

Rev. Dr. Karen Blanchard
“Going Home or Coming Home?”
First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood
Sunday, March 28, 2021

Psalm 118

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

Let Israel say,

‘His steadfast love endures for ever.’

Let the house of Aaron say,

‘His steadfast love endures for ever.’

Let those who fear the LORD say,

‘His steadfast love endures for ever.’

*Out of my distress I called on the LORD;
the LORD answered me and set me in a broad place.*

With the LORD on my side I do not fear.

What can mortals do to me?

The LORD is on my side to help me;

I shall look in triumph on those who hate me.

*It is better to take refuge in the LORD
than to put confidence in mortals.*

*It is better to take refuge in the LORD
than to put confidence in princes.*

All nations surrounded me;

in the name of the LORD I cut them off!

They surrounded me, surrounded me on every side;

in the name of the LORD I cut them off!

They surrounded me like bees;

they blazed like a fire of thorns;

in the name of the LORD I cut them off!

*I was pushed hard, so that I was falling,
but the LORD helped me.*

*The LORD is my strength and my might;
he has become my salvation.*

There are glad songs of victory in the tents of the righteous:

‘The right hand of the LORD does valiantly;

the right hand of the LORD is exalted;

the right hand of the LORD does valiantly.’

I shall not die, but I shall live,

*and recount the deeds of the LORD.
The LORD has punished me severely,
but he did not give me over to death.*

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

*This is the gate of the LORD;
the righteous shall enter through it.*

*I thank you that you have answered me
and have become my salvation.*

*The stone that the builders rejected
has become the chief cornerstone.*

*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.*

Save us, we beseech you, O LORD!

O LORD, we beseech you, give us success!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the LORD.

We bless you from the house of the LORD.

*The LORD is God,
and he has given us light.*

*Bind the festal procession with branches,
up to the horns of the altar.*

*You are my God, and I will give thanks to you;
you are my God, I will extol you.*

*O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good,
for his steadfast love endures for ever.*

John 12:12-16

The next day the great crowd that had come to the festival heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, shouting, 'Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord—the King of Israel!' Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it; as it is written: 'Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion. Look, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey's colt!' His disciples did not understand these things at first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written of him and had been done to him.

Will you pray with me? Gracious God, as we enter into Holy Week, and together, we remember, we recall, we listen. And our hearts will be moved. So, as we gather this day, may Your Word instruct and teach us as together, we wrestle with Your Word for us this day. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.

The Tuesday Morning Book Group has read a wide variety of books. And in January and February, we discussed the *Founding Brothers*, a series of vignettes about the relationships between Washington, Burr, Hamilton, Adams, and Jefferson. There were stories about their times of cooperation as well as disagreements, the dirty politics and rumors they spread about each other over the years, mostly after the Revolutionary War. But what we all noticed as we discussed it was that the issue of slavery was brought up over and over again, but it kept getting kicked down the road, and they would not deal with it. And I learned later that in the Constitution under Article 1, Section 9, the original Constitution prohibited Congress from even discussing or passing any laws that banned enslavement until 1808. So, they could never discuss slavery on the floor of the House in those early years of our nation. The book ended with a story about the relationship between Jefferson and Adams. They had developed a hostile relationship after the presidencies that they served for many years, in part because Adams was a strong supporter of a central government, and Jefferson, of states' rights. But in later years, they reestablished their relationship, based in part on the fact that these two were among a few that understood the tensions, excitements, challenges, all those things that they had experienced during the founding years of our nation. And their death on the same day, July 4th, 50 years after the signing of the Declaration of Independence, is one that many cannot help but say, "It's something more than coincidental." But still, the issue of slavery was not dealt with by the Congress. The two men had paradoxical perspectives. Adams was opposed to slavery, but not an abolitionist. Jefferson thought the slave trade was wrong, but he owned slaves until the end of his life. So, with the issue of slavery in mind, we decided to read next, *The Lincoln Conspiracy*. And this is a historical overview of the plot to assassinate Lincoln before he was even inaugurated. I don't know about you, but I had never read about it before. Many in the south were terrified by Lincoln's selection and desperate to keep him from taking office because of his stance on slavery. He had never approved of slavery, but he saw the issue as a state's right issue and he didn't think the federal government had the right to determine a state's position on a matter of property, which I find to be a very unsettling statement that people are property. But it was his hope that as new states formed during the westward movement, that they would be free states. And those in the South recognized with more free states, it meant that the Congress could turn the tide in favor of the North's position. And we found that Lincoln's view on slavery evolved. Like Adams, he was opposed to slavery in principle, but he was not an abolitionist. He felt that the federal government could not determine the property laws of a state. But Lincoln's thinking changes. He stops the focus on states' rights to human rights, from focusing on laws about property to justice for human beings.

The authors paint a very vivid picture of the different feelings and actions between those in the North and those in the South. In the North, they prepare to bring Lincoln and his entourage to Washington. It's a large party and they move from train to train because with no Amtrak or national railroad in place, the passengers and their luggage had to disembark and be moved from one rail line to another as they moved through the states. And along the way, they made many stops. And the towns, even the smallest ones, are filled with cheering crowds wanting to see this new incoming president and to hear him speak. It takes over 11 days to go from Springfield, Illinois, to Washington, D.C. And at times, the crowds get almost out of hand and the police are scrambling to keep some kind of order.

Meanwhile, there are feelings in the South as well that are intense. South Carolina has seceded from the union and others had followed. And now Jefferson Davis had been asked to lead the Southern states. And he makes his way across the country. And he, too, is greeted by cheering crowds all the way. We learn that militias, though, are practicing in secret and the plot's beginning to take shape. I haven't finished the book yet, so I can't say spoiler alert. But I do know that the plot was foiled. What I did find intriguing as I was reading the book the last couple of weeks, that as we approached Holy Week, I sensed there were parallels between the tensions and excitement of the crowds that awaited Lincoln and Davis and the tension and

the excitement amongst the crowds and others as Jesus enters Jerusalem. For in today's gospel reading, we are told that as Jesus approaches Jerusalem, there are many crowds of people cheering and celebrating. And there's excitement in the air because under Roman rule, life was difficult, and many of the Jewish people were living on the edge. They felt beaten down and hopeless, not only because of the occupation by those of another nation, but because of their own leaders in power who did not care about them or for them. So, Jesus had brought them hope. His ministry of healing and teaching and feeding has nourished them in body and spirit and the images and words about the palms and joyous shouting come out of the prophetic books of Zephaniah and Isaiah and Zechariah. For in those prophetic works, there are not just warnings for those who are abusing their power, there is also hope and promise that in the end the difficulties will be overcome. And so for them, Jesus is the light at the end of a dark tunnel of their lives because the Messiah is finally, finally coming. But there are others that do not feel the same way, the Pharisees. Jesus has just come from sharing a meal at the home of Martha and Mary where Lazarus has been raised from the dead and the word is out. The Pharisees see a frenzy about Jesus growing and they are losing control. The gospel writer says they said to one another, "You see, you can do nothing. For look, the world has gone after him." The Pharisees are scrambling to figure out what to do because they know well that the Roman leaders will be concerned if they can't get a lid on the excitement and His power.

So, it's into the midst of all these tensions that Jesus comes riding on a donkey, palms and prays, shouting and joy surrounding Him, and it's here that symbolism meets reality. The crowd see and view Jesus as coming home to the temple where God lived. Where else would the Messiah reign? All they had hoped for was going to happen. They had not been abandoned by God. The Messiah was coming home, and they are sure He will take the city and rulers by storm and lead them in a way beyond all the others. But this is not how Jesus sees the story unfolding. He is coming home to Jerusalem, but not in the way they had imagined. The anointing of His feet with oils the night before is a foreshadowing of his anointing after death. The raising of Lazarus foretells the resurrection of Jesus. For Jesus, returning to Jerusalem wasn't about coming home to roost and to reign. It was about getting ready to return home to God, the one who had sent Him. He knows he's coming to give up his life so that others might have new life.

This will not be an easy homegoing or the homecoming that the crowd imagined. The disciples are aware of the tensions and hostilities in the air. The Passover meal and the Last Supper are yet to come, and it is at that time that He shares the words about His coming death in the Gospel of John. As we venture into Holy Week, we will be reminded of the struggle of the disciples to accept that the story may not turn out as well as they had imagined and that they will be having a part in denial, betrayal, and struggle. But this time I heard one verse in a new way. The writer of the Gospel gives us a glimpse into the disciples' confusion with compassion and understanding. His disciples did not understand these things at first, but when Jesus glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written of him and been done to him. They are about to enter into events that they could not imagine, but while the story does not end as they thought it would, they do move into new understandings. And maybe that's the lesson for us that even though we know how the story unfolds, we're invited, every year, to experience the story anew. The journey of Lent into Easter is an invitation to open our hearts and minds to new understandings, to allow ourselves to be transformed, to be reminded that our faith is not supposed to be static or closed but that we are to work towards new insights and new growth, to have faith that's alive and moving. We come each year to Lent not saying here we go again but to be those who are willing to be changed by new awareness, for the willingness to be transformed is what brings us to new perspectives. It's what helps us evolve. That is the power of faith to be a source of transformation. Just as Paul was on the road to Damascus, the foundations of his life shaken both literally and emotionally as he encounters a vision of the Lord, and he moves from someone who is persecuting others for following Jesus to becoming a follower himself, or the woman at the well who went through loss and change after loss. She was offered something for her thirst, not in body, but in spirit, transformed by Jesus' words about living waters. She came to know she mattered and was loved by God, so much so that she ran to tell others of the joy she had come to know. Lincoln was someone who was also transformed by his new awareness, a reminder of how we should be willing to evolve and be open to change. For with him,

the issue at hand was slavery, and if we are honest, we realize we've only begun to consider what this means. Slavery has ended, but racism has not. Our awareness of the complexity of this issue continues to unfold. We need to continue to learn and to evolve and to grow.

That is our invitation to live a life truly steeped in faith. We are a church of cycles and seasons not to be repeated over and over again in the same way but so that we are willing to be transformed. We make the journey from Lent to Easter each year so that we can arrive at Easter shaped in new ways like the disciples. As we like to say, we are reformed and still reforming, and as such, we are continually invited by God and the Spirit to learn, to grow, and be transformed by faith. Jesus may not have had the homecoming that the crowds expected, but I think for many of them, their hopes were fulfilled in the end in ways that were totally unexpected. As the events after his death and resurrection unfolded, many came to experience a different kind of joy and hope, no longer hoping for power over others or having the kind of magical thinking that some had, as if to say, don't worry, be happy. When the Messiah comes, everything will be perfect. Instead, they and we are invited to be transformed by the journey. In the week to come, we will be reminded that Jesus teaches us new things, for he is the one who was and is the living word, the bread of life, the source of living water for those who thirst. He offers the kind of hope and peace from beyond this world to comfort and encourage us as well as to transform us. This is a time when we are invited to experience the profound, life-changing ways that Jesus offers us in understanding the meanings of life and light and love. So, thanks be to God from whom all our blessings flow and from whom all love flows. Amen.