesus could fulfill this prophecy. But there is some debate about fulfillment. More specifically, some debate around that "king" word. Many were expecting a vastly different Messiah than the one who rode into town on a donkey. Most Jews were thinking mighty warrior on a huge warhorse. These folks skipped right over the "humble" part and, oh yes, the part about a "donkey" and "colt." The religious leaders of Jesus' day were not alone in their misconceptions. It happens yet today.

*"Look, your king is coming to you,
humble and riding on a donkey, and
on a colt the donkey's offspring."*

- Matthew 2:5

- (Isaiah 62:11 & Zechariah 9:9)



Turning to this week's chapter from *Stretched*, the title is "Piety."

Much of the chapter really connects well into this struggle with who many hoped Jesus was and with who he actually was.

Christopher Richmann begins the chapter with some thoughts on who or what we are. The author argues that there are many outside forces that put great pressure on us, telling us how to act and behave, how to present ourselves to the world. These choices, in turn, reveal our character and what really matters to us. Richmann terms this our "cultural identity."

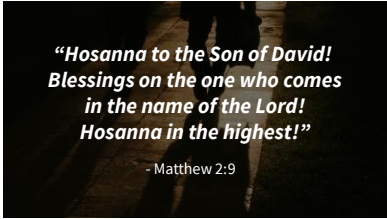
In order to counter all that society tells us about who and what we should be, Richmann offers, we often craft and protect our sense of identity by coming up with our own norms and then by doing these things so that we can set ourselves apart from others. Religion is very good at doing this. In many ways, the Old Testament is about setting Israel apart from the rest of the world. Through the Law, the Israelites defined who and what they were as a people. By the time of Jesus, facing the threat of the dominant Roman pagan culture, the religious leaders had doubled down on the practices that set them apart from the Romans and their other pagan neighbors.

This is one reason that the religious leaders took such issue with Jesus. They could not square the way Jesus so often disregarded their religious rules with the clear evidence that he was an impressive religious leader. This tension is evident in the palm parade and it rises to fever pitch as the week unfolds, moving from Palm Sunday to flipping tables in the temple, to heated discussions, and finally to the cross of Good Friday. The Messiah who rode into town on a donkey just did not fit with their norms, rules, and religion.

Returning to this scene, Jesus nears Jerusalem, yes, riding on a donkey. The disciples are with him as the large crowd begins to build. Even though potential danger lay ahead, they walked alongside Jesus. I wonder, would we all walk alongside him too? Perhaps we'd just get caught up in the moment and trundle along. But would any of us question what we were doing or question why Jesus felt the need for such a grand entrance when there was already so much tension with the religious leaders?

I think we wrestle with these same types of questions when we feel led to love our enemies or to welcome strangers or to pray for those who persecute us or to stand or to speak for the vulnerable or marginalized. These actions feel risky and they often question the status quo or those in authority. When we struggle with these questions or others like them, maybe we need to remember what Jesus told the two disciples to say if anyone who questioned what they were doing: *"The Lord needs them."* Jesus needs all people to be brought into the kingdom of God.

As the parade progresses and people lay down clothing and palm branches on the road, a palpable excitement builds. The crowd in front and behind begin shouting, *"Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessings on the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!"* In this scene, I think that the disciples stopped worrying about what *might* happen and started to lean into what *was* happening. This is something that we've experienced, getting caught up in the excitement of the crowd or an event. For the disciples, fear is replaced by what is happening. We've been here too. When we've summoned up the courage to say "yes" to the call and then have seen Jesus moving in our life or in someone else's life, we'd march along with Jesus wherever he was going. Yes, we'd even shout.



*"Hosanna to the Son of David!
Blessings on the one who comes
in the name of the Lord!
Hosanna in the highest!"*

- Matthew 2:9

As we ponder whether or not we'd go along on the parade, shouting and waving palm branches, we also need to consider *why* we might be going along. Just as it is possible for us at times, maybe some in the crowd got caught up in the excitement and picked up a branch and quietly waved it a little bit. Maybe this was even true for some of the disciples. And maybe, as the parade grew and gained energy, maybe some held the branch up high and began shouting along with the crowd. They might not be disciples. They might not even know who Jesus is. But there is a crowd and they're doing this and saying that...

In our world today, this can very much be the case. Because of our humanity, we want to be seen as part of the crowd, we want to belong, and we want to be someone that matters. We want others to notice what sets us apart from the regular people. When that desire mixes with our faith, it can be dangerous. On a simplistic level, one might be faithful in church attendance or might be generous in one's giving or might be a regular volunteer at the church. As simple acts, all are good and right things to do. These practices make us feel like we are part of something, that we belong, that we matter. Two thousand years ago many people showed up to a palm parade, waved branches, shouted "*Hosanna!*"

When we practice these faith habits or when the folks cheered for Jesus as he entered Jerusalem as a means of loving God and/or loving neighbor, these are wonderful things to do. In the same way, when we extend forgiveness or offer grace or bring comfort purely for the benefit and aide of the other, these are means of loving God and/or neighbor. But when done begrudgingly out of a sense of obligation or in order to be noticed by others, then we are entering dangerous territory. When we do something for another expecting some future benefit, we are thinking of self instead of simply loving God and neighbor. Maybe some there that day outside of Jerusalem were thinking this way.

As we close, let's step into that moment long ago. As we are people who profess Jesus as Lord and Savior, we can assume that we'd be standing there that day, cheering, shouting, waving palm branches as Jesus made his way into the city. Maybe we'd even be in the group walking along with Jesus. But either way, we'd be there. We'd shout, "Hosanna!" and we would desire for Jesus to save us, to bring us salvation. And that means we'd be there later in the week, in the moment when the tone changes. We'd be there when those who had shouted "Hosanna" started shouting, "Crucify! Crucify!"

The questions then become, where would we stand? Would we continue to follow? When the parade moves from celebration to condemnation, do we continue to move along with the crowd or do we stand apart with Jesus? Whose marching orders do we follow then, when the rubber meets the road and there is a cost to discipleship?



Let us pray...

Creator God, we praise you, for your Love rules over our lives with grace and beauty, creating us anew each moment. We thank you, for your Christ rules over us in humble tenderness, healing and redeeming us. We open our hearts to you, for your Spirit rules us from within with power, filling us with compassion. Grant that we will always turn to you alone for our salvation, and for the gift of life. Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in your name! Peace on earth, and glory in the highest! Grant us your salvation, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Grow, Pray, Study

- 1) *Grow*. Which of these faith “pitfalls” do you struggle with the most: doing the “wrong” things, doing “good” things for the wrong reasons, or relying too much on your own efforts to be good enough for God?
- 2) *Pray*. When have you experienced God’s power in your life of faith – in a moment, at an event, in worship? Pray for your heart to be more open to these experiences.
- 3) *Study*. Read Matthew 21:12-17. Why do you think Jesus would act in a way that was so different from the palm parade? What is he showing? Revealing? Trying to accomplish?