**Psalm 24** March 28, 2021

Pastor P. Martin **Faith Lutheran Church, Radcliff, KY** Palm Sunday

*The full text is found in the Bible, much quoted in this sermon*

Dear Friends in Christ,

Several years ago—but not so long ago; it was in my adulthood—a president of the nation did something that completely shocked me. He went out to visit someplace in a small town, as presidents are known to do once in a while. I don’t remember his reason for going to that small town, but when he got there, he refused to sit down. He looked at the furniture. To his presidential expectations it was pretty ramshackle, so he simply refused to sit. The hosts said it was the best they had. He would have nothing to do with it. The chair simply was not worthy of a president. Well, a staffer got on the cell phone, called the nearest furniture store, and placed an emergency furniture order. Now, you have to remember: they were out in a very remote, very small town. The nearest furniture store was *many* miles away. It would a minimum of an hour for the furniture to get loaded up and for the delivery truck to bring the furniture to the president. The president said, “That’s okay. I’ll wait.” And he did. He stood there, refusing to start any meeting, refusing any chair, stool, or couch that was put before him. The hosts looked on nervously, embarrassed, shamed. Finally the furniture arrived, the president sat, and the meeting began.

First, I didn’t make this up. Second, don’t worry, you didn’t vote for this president. And third, don’t get excited, you didn’t vote against him either. He wasn’t an American president. He was the president of Zambia, a modest-sized African country where we were living in at that point in time.

At that point, Zambia was an extremely poor country. I was sure that a .president acting like that would enrage the citizens. “Who is this president who looks down his nose at the poor people of his country doing the best they can?” I thought. So I asked my parishioners about their president’s behavior. I was sure that their words would drip bitter resentment. Quite the opposite! Every time I asked, these peasant farmers said, “The president was right! They should have given him a chair worthy of a president!”

Does that shock you? Does that shock you? Of course it shocks you, just like it shocked me! It shocks us because we are Americans, a nation founded with, birthed in, nursed on the rejection of kings and anyone who thinks they wear bigger britches than the rest of us.

Now I believe that serious Christians realize that our American notions of democracy have to be laid aside when we talk about God. He is kind and loving, but he is still God. He has a right to demand what no human being has a right to even ask. I think Christians realize that. Most of the time. At least in principle. But since we all still share a bed with a sinful nature which hates to give God his due, we do well to review Psalm 24.

This 24th psalm, focuses us on this idea, which is also part and parcel of this day of the church year, Palm Sunday. It focuses on

**A Matter of Honor**

**I. Why does God get honor?**

Listen to how Psalm 24 starts the discussion about this matter of honor, **“*The earth is the Lord’s, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it.”***

Did you notice where this discussion about the Lord’s honor started? Instead of talking about us, this psalm starts by talking about the Lord God. This isn’t about you. It isn’t about me. It’s about him.

Here is a fundamental problem about many relationships with God. I have seen and heard it again and again over the years. Rather than focusing on the objective facts of who God is, people are so incredibly self-centered. So many people’s standards—and here I am talking about Christians, not non-Christians, because non-Christians can do nothing else—but so often when I speak with people about what appears to be a weak relationship with the Lord, their issues are not who God is, but “What has God done for me lately?” A family member dies of cancer, and someone says, “I’m not ready to come back yet.” A traumatic event occurs and people say, “I can’t believe God let that happen.” There are rumors or maybe even hard facts about a clergy or a church leader leading immoral life, and people say, “No more church for me.” Never, in all of those objections—and that is just a small sampling, but there is a general thread that runs through most of them—never is there a centeredness on God. It’s always about “ME!”

Psalm 24 starts us where we need to start. ***“The earth is the Lord’s and everything in it.”*** Everything you have ever laid eyes on in your entire life, came from God as a blessing. Some of it has been twisted by us humans, but it is all from God. Without him, nothing exists. This means we can partake in nothing good without acknowledging God. If we do, we are freeloaders, we are ungrateful parasites.

We expect our dogs to mind us, to come when we call them, to stop barking when we tell them, the sleep where we allow them. And all we do is feed our dogs. We didn’t make/create our dogs (or cats). We don’t give them the air they breathe, the breath in there lungs. We have a right to expect them to treat us as the owner. But God did make us. And he made the earth we live on, the food we eat, he gave us the brains we have to make music, and cars and phones and jokes. He made us to do that! Isn’t that cool?

And just when we think we have quite a bit of stuff figured out (but not as much as we like to imagine), we realize that there is a universe out there with stars, and now we are finding, planets, and we are guessing, maybe even planets capable of having life, and the numbers are in the billions and billions, and we will probably never be able to get off the one we are on, or at least not this solar system. So, as we think we understand and know better and better about the created order, we find more and more that we don’t know, and more and more that we will never be able to touch.

Take a stroll through the book of Psalms, and you will find it again and again, songs just awestruck at God’s creation, and saying that that means we have a responsibility to him. Of course he is worthy of honor! Our honor!

**II.** **Who is even worthy enough to bring him honor?**

So let’s honor him, right? Not so fast! ***“Who may ascend the hill of the Lord?*** [That’s to say, “Who can go up to his temple?”] ***Who may stand in his holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to an idol or swear by what is false.”***

Much as we like to imagine to the contrary, honoring God is not a freestyle event. Not just anyone is allowed to burst into God’s presence and do what they think is right. ***“Who may ascend the hill of the Lord? Who may stand in his holy place?”*** What a peculiar question.

It is a peculiar question because it implies something we, especially people with democratic impulses, pretend isn’t an issue: not everyone may step into God’s presence. This question implies that God, at times, is like that Zambian president who stepped into the room and said, “This is unacceptable. This is not fit for a glorious king!”

We know Jesus, the Son of God, as the friend of sinners. We know that when Jesus looked at the offering plate that one time at the temple, the hundred dollar bills were invisible to him, but he looked at the poor widow’s two pennies as gifts shining to the heavens. But this question says it’s a little more complex.

***“Who may ascend the hill of the Lord?”*** The answer to that is in the next couple verses: ***“He who has clean hands and a pure heart.”*** Human beings need to be ready to step into God’s presence. He is a holy God, and filthy sinners offend him. To enter God’s presence requires purity of hands and heart; purity of deed and thought; purity of what has been done in the past and how we are thinking at this moment. What are you thinking at this moment? Is your mind wandering?

It also describes the worthy worshipper as one ***“who does not lift up his soul to an idol or swear by what is false.”*** There is a common misconception out there that if you are nice, kind and helpful, then God is going to overlook a lot of other stuff, like if you aren’t all that serious about worship or his word. Most people think religion is kind of the icing on the cake, and that as long as you more or less get along with people, that’s the important part.

God says that first you must have yourself right with God, for any of that other stuff to be anywhere in the equation. The answer to ***“Who may ascend the hill of the Lord?”*** isn’t “nice people,” “honest people” or “friendly people.” It is holy people, pure as the wind-driven snow people.

And the only way any of us can meet that qualification is through the one who on Palm Sunday rode through the crowd on a donkey, to make his way to the sacrifice of his own blood for sinful humanity. That is why we revisit Palm Sunday. What we see here is the transition from Jesus’ mission of teaching and miracles, to his work of saving; from his work as The Prophet to his work as The High Priest.

If we are left to work ourselves into that position where we say of ourselves, ***“I can ascend the hill of the Lord. I can stand in his holy place. I have clean hands and a pure heart”*** the rest of us would rightly call you a hypocrite. And if we could, just imagine what God who knows the heart could do.

We know that we need a Savior, the Savior, Jesus. But we know him, and so we are ready to honor him. How?

**III. How are we to greet him?**

Psalm 24 uses a poetic picture, a personification, that is kind of tough to get: ***“Lift up your heads, O you gates; be lifted up, you ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in.”***

I have never served in the military, so I have to be careful, and I am sure some of you could flesh out this illustration more fully, but I have sort of imagined this phrase ***“Lift up your heads, O you gates; be lifted up, you ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in”*** as similar to soldiers who are called into formation to receive a general officer. When he steps in the room, it is silent, no one is slouching, all are attentive straining to hear every syllable. It about more than following the rules, it is a matter of honor. If there were to be talking in the ranks at that moment, it isn’t just breaking the rules, it is about dishonoring a superior. There is obedience, and then there is honor.

To make an application, that’s why our bulletins guide us to quiet down before the service, especially once the candles have been lit. We are in God’s presence. We are getting ready to worship him. He isn’t some E-3 who slips in the room unnoticed, to whom we owe nothing. He is our Creator and he is our Savior. In his space, we owe him honor.

But all is not silence. We also honor him by participating in worship, of following along, of paying attention to what is going on. Here in his word he speaks to us and we listen, even if it is through the faltering words of a preacher. Here we sing songs to the best of our abilities to praise him. Here we also honor him with our offerings, that the praises of our Savior are heard around the world, so that even more might join the parade. Here we receive him because he is the King of Glory.

But now briefly, let us go from psalm 24 to that first Palm Sunday crowd. Could there have been even more excitement on that day? I think there could have been

For those who understand how they stand with God, their praise of God does then become something of a freestyle event. They honored Jesus however they could. They took their jackets and laid them before Jesus in honor of him. The sang songs, they quoted Bible hymns, the cut down palm fronds. They did whatever they could to praise him.

But think of this, these people didn’t really even know the greatest thing that Jesus would do for them. They rightly acclaimed him as prophet, as miracle worker, even as the Messiah, but they did not yet know him as Savior, and that is the greatest work of all! We know it. Let our praise, our honor, even step it up a notch from where they were on Palm Sunday.

It’s a matter of honor, honor for the King of glory, for the Lord Almighty. Amen.