



THE CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH OF NEW CANAAN

SERMON – September 7, 2008

This is the Day

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Psalm 118

A Song of Victory

- ¹ O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good;
his steadfast love endures forever!
- ² Let Israel say,
“His steadfast love endures forever.”
- ³ Let the house of Aaron say,
“His steadfast love endures forever.”
- ⁴ Let those who fear the LORD say,
“His steadfast love endures forever.”
- 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?
- ⁷ The LORD is on my side to help me;
I shall look in triumph on those who hate me.
- ⁸ It is better to take refuge in the LORD
than to put confidence in mortals.
- ⁹ It is better to take refuge in the LORD
than to put confidence in princes.
- ¹⁰ All nations surrounded me;
in the name of the LORD I cut them off!
- ¹¹ They surrounded me, surrounded me on every side;
in the name of the LORD I cut them off!
- ¹² They surrounded me like bees;
they blazed^a like a fire of thorns;
in the name of the LORD I cut them off!
- ¹³ I was pushed hard,^b so that I was falling,
but the LORD helped me.
- ¹⁴ The LORD is my strength and my might;
he has become my salvation.
- ¹⁵ There are glad songs of victory in the tents of the righteous:
“The right hand of the LORD does valiantly;
¹⁶ the right hand of the LORD is exalted;
the right hand of the LORD does valiantly.”
- ¹⁷ I shall not die, but I shall live,
and recount the deeds of the LORD.
- ¹⁸ The LORD has punished me severely,
but he did not give me over to death.
- ¹⁹ Open to me the gates of righteousness,

- that I may enter through them
and give thanks to the LORD.
- ²⁰ This is the gate of the LORD;
the righteous shall enter through it.
- ²¹ I thank you that you have answered me
and have become my salvation.
- ²² The stone that the builders rejected
has become the chief cornerstone.
- ²³ This is the LORD’s doing;
it is marvelous in our eyes.
- ²⁴ This is the day that the LORD has made;
let us rejoice and be glad in it.^c
- ²⁵ Save us, we beseech you, O LORD!
O LORD, we beseech you, give us success!
- ²⁶ Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the LORD.^d
We bless you from the house of the LORD.
- ²⁷ The LORD is God,
and he has given us light.
Bind the festal procession with branches,
up to the horns of the altar.^e
- ²⁸ You are my God, and I will give thanks to you;
you are my God, I will extol you.
- ²⁹ O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good,
for his steadfast love endures forever.

Scientists placed four monkeys in a room together. Right in the center of the room, the scientists placed a pole, and right on top of the pole they placed a bunch of bananas. You can guess what happened. The monkeys spotted those bananas, scrambled up the pole, and ate their fill.

But then the scientists changed the environment. They put a pail of water right at the top of the pole so that any monkey that tried to get the bananas . . . got drenched with cold water. You can guess what happened. After a couple of cold, wet disappointments, the monkeys gave up on getting the bananas. The scientists even sneaked in and removed the water

^a Gk: Heb were extinguished

^b Gk Syr Jerome: Heb You pushed me hard

^c Or in him

^d Or Blessed in the name of the LORD is the one who comes

^e Meaning of Heb uncertain

bucket, but the monkeys had given up hope. They didn't even try anymore.

Then the scientists changed the environment yet again by replacing one of the monkeys with a new monkey that had never gotten drenched. Sure enough, the new monkey spotted those bananas and jumped right on the pole to scramble up for a treat. But, as soon as the new monkey leapt for the pole, the other monkeys raced over and grabbed his tail and ankles to keep him from climbing up. They wanted to protect the new monkey from the shock and disappointment of getting drenched, even though it had been months since there actually had been a bucket at the top of the pole.

Over time, the scientists replaced monkey after monkey, until it had been generations since any monkey had actually climbed the pole and gotten drenched. But guess what. Now, even the newly introduced monkeys ignored the pole. Somehow the whole community had internalized the message that it was just hopeless. You could see the pole; and you could see the bananas at the top of the pole, but there was no point in trying to climb up and actually eat the bananas – you'd just get drenched.

Theologian Kevin Ford describes this experiment in his book Transforming Church as a challenge to local churches. He writes, "We preach and teach about bananas. We cast a vision for eating bananas. We develop pole-climbing training programs. We read lots of books about bananas." It's just not clear how many of us are actually getting around to eating the bananas. Sometimes it seems as if we've decided that talking, singing or praying about bananas is just about all we can really hope for.

So, what about us? What about you and me as we gather for a new year of spiritual experience, Christian formation, and love of neighbor. Do we actually hope for the transformation, for the abundant life, for the joy Jesus promised? Did you enter these doors this morning hoping that this will be a year in which you encounter the joy of the risen Christ? Or did you come in ready to settle for a year of talking pleasantly about the abundant life but never quite getting around to actually living it?

Well, if you came in this morning ready to settle for modest expectations – if you're resigned to the notion that our gatherings are simply occasions to reflect on an abundant life that never quite shows up, then I've got a plan to turn things around.

Here's my plan. Just to be sure we keep our eyes on the prize, just to be sure we stay focused on God's priceless gifts, every single Sunday that I welcome you into our meeting house . . . I'm going to welcome you by quoting David's great invitation from Psalm 118: "This is the day - that the Lord hath made. - Let us rejoice and be glad in it."

What do you think? You know what I think? I think that, by itself, the simple incantation of that Psalm would amount to little more than nattering about bananas. Lidabell welcomed us to worship with those same words every Sunday for seven years; and, out of respect for Lidabell, I've opened every service the same way for 14 years. Yet, taken alone, the words can become just so much liturgical background noise.

But, O my friends, let David's invitation soak into your soul, let God's assurance take root in your heart and flower in your life this year, and it will grow into a way of transformation, a way of joy, a way of abundant life. For embedded in this simple little line is a three point spiritual prescription that will utterly change your life, and the three points should come as no surprise. They are: 1) this is the day; 2) that the Lord hath made; and 3) let us rejoice and be glad in it. Let me explain.

First, "this is the day." "This is the day." Not yesterday; not tomorrow. Through this Psalm, God calls your soul, your awareness, your attention, into this day: this single, unique, never before seen, never to be repeated day of your life.

We can remember transformative experiences from the past, we can dream about abundant life in the future, but the only time in which you can actually encounter God, actually be transformed, actually experience joy, actually live abundantly is the present moment, the present day. "This is the day."

But, of course, our minds are constantly in flight from the present day, from the present moment. Picture a series of big, billowing soap bubbles floating over your head in a steady line. Each bubble is a moment of life,

and there's joy to be had in each moment as you reach your finger up and pop the bubble, experiencing the sprinkle of cool water on your brow.

It's actually pretty easy to focus on each bubble as it floats over your head, but what always happens? Our mind wanders. We begin to worry that the bubble line might run dry. We begin to worry that a breeze might drive the bubbles off course, we begin to worry that someone else might reach over and pop one of our bubbles. We take our eyes off the bubble over our heads to check on the bubbles coming our way, and, as we squint into the future, the present bubble over our head floats on by and out of reach.

We throw our hand back trying to pop it, but we miss; and then we sag with regret. Our eyes follow the missed bubble into the past, as we gnash our teeth over our mistake. And, of course, while we're beating ourselves up with guilt, we miss the next bubble as well. And so it goes. Anxiety over the future, guilt over the past, constantly tug our attention away from the gift of joy in the moment.

French mathematician Blaise Pascal, put it this way over 400 years ago: *"Let each of us examine our own thoughts; he will find them wholly concerned with the past or the future. We almost never think of the present, and if we do think of it, it is only to see what light it throws on our plans for the future. . . . Thus we never actually live, but hope to live, and since we are always planning how to be happy, it is inevitable that we should never be so."* [Pensees, No. 47.]

My friends, this is the day. Whenever we worship, whenever we pray, whenever we sing, whenever we study, whenever we love a neighbor this year, let us yield to God's gentle invitation, calling us to life in the present moment. This is the Day.

Second, "this is the day . . . that the Lord hath made." This day, this unique, unrepeatable gift of life is no mere space on a DayTimer page. You didn't make this day. Congress didn't declare this day. Hallmark didn't design this day. This is the day that the Lord hath made. Genesis recounts how "God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night." [Genesis 1:5.] and how "God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good." [Genesis 1:31.]

What is more, God made this day, this particular very good day, this very good Sunday as a Sabbath. God made this particular day for us. Here is the beautiful gift of a day when God calls us away from our striving, away from our cares, yes, even away from driving our kids through their achievement regimens just to rest and rejoice with our God and our loved ones.

Here is the Lord's Day, the day of Christ's resurrection, when God calls us to new birth, to new life, to fresh starts. No matter what you've made of your life in the past week, and no matter what the past week has made of your life, today God declares a do-over.

We need not wander into the past in regret, for in Christ God has forgiven our sins. We need not wander anxiously into the future, for Christ's victory over death assures our eternal destiny. We are the creatures God hath made, set in the creation God hath made, free to enjoy the day God hath made for us.

Finally, this is the day that the Lord hath made, let us rejoice and be glad in it. Doesn't this last truth follow inevitably from the first two? When God calls us into God's life and love in the present moment, when we reflect that this day, this world, this life are all gifts of the God whose steadfast love endures forever, how can we not be grateful, and how can our gratitude not lead to joy? 14th Century writer Julian of Norwich wrote, "The fullness of joy is to behold God in everything."

I remember Lidabell telling a story of a parishioner who asked her minister, "What is God's Will for my life." The pastor told her to read Thessalonians 5:16-18, "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you." Folks, you can't get much clearer orders than that.

This is the day the Lord hath made. This is the day the Lord hath made for you. This is the day the Lord hath made for you to be grateful and to know joy. Albert Schweitzer put it this way "Those who thank God are truly wealthy. So our inner happiness depends not on what we experience but on the degree of our gratitude to God whatever our experience." [Reverence for Life.] I guess what I'm trying to say here is that people are usually grateful because they are happy, but it turns out that they are usually happy because they have been grateful.

I guess what I'm trying to say this morning is,
welcome back. I hear God's handing out bananas
again this year. Let's go get some. **Amen.**