

Easter in a Pandemic

*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. -Psalm 118:19*

The Psalm readings assigned in the new three-year Daily Lectionary for *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* are usually taken from the Sunday previous during the first part of the week and the Sunday coming during the second part of the week. Except for the last week of Lent. For the last three days of the season of Lent, and only in this particular year, the Daily Lectionary assigns Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29. This is most curious, and even wonderfully mysterious with the mysterious working of the Holy Spirit through the word of the church. Psalm 118 is the Easter Psalm. It has been the Easter Psalm for a long, long time. It is recited when we gather at the grave to express our hope in the resurrection of Jesus, and it is shouted or sung by the congregation at the Easter services to express the victory of Jesus over evil, sin, and death. God already knew, years ago when the revisions for the Daily Lectionary were being surveyed, weighed, and prayed, to reassure the Church in North America during a frightening pandemic to celebrate the Resurrection of our Lord by framing Holy Week with the Easter Psalm!

Marginal notes in *The Lutheran Study Bible* (Augsburg-Fortress—1517 Publishing, 2009: p. 979) explain that “these verses probably indicate a liturgical entry into the temple and surrounding area... Illnesses and other crises often lead to isolation, so part of thanking God included rejoining the community of God’s people.” Once again, thorough scholarship, honestly presented, builds up our confession of faith, rooting it deep in our current experience. No doubt the author of these study notes, Rolf A. Jacobson, submitted them years before they were published, yet how they speak to our Easter experience right now! He goes on to explain verse 24, “This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.” “This does not celebrate the creation of a new day as much as it celebrates the fact that the Creator of all things has rescued the psalmist from a crisis.” In rising from the dead the Lord rescues us from this crisis too! Jesus has opened the gates to God, to the community that worships God, to life in the Spirit, and to eternal life! Let us pass through them in faith dancing in the Spirit, with prayer and hope and joy, whether we worship in person or online or with someone reading the bulletin for us, not isolated but together in the Lord.

Verse 25 might be one of the reasons Psalm 118 was placed here to help us prepare to enter Holy Week during the pandemic. When translated from the English back into Hebrew, this verse contains the victory shout used by the crowds as they welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem: “hoshi’ah na,” or “Hosanna!” as we are more used to reading. “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!” Jesus’ three days of teaching and preaching in the Temple during Holy Week peek out from behind verses 26-27 as the crowds blessed him and he remained among them as the Light of the World. Then the incomprehensible, sudden change, already hinted at in the last part of verse 27 with the strange image of binding the procession and pushing right up to the horns of the altar—could it refer to an unforeseen martyrdom? As suddenly as it appeared, Psalm 118 is gone as we plunge over the edge into Holy Week, clinging to the closing verses as our prayer and our hope: “You are my God, I will give you thanks; you are my God, I will extol you. Give thanks to the Lord, for the Lord is good, the Lord’s steadfast love endures forever.”

God be with us all as we journey through Holy week and celebrate Easter during the pandemic. Amen