

“Hallelujah”
Luke 19:28-40, Psalm 118
March 20, 2016: Palm Sunday
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There are moments. Moments that you re-live over and over in your mind. Moments that you can't describe even if you were the greatest poet or most erudite novelist ever. Moments that are perhaps worth being born at all just to have experienced. Watching her walk down the aisle knowing that she's going to say “I do.” Watching your child be born. Standing at the rim of the Grand Canyon. Hearing Pachelbel's “Canon in D” for the first time. Feeling that total embrace that holds nothing back and realizing that this is the one, this is the person that makes you complete and your spirit is at rest. Moments when there is a smile on your face and tears on your cheeks at the same time. We have moments. And what do we say at such moments? We can't describe what they are like, say fully what they mean, that's beyond our mortal powers—so what do we say? “Wow.” “Yes.” “Oh my God” (in the best sense). Or if you believe in God, your spirit turns to God and you say “Thank you.” As the fourteenth century German Christian mystic Meister Eckhardt said, “If the only prayer you ever say in your life is “Thank you,” that would be enough.” Or maybe you start speaking Hebrew—out of you comes a Hebrew word that you really didn't know you spoke. Hallelujah. Hallelujah—it's a Hebrew word that means “Praise the Lord.” Hallel is the Hebrew word for praise, so when the scripture says that when Jesus rode into Jerusalem and the whole multitude began to praise God joyfully, they probably said, “Hallelujah!” Praise the Lord. For them it was one of those moments. They were watching the one they believed to be the Messiah come into Jerusalem at last. A moment they had waited for all their lives. A moment Jews had waited for years beyond count. A moment beyond description, a moment when their spirits and their voices could only shout, “Hallelujah!” Praise the Lord!

Praise. We all like praise, we all need praise. We all need to be told that we are doing well, that we are appreciated. In the church as much as anywhere else, we try to show through our words and our actions

that we value each other. The people you work with, you see in coffee, you pray next to, are people that we want to make sure are appreciated and so we praise them. Because we all need praise. But does God? Does God need praise? Does God need to hear what a good job he's doing? Do we tell God that we appreciate him, maybe before we ask him something? Praise the Lord! Good job God! That tree you made is really top-notch, and the taste of apples—terrific. But if you could do something about the mosquitos we would appreciate it. That's not really praise—praise is not quite the same thing as thanksgiving. Praise is unsolicited and spontaneous expression of surprise, joy and satisfaction that builds bonds between those praised and those offering praise. Our Call to Worship today comes from Psalm 118, traditionally one of what is called the Hallel Psalms. These psalms are said before or after the passover meal praising God for what he has done for the people. Does God need to be reminded? Might he forget? Does God need praise? No. But do we need to praise God? I think so, because praising God turns our hearts toward God and builds that bond with God.

Some of you may have noticed from time to time that up here in the pulpit I have a string of beads made of olive wood. I found this in Jerusalem in a little shop. I was intrigued by it because I had seen several shopkeepers and an attendant in a mosque with beads like this. I asked our guide about it and she told me that it was a Muslim prayer strand and it usually had a series of 33 beads. Many Muslims use it as a way to meditate and to praise God. According to Islamic tradition there are 99 names of God, and one of the ways to praise God is to memorize and then count the names as you count the beads on the string three times around—the holy one, the provider, the merciful, the forgiving one, the creator, etc. When I went into the store and saw this string of beads, I wanted to buy it. And the store owner was confused—he asked me if I knew that it was a Muslim prayer strand. I said I did. I said I had a sister-in-law who was Muslim. He grew more confused. But you are Christian, he said. And I said yes, and he obviously didn't understand how the same family could have Christian members and Muslim members. But he finally handed me the prayer strand and said, All people can praise God. All people can praise God. God doesn't need our praise. God doesn't need to hear that he is merciful and

kind and forgiving. He knows that. But we need to praise God, and we might need the reminder.

Hallelujah. Praise the Lord. Not a scripted prayer of thanksgiving, remember all the things God has done for you, right before you ask him for more. But just that feeling, that expression of “Wow. This is it. Let me just stay here a moment.” What are those moments for you? Rocking my daughter to sleep when her head is tucked into that special place in your neck and wondering, “Do I really have to put her back in her crib? And does she really have to ever grow up?” When I was on Iona walking back from the pub at midnight and one of my new friends saying, “We're going to sing in the abbey, want to come?” and then singing with them from one end of the darkened ancient abbey to the other song like “Dona Nobis Pacem” and “Kum By Yah” and knowing that the angels listened. Kneeling at the church of the Annunciation in Nazareth and knowing without any proof at all that an angel had been here and said to a young woman, “Don't be afraid, Mary.” And as your pastor, once in a while, I get to take a child in my arms and take a little bit of water and a touch of oil and enter into an ancient covenant with her and her parents, and then I get to step on these palms and walk out into your midst and say that God has joined her with us in that covenant and you affirm that you will love and support her and then under my breath, I say Hallelujah. Praise the Lord. A covenant is affirmed, a relationship renewed—just like everytime we praise God. God doesn't need praise, but when we do praise him and praise each other, bridges are built between us—and that we need.