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Sermon 12 July 2020
Psalm Beach 5: The Cornerstone

- Audio intro
    - Female voice: At the top of the hour on LargsNaz Radio, let's take a moment to visit-- the poet's corner.
    - Male voice 1: Today on the poet's corner, a delightful offering from one of the late 19th century's most prolific but unfortunately least-talented poets, Samuel Cholmondley-Whittingshire the third. Whittingshire wrote a total of 118 poems, but none more well-received than today's meditation upon one of the geological formations at a popular coastal destination. An Ode to the Cornerstone at Psalm Beach was written in 1902, making it 118 this year, and it is read for us today by London cabbie and literary enthusiast, Malcolm Merriweather.
    - Male voice 2: An Ode to the Cornerstone at Psalm Beach

        Of stones and rocks with famous names, we could forever sing
        For they are many, far and wide, a not uncommon thing,
        Gilbraltar is a rock that stands resplendent, tall and strong,
        On Plymouth Rock, the Pilgrims stepped; that may be right or wrong.
        Our Millport rock's a crocodile, with wide and toothy grin.
        The Rock of Ages, it was cleft that we could hide within.
        The Blarney stone, when it is kissed, endows the gift of gab, and
        The Stone of Destiny-- there's a rock that's more than just a slab
        But none of these old rocks, you know, are what this poem's about
        It's the Cornerstone at old Psalm Beach of which I choose to shout
        Rejected by the builders of a marble edifice
        It serves as a reminder, for such a time as this
        A landmark, a formation, standing steadfast in the waves,

And swimmers found up to their necks, it's them lot what it saves.
But great ships that have gone astray have split in half upon it,
And if I were the Bard, about that I might write a sonnet
But I ain't no Will Shakespeare, see, and even if I was,
I couldn't do it justice, right, I'd earn me no applause.
So I'm content to sit in sand, here in this tidal zone,
And gaze upon the majesty, of The Psalm Beach Cornerstone.

- Male voice 1: Lovely, just lovely. Tune in tomorrow at this same time for the Poet's Corner—until then, Good day to you!

- (beach sounds) Good morning church! It's a beautiful morning at Psalm Beach—the water is clear, the breeze is warm, the skies are blue. We're just sitting here in the sand, like the narrator in that poem we just heard, looking out at that that majestic landmark, the Cornerstone at Psalm Beach. Of course, there isn't really any Cornerstone at Psalm Beach, because there isn't really any Psalm Beach except in our minds—these waves and bird sounds are just sound effects, but they help each of us to create an imaginary place where we can come together and learn about the scriptures and listen to what God has to say to us.
- Just this week someone asked me, they said "Why do you have those little introductions at the beginning of the Psalm Beach sermons—those scenarios like looking up at the sky or a weather report or a news update—what are those for? Are they just supposed to be funny, or entertaining, or just to sort of introduce the sermon? What's the point of them?"
- And we do hope that they are entertaining, and funny, and provide a little levity, and help to introduce the sermon, but the point of them is this. I've

been a student in several different disciplines, and a teacher-- a professor and a tutor—for a lot of years, and one thing I've learned is that if you want to be able to recall information, not just little bites of information but larger chunks of knowledge—if you want to be able to bring them to mind more readily in the future, so that you can really understand the information, then one of the best ways to make that happen is by using stories—creating scenarios and narratives that incorporate elements of what you want to remember. And the more unusual, or dramatic, or outrageous these narratives are, the more likely you are to retain the information they contain, without even knowing that you're doing it. Without "memorising" like we used to do with Bible verses when we were young—just saying them over and over until they stick in our heads.

- Now, don't get me wrong—repetition can be a very effective way of remembering, too
- And so these introductions to the sermons are mnemonic devices that help you to more easily recall what's in the scripture and in these sermons more easily in the future. Because you may not always be able to read or to hear the Scriptures—for that matter, you may not always be able to read or to hear at all—but if you've hidden these words in your heart and in your mind, then its much harder to take that away from you
- So if in six months or so you look up at the night sky, and think of Psalm 8, "O Lord how majestic is your name in all the earth, when I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers—what are humans that you are mindful of them?"

or if you hear a weather report about a hurricane and think about Storm Shoshanim and the rising floodwaters in Psalm 69, or maybe you hear a news update about a music festival, and you think about the psalmist who waited patiently and proclaimed the good news of deliverance to the great congregation in Psalm 40—if in some situation you find yourself recalling Psalm 8 or 118-- then those little narratives, the stories in those introductions, will have served their purpose—to help ensure that you remember.

- We're looking at Psalm 118 today, this penultimate Sunday of our Psalm Beach series, and Psalm 118 is frequently read on days of remembrance and celebration. In the Christian tradition we often hear parts of Psalm 118 read on Easter Sunday, when we remember the resurrection of Jesus.
- Psalm 118 was read on the Feast of Tabernacles, when the Israelites would call to mind the dwellings they lived in during their 40 years in the wilderness following the Exodus from Egypt. But that wasn't the only time it was, or is, read out loud as part of worship.
- Psalm 118 is part of a set of six psalms, Psalm 113 through 118, that are known as the Hallel, and which are recited on joyous occasions in the Jewish faith—the pilgrim festivals, and Passover, and Hannukah. Psalm 113-118 are sometimes called the Egyptian Hallel, because Jewish tradition holds that the Israelites recited the words of the Hallel when they came out of Egypt, and so the Hallel is central to the Passover liturgy. Many scholars believe that when Jesus and his disciples "sang a hymn" in Matthew 26 and Mark 14, after

leaving the Mount of Olives at Passover time, it was the Hallel that they were singing.

- Incidentally, the word Hallel is another word in Hebrew for “praise,” and when you know that God is referred to as “Yah” in Psalm 118 and elsewhere, then the meaning of Hallel-u-YAH, Halleluia, “praise God,” becomes clear.
- At the festival of Passover and in other ancient settings, Psalm 118 was most likely a liturgy that accompanied the entrance of a procession INTO the Temple, proclaiming God's deliverance from Egypt and, later, from the Exile.
- And there would have been some audience participation, too—in fact, you could say that there was no audience at all, at least not as we think of an audience today, except perhaps for God himself, to whom the worship was addressed.
- But as you heard in our scripture reading this morning, Psalm 118 has a call and response written into it—there are speaking parts for the leader and the various members of the congregation, however they identify themselves. So we hear, "Let Israel say, 'His steadfast love endures forever.' Let the house of Aaron say, 'His steadfast love endures forever.' Let those who fear the LORD say, 'His steadfast love endures forever.'" Because this is a reminder to all the people of God, whatever group you belong to, to remember that God keeps His promises, that God comes to deliver those who are oppressed.
- We could have continued along those lines this morning and said, “Let the folks from Skelmorlie say, 'His steadfast love endures forever.' Let the people in Largs say 'His steadfast love endures forever.' Let the House of Strathclyde

say, 'His steadfast love endures forever.' Let the folks in Dordrecht in the Netherlands, and in Arlington Texas, and in North Augusta, South Carolina, and in Evans City Pennsylvania, and in Hendersonville, Tennessee, and in Rossville, Georgia, say “His steadfast love endures forever.”

- These are the words the leader and the people would have been prolaiming as the procession made its way into the temple.
- Because these words are the central theme of the psalm—whatever else is in Psalm 118, we find these words repeated four times in a row in the first four verses—you remember I said repetition was not a bad way to remember something? And not only four times in a row at the beginning of the Psalm, but at the end of the Psalm as well we find verse 1 repeated—so here we have an “inclusio” structure—or an envelope structre, as we saw in Psalm 8—from beginning to end—Psalm 118 reminds us that God’s steadfast love endures forever.
- The Hebrew word for that steadfast love is *hesed*—you’ll sometimes see that spelled with a ch—c-h-e-s-e-d—so it’s pronounced more like Chesed, the way that folks here in Scotland pronounce the CH in “Loch Lomond” or “Loch Fyne”—unfortunately I have not lived in Scotland long enough to say Chesed very well, so I’m just saying Hesed—
- That word hesed is translated in English Bibles as “kindness,” “love,” “steadfast love,” “loyalty,” “favor,” “devotion,” and “mercy”—and multitides of books and articles have been written about what it is

- In Exodus 34 verse 6, when Moses is given the commandments and the covenant with Israel is made, God uses the word Hesed twice in a self-description: "The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love (hesed) and faithfulness, 7 maintaining love (hesed) to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin"
- The word hesed is used 246 times in the Old Testament, and well over 100 times in the Psalms
- In the familiar words of Psalm 23, "surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life"—it's God's hesed that the word "mercy" refers to
- Hesed has to do not only with the mercy and steadfast love that God HAS for His people, it has to do with the fact that God is the one whose ACTS make that mercy and steadfast love real—He is the One who delivers, who saves--hesed is as much about what God DOES as who God IS.
- But what the Psalmist in Psalm 118 wants us to remember about God's hesed is that it endures forever—like the verses at the start and the finish of this Psalm, God's hesed, his mercy, his covenant love, his loyalty, his kindness, lasts from beginning to end. It is not temporary, nor is it occasional, nor is it sporadic--His hesed endures forever. Let's all say it together, His steadfast love endures forever.
- And that is why, in verse 1 of Psalm 118, is a call to give thanks, because God is good—God's steadfast love endures forever.
- What kind of Psalm is this? Even though this psalm contains elements of several different genres, and some medieval manuscripts divide Psalm 118

into as many as 5 different psalms, verse 1 leaves no uncertainty about it, it is in general a psalm of thanksgiving—it calls the congregation, it calls us, to be thankful—the Hebrew word here is YADAH—and it means to praise and to give thanks, but it also means more literally to THROW, to CAST like a stone—we are called to throw praises praises toward God, to cast our praises upon Him—this is not a call for limited expressions of gratitude, for small tokens of appreciation, no, these are big thanks, big praises that are thrown, not just placed or presented—I'm just throwing that out there, so to speak

- So we know that Psalm 118 is a Psalm of thanksgiving, for God's hesed, and that it would have been part of the liturgy of a procession into the temple.
- But when we get to verse 5, we find that there is a speaker in this Psalm, a speaker who refers to being delivered very much like the psalmist in Psalm 40 did—in verse 5 we read
    - 5 Out of my distress I called on the Lord;

      the Lord answered me and set me in a broad place.

      6 With the Lord on my side I do not fear.

      What can mortals do to me?
- Who then, is this speaker?
- Most scholars agree that the speaker is a King, because the way that the threats against him are described is political. He says that the nations have surrounded him like bees, and like a fire of thorns—now there are two outrageous and memorable images—bees and a fire of thorns—but the psalmist tells us, "in the name of the Lord I cut them off!"

- He goes further, letting us know that he was "punished severely," but that he "shall not die but shall live to recount the deeds of the Lord" and it seems that he has learned and so wants others to know that it's better to take refuge in the Lord than to put confidence in mortals—in princes, or in the powerful—the aristocracy, in particular.
- Some scholars have suggested that maybe the speaker is King Hezekiah, his story is told in 2 Kings 18-19, as the army of Sennacherib laid siege to Jerusalem-- others believe the king of Judah is the speaker here since, in places like 2 Samuel, we see that the king played an important role in public worship, and that a lot of the worship of the community had to do with the life of the king--His appointment to office, and prayers and celebrations for victory or defeat in battle
- So, we don't know who this speaker is, or was originally, but it's a good guess that it's a king who is understood to be speaking in verse 19, "Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them and give thanks to the Lord," and it's pretty likely that in the worship setting, after those words were spoken by the leader, those in the worshiping congregation would have answered back "This is the gate of the Lord, the righteous shall enter through it."
- And as the procession made its way into the Temple itself, through the gate, there is a reference to the keystone at the top of the gate or to the cornerstone of the building, depending on whose interpretation you follow —in verse 21 we read "I thank you that you have answered me, and have

become my salvation. The stone that the builders rejected, has become the chief cornerstone" as the speaker, the King, gives thanks that he has been delivered and lifted up, like the cornerstone, moved from low and discarded to high and exalted.

- And the significance of this transformation makes the day it is remembered a special one, and so we hear: 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.
- This day is something special, because of what they, because of what we, remember.
- The procession continues on its way, and we're reminded that this is a thanksgiving procession, as verse 27 specifies, "bind the festal procession with branches up to the horns of the altar."
- Now what's interesting about that verse is that some scholars think that it wasn't supposed to be part of the psalm itself at all, but that it was a ritual instruction that told the worshippers and those conducting the service what to do and when—and that this instruction that could have been excluded has been included—like that cornerstone that the builders rejected but becomes the chief cornerstone.—
- And what this instruction says is, at this point in the service "bind the festal procession with branches up to the horns of the altar"—and some interpreters think that the reference is to the branches that would have been used in the festival of the tabernacles, or that it refers to ropes that would have been used to bind the animal sacrifice that was being brought "up to the

horns of the altar," but at any rate, there is an offering, an animal, that is bound and being led to the altar for sacrifice.

- This is not the sacrifice of praise, the offering of a song that we saw in Psalm 69 and Psalm 40, this is an actual sacrifice, an animal "todah" as we have mentioned before, with horns and hooves, a thanksgiving offering
- And the procession reaches the altar and the psalm ends with "You are my God, and I will give thanks to you; you are my God, I will extol you." And then the envelope is completed with the repetition of the first verse here at the end.
- So that's all wrapped up, and we understand what God has done, how His hesed has been manifest in the life of the people of God. Psalm 118 is about being thankful for God's steadfast love, and it features a procession into the temple, a king, a cornerstone, and a sacrifice.
- But as we saw last week, inspired words, like the words of the Psalms, have a way of being transported by the Holy Spirit through history, transforming situations and understanding, and people, in new and surprising and unexpected ways. We heard last week about the way that Psalm 40 moved through history from the Psalmist's quill to the congregation, to the streets of Atlanta, Georgia, and to our worship service—the way that the words of a poet about God's enduring love made their way through a thousand years to the cell of a mental institution, to a pulpit at a campmeeting, and to the pen of pastor Frederick Lehman.

- Two weeks ago, you'll recall that we had our Big Faith Sunday, and we talked about the widow's offering that is described in Mark and Luke's gospels.
- And we pointed out that that narrative is part of a larger narrative that includes Jesus' arrival at Jerusalem and his teaching at the temple—the events that we remember at the beginning of Holy Week, before Easter. You can also find these events described in the gospel of Matthew, around chapter 21.
- And in Matthew, Mark, and Luke's gospels, we find Jesus telling parables at the Temple. Parables, of course, are narratives that help to illustrate what a person is talking about, they help folks remember and understand what has been said—in that way, they're really sort of like mnemonic devices. And the parables Jesus tells tell us about what the Kingdom of God is like.
- Incidentally, the word parable, comes from the Greek "para-ballo" which means literally "to throw alongside"—"ballo" is where we get the word "ballistic," and "ball,"—it means to throw or to cast like a stone—I'm just throwing that out there.
- But in Luke 20, and Matthew 21, and Mark 12, we find Jesus telling a rather outrageous parable that's known as the parable of the tenants. The response it gets from Jesus' listeners, the teachers of the law and the chief priests, as well as the other people, is one of shock and surprise.
- The parable of the tenants tells about a man who planted a vineyard and rented it to some farmers while he went away. When harvest-time came he sent a servant to collect some of the fruit, but the tenants beat him and sent

him away. So the owner sent another and another, but they got beat up just like the first one. So finally the owner sends his son, who he loves, thinking they'll respect him, but the tenants think, "If we kill the son, we'll get his inheritance." So they do just that. They kill him. So Jesus asks, "What do you think the vineyard owner will do?" The answer, of course, he'll come wipe the tenants out and give the vineyard to someone else. The people respond with something like "God forbid!" And then Jesus asks them "what then is the meaning of these verses of Scripture, "'The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes'? and the Jesus says, 43 "Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit. 44 Anyone who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; anyone on whom it falls will be crushed."

- And it is there that the words of Psalm 118 take on new meaning, there that a fuller understanding is given, as we see Jesus as the stone rejected by the builders but which becomes the chief cornerstone of the temple, a cornerstone upon which every worldy edifice is broken to pieces, a stone that crushes the structures of injustice and unrighteousness.
- But it is in these gospels also that Jesus is revealed not only as cornerstone, but as the King about whom the crowds shout with the words of Psalm 118 "blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord,"
- It is there we read of a procession with branches like the one in Psalm 118, that makes its way into Jerusalem and into the temple

- But Jesus is not only part of the procession, he is not only King and cornerstone, but he is also the sacrifice that in a few days will be bound and led up to the horns of the cross. But just as the Psalmist asks, “what can mortals do to me?” the power of death will not have the last word and so we like the Psalmist can also declare, I shall not die, but I shall live and recount the deeds of the Lord.”
- In Psalm 118 we read of a procession, a king, a cornerstone and a sacrifice, and these remind us that God’s steadfast love endures forever. And it is that steadfast love, that hesed, that we see in action in the sacrifice and resurrection of Jesus.
- And when we remember, when we are reminded of, that steadfast love we are able to say, “this is the day that the Lord has made, I will rejoice and be glad in it—what can mortals do to me?
- Oh give thanks to the Lord for He is good, his steadfast love endures forever.
- We heard Pastor Tasha and her Mom last week as they shared with us Frederick Lehman’s beautiful hymn about God’s steadfast love—it shall forevermore endure—but I think it would be good to be reminded again—and so Brannon and Gloria Hancock are going to sing it for us this morning
- May God bless you this week—be reminded of the love of God, let others know about it, and remember the cornerstone.