

**Message Delivered at Christ Church  
Saturday & Sunday, February 20<sup>th</sup>, 2011**

**TEXT: Psalm 118**

**Delivered by Paul A. Johnson**

\*\*\*\*\*

“Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his steadfast love endures forever.”

We prayed those words from the psalms earlier this morning. It’s how Psalm 118 begins. Now the psalms were all written for different purposes...and this one was probably a prayer sung at the Temple in Jerusalem, most likely on the occasion of the Passover. And at Passover is when Israel remembers all that God has done for them; when Israel stopped and remembered that it was the Lord who had given them life, and that it was the Lord who was the one who all the time had been walking by their side; that in their journey—every place they’d ever been taken--they’d never traveled alone.

I imagine when they sang this song they turned the amps up to eleven; sang it loud so everybody could hear. Think of Easter Day and Christmas combined, with all the pageantry...and that’s a bit of the context for how they sang this prayer. They celebrated happy, remembering what God has done, and the promises of what God will do; and they gave their gifts and gave their thanks.

Israel was very good at remembering. They were powerful rememberers. You see, there is a kind of remembrance that looks only backwards. Sometimes that kind of memory is a comfortable reminiscence; sometimes it’s a self-limiting nostalgia. But there’s also a kind of remembrance that is tinged with hope and expectation; that understands what’s happened in the past is a preview of even greater things to come; remembering, if you will, the past into the present and future. That’s the kind of remembering Israel did. There’s a fancy church word for this kind of remembrance. It’s called “anamnesis.” “Amnesis;” amnesia; forgetting. “Anamnesis” is the opposite...remembering, but remembering with a purpose; recollecting the past God has given to claim the future God has in store; remembering how God has shown up in the olden days so that we can see the presence of the Lord today.

So in Psalm 118, the people of God sang the past into the present, and sang their thanks not just for what God did, but for what God is doing.

And today, we’re singing our thanks. We’re having a February thanksgiving day celebration; and our weekly thanksgiving meal. Because we’ve been given some really good things to celebrate and give thanks for.

For us...meander across the parking lot and go over to the new building after worship this morning, y’all; because the space is completed, and it’s open, and it’s a fun space. We still got to pay for it, so let’s complete our pledges. But the hammer and nail part is finished.

And tonight, we’re going to celebrate more...with a grand opening. Y’all come. We expect the Bishop to be there; a few other special guests...we’re going to worship, and party. We’ll turn the amps up to eleven.

You see, there are landmarks in the life of a people when it’s a good idea to thank the Lord special; and this is one of them.

It’s been an exceptional journey God has taken us on; filled with all sorts of twists and turns. Sometimes it felt as if we were cruising down the highway; sometimes we had to change

directions. Sometimes we agreed easily; and sometimes, we didn't all agree. Those things happen whenever a people decides to do something.

It's been a rich journey, giving us good stories to tell about where God has taken us, and good things to remember into the future...

Like how a while back we looked around and realized that this is a beautiful space; one that God has made holy through worship, and baptisms, and marriages, and funerals, and suppers, and tears, and laughter...and that it was both responsible stewardship and more in keeping with our character to expand this space rather than build a new sanctuary.

Like how we went public with our *Growing for the Generations* capital campaign in September 2008 the weekend after the markets went crazy, and the economy began to head south; and that instead of shrinking back we were given the courage and trust to go ahead. When the day comes that the world presents us with situations more challenging than these, may we remember into that future the courage and trust God gave us in that moment to respond rightly.

Like how because of the economy...and maybe because God gave us some wisdom...we changed plans in the middle of this whole thing, and worked it out. It took both courage and humility to step back, re-assess, see how things had changed, and make changes ourselves.

Like how we gave generously...of the material wealth God has given you; but also shared your spiritual gifts...how we responded with our heads, and hearts, and hands, and pocketbooks.

We prayed together; worshiped together; and continued to serve in other parts of our life. Scores of persons...too many to list...shared their gifts in all sorts of ways to plan and complete this project. And we shared the wealth God has given us, and we have done so generously...to support this work, but also to support our daily life. Your generosity has been immense.

Thank you. On behalf of this people, and those who will be here, and those who will never be here but will be blessed by this ministry...thank you.

May we remember into the future the grace God gave us to each give in our own ways. The qualities represented by these banners...we have shared all of them—and more--in this process; and the evidence will be here well beyond us. The next generation, and the generation after that, and the generation after that--who become the people of Christ Church will thank their forebears for the work they did.

But let me tell you something more powerful...and this was given to me this week as I did some ruminating and praying...

It's easy when churches do construction work to think only about the construction work; to lose perspective, and treat the building of a building as if it's the only thing.

But our ministry and service has grown while we've been doing this work. While we were working on that and this; the other ministries God has given us became richer and fuller. There's not time this morning to lay out the evidence, but it's there...in care and fellowship among us; and in ministry in Short Pump, Richmond, and the world...at least as far as Sudan, Haiti, and Peru. It seems the Lord blessed us with the grace to keep on keeping on; to reach out, and open up, and keep our head up; and had something to teach us about how the truly satisfied life is not one where we do whatever we want, or get whatever we want, or seek the fulfillment of our own selves; but that the life of true satisfaction and faithfulness is one lived according to God's purposes, and is marked by open hands towards one another and God...open to receive, but also to pass on; open to welcome, but also to give thanks.

You see, there is an even deeper truth to the story God has given us, and that we remember into the future: We are a thanksgiving people. That's what we do every week. That's

who we are. It is part of our DNA. This land we're on is a gift. The money from the county we've received is a gift. And on an earthly level, our very life came through the vision and generosity of the Diocese of Virginia. Before we gave and served, others gave and served. So we know that it is by the grace of God that we are—individually and as a people—and that our lives are a response to that grace.

We're kind of like every human being that's ever been; really, like every living thing that's ever been. We began life as complete receivers. That's the foundation of our story...receiving the Kingdom from our God who loves to give it, and blessings from our brothers and sisters along the way. Given life, and salvation, and love, and hope, and mercy, and the Kingdom of God, and everything worth having...given all these things by a good God to turn and give it away, and pass it on, and be grace-givers ourselves to help Jesus save the world.

So we give thanks...to God, and to one another.

The psalmist says "This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it." Because God has made it, and given it to us, and it's a good day...a good day to celebrate, and practice giving thanks. Make our list of things we're grateful for—count some blessings--and honor our dependence on a merciful God, who is trustworthy.

So sometimes we speak for a long time up here. Not today. It's better to give thanks than it is to talk about it. So I want to invite you into a practice this morning...

Y'all have a thank you note. I'm going to stop talking. And when I stop talking, Keith is going to play a little bit. And we're going to be quiet, and take some time. And while the band is playing, we invite you to use that notecard to give thanks...just write a little something on it. Maybe you want to make a list of things you're grateful for; maybe you want to write a thank you note to God; maybe you want to write a commitment, about how you are called to respond to the grace God has shown you. It's up to you, and we're not going to rush it.

And then, we're going to stand and sing a song. And up here is the baptismal font, representing how each of us got started in this journey; remembering the past into the future.

And while we're singing, we invite you to come up, and put your thank you note in the font. This is a little bit different for us; we've never done something like this before. No one's going to read what we write. At the end of worship this morning, we'll burn them. And nobody has to come up...and maybe no one will...but some of us may want to...some of us may even need to.

Because God blesses, and gives freely...love, and grace, and mercy, and hope, and joy, and responsibility, and the Kingdom we hope for. The Lord saves lives. It's a good day the Lord has made, to give thanks for enduring love.

This is where the preacher usually wraps it up kind of neatly. Instead, let's wrap it up together...by giving a good God our thanks, and remembering the past into the future; and that where God has taken this people to this point is still only the beginning.