

**Fleeting Praise**  
Palm Sunday  
March 16, In the Year of Our LORD, 2008  
Gates Presbyterian Church  
The Rev. Ralph S. English, Pastor

Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29 and Matthew 21:1-11

Like people of countless ages, we gather this morning in a time of public worship and praise, and in the words of the Psalmist, "give thanks to the LORD, for He is good." Today's Psalm even includes the prophetic words about what occurred on that Palm Sunday: "Blessed is He who enters in the name of the LORD! ... Bind the festal procession with branches ...."

Like people of countless ages, we know the wonder that we experience in occasional moments of unbridled joy - when even the most stoic in our midst can, with at least some enthusiasm, embrace, really "get" the presence and power of our God. But, like people of countless ages, we know that some of the most precious moments are fleeting at best, that the "high" passes quickly and then we are left .... with what exactly?

Like people of countless ages, ....

Three thousand years ago, a "preacher" (most think the author to be Solomon) wrote words of wisdom that as a body of work is included in our Holy Bible and called "Ecclesiastes." The ninth verse of the first chapter is telling - and appropriate for today's lesson:

What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; and there is nothing new under the sun.

One thing that will never be "new under the sun" is the presence of scoffers - and the scoffers will put it quite simply: "Nothing new under the sun? In Solomon's day, there were no spacecraft that landed on and photographed the surface of Mars, there was no e-mail or You Tube, there was no splitting of the atom or understanding of DNA," ... on and on. To those scoffers, we retort - that is not what the preacher meant, and you know it.

Then, as now, as in all years in between, and for all time to come ... there are the hopes and dreams wrought of our faith - and the realities born of our humanity - some which deserve praise and some which will ever rankle the hosts of heaven.

How different was the warring of nations and struggle between and among peoples as portrayed in Scripture and other ancient histories from the conflicts that are so rampant today? There is nothing new under the sun!

How different was the arrogance of King David who apparently thought nothing of committing adultery with Bathsheba from that of King, I mean Governor, Spitzer who thought as little of his marriage vows as well? There is nothing new under the sun!

How different were the kings of Israel and Judea who built temples and palaces and lived in grandeur at the expense of the peoples from that of Saddam Hussein who thought little of the people he had the privilege to lead? There is nothing new under the sun!

How different were the Chosen Peoples who turned from reliance on their God to whatever attracted them in the moment or promised them a "good time" from those of today who put their trust in things instead of in the One Who creates all things and redeems all things? The Rev. Harry Emerson Fosdick's words of a generation ago, of how we are "rich in things and poor in soul," remind us: There is nothing new under the sun!

How different was Jesus' reception on that day of the palms, in what turned out to be at best a few hours of unbridled praise, a brief moment, fleeting at best - how different is that from the praise people are willing to give to their God for the briefest and most fleeting of moments, before supposed reality sets in, ... before thanks to God becomes, "What have you done for me lately?" ... before praise of God becomes, "OK, God, in praising You, I can now expect You to fulfill my wishes for" .... you may fill in the blank. Fleeting praise - there is nothing new under the sun!

Oh - and as to attention span - the accusation that today's youth or today's generation has the shortest attention span in all of human history ... the Chosen People can compete with us on that any day! Let's see:

- Moses lead them out of captivity with songs of praise to a liberating God, and within days, the peoples' thirst and hunger had them complaining that God abandoned them. "OK, yeah, yeah, yeah, so You led us out of slavery in Egypt – what have You done for us today?"
- Given water from a rock (from a rock!) and bread from heaven (literally falling from the sky), their thankfulness and praise is fleeting, for once Moses is out of their sight (on his way up the mountain to talk to God), they pool all of their precious possessions into the making a golden idol. "OK, so You fed us when we hungry and sated our thirst when we were parched - what have You done for us today?"
- Given the Messiah, presented with the One promised of the ages, realizing that this one Who rode into the city on a donkey was fulfilling the promises and hopes of the ages, within hours, the praise turns to disdain, and within days, a complete reversal occurs. Shouts of "Hosanna" are replaced with another one word cry - "Crucify!" "OK, so we thought You were the Messiah – what have You done for us today – and in particular with those 'blasted' Romans Who rule us – and mock our religion?"

"Hosanna!" was a genuine cry of praise - and it would be so for us today. The problem then, the challenge today, is what lies beneath that word - what expectations - expectations of our God - and our expectations belie the fleeting praise of then and now.

People then and people now think there is some divine formula, that praise and love of God will be matched quid pro quo. Supposedly, it works like this: I praise God and God will bestow on me riches or power. The "prosperity Gospel" or "Success Gospel," that God will lavishly bless those who bless God ... all of that leads to fleeting praise when a person wakes up from their self-induced dream and discovers that isn't the promise of God at all!

The incredible irony is that what God *does* promise in return for our praise and love is better than any earthly riches *anyway*: salvation and redemption - grace and peace - and not only in the Kingdom to come, but here on earth, when we come to terms with some rather simple truths

- that when "things" are no longer what is important - that we won't crave them as much!

- that when "love of and service to others" becomes a focus of our lives - that the endless drive for self-gratification will get lost in the shuffle!
- that when the ways of greed, envy, strife and war are set aside in the pursuit of peace and hope and grace and encouragement and justice - that those deepest desires of all humanity can be grounded in reality and not just in our dreams!
- that when we realize what Jesus knew when he entered the gates of Jerusalem - what Jesus *knew* - not in the short run, not in the agony of a week of confusion, betrayal, denial, arrest, torture, humiliation, disgrace, march to death, nails in the wrists and ankles, slow death, burial, or stone rolled before a grave ...

Jesus *knew* the whole story of Holy Week - that is, in the words of Ecclesiastes, played out over and over again as there is "nothing new under the sun:"

- That in addition to betrayal there was faithfulness,
- in addition to sacrifice there was glory,
- in the presence of the harshest of realities there was incredible promise,
- in addition to human cravings there were divine invitations,
- that death led to birth,
- a bloody end ushered in a new beginning,

When we get that, see the blessed story in its entirety and not in its parts, then, if ever so fleetingly, our praise will be real, our love of God seemingly magical, and our claim to redemption and salvation one that carry us through all the days of our lives in this kingdom on earth and in the kingdom of God.

Amen.