

**A Song of Defiance (Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29)**  
**By Rev. Melissa Hatfield**  
**A Sermon Preached for First Baptist Church, Jefferson City, MO**  
**Palm Sunday, April 10, 2022 – Year C**  
**WATCH/LISTEN: [www.fbcjc.org/sermon/a-song-of-defiance](http://www.fbcjc.org/sermon/a-song-of-defiance)**

There is a thing in sports called “a walk-up song.” It is a song chosen by an athlete to be played when he or she walks onto the field or the court. A great walk-up song serves many purposes. It is meant to energize the crowd as a player makes his or her grand entrance while simultaneously getting the athlete psyched up and intimidating the opposing team. It is a tall order for a song.

Though the walk-up song can be traced back to 1972 with Yankees reliever Sparky Lyle taking the mound to “Pomp and Circumstance,” it didn’t really take off until the ’90s when players began requesting their own music. While genres like rap and rock still tend to dominate, in recent years, players have had some fun with their picks, opting for a laugh instead of a flex.

I thought about playing a walk-up song today when I walked up here to preach ... now that I’m ordained and all. Perhaps Journey’s “Don’t Stop Believing” or Bon Jovi’s “Living on a Prayer.” I wonder what your walk-up song might be if you were granted one each time you walked into your office, home, or school hallways. (I just lost about half of you who are now pondering that question. Make a note to come back to that over lunch.)

The Church has certain walk-up type songs for special seasons. Easter often has us singing, “Because He Lives” or “Up from the Grave He Arose.” Funerals very often include a version of Amazing Grace sung by a church choir or second cousin, or maybe recordings by Carrie Underwood or the King of Rock-n-Roll himself, Elvis Presley. And can Christmas Eve even happen at FBC JC if we don’t sing the Hallelujah Chorus?

These songs serve to energize the crowd, to remind worshippers of the significant moment in front of them.

Perhaps our chosen walk-up songs might even be considered songs of defiance. A song to defy the negative thoughts in our mind or spirits. A song to challenge what others say or think about us. Or a song to remind us of whose we are, what we hope and what is ahead of us, defying our current circumstances or past trials.

What song do you sing when things seem dark or uncertain? When all around us threatens hope, what will be our song of defiance? When life leads us toward death – of something or someone – what song shall we sing to remind us death does not have the last word?

Psalm 118 is one of six known as the Egyptian Hallel (Hal-lel) praises. "Hallel" refers to the repeated word "hallelujah." These six psalms, Psalm 113-118, recount and celebrate God's saving action in the exodus from Egypt and is still read during the Jewish Passover celebration. Psalm 118 is a song of celebration for a community who has survived a dangerous crisis, and God, the faithful deliverer, is honored and praised. In the portion we read today, the celebrant stands at the gates of the temple courts accompanied by an assembly of worshippers. There, he gives testimony of his escape or deliverance. After a ritual of admission into the temple, he enters with the worshippers and gives thanks to the Lord in a liturgy of praise with speaking parts for leaders and the congregation. The physical movement begins outside the Temple, progressing inside and all the way to the altar. The people express their faith that since God has saved them in the past, God can be trusted in the future.

Psalm 118 is a type of psalm known as an antiphonal psalm or responsive psalm. There are responses and repetition, all intended to create a song the people of faith could memorize and participate in together as a community celebration of God's steadfast love. For thousands of years, those who have come before us have sung this song of defiance, a song declaring that with the Lord on our side to help us, what can mortals do to us? A song that says although we are pressed on all sides by trouble and enemies, the Lord is our strength and our salvation. A song that proclaims the One the world rejects God made the very Cornerstone of God's grand salvation plan and because of this we can rejoice. When we sing Psalm 118, we shout with our faith ancestors, "God's steadfast love endures forever!"

All four Gospels and several letters in our New or Second Testament in the Bible quote portions of this psalm. Verse 26 from Psalm 118, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the LORD," became the liturgy in all four gospels for a noisy crowd in Jerusalem, laying down cloaks and waving palm branches, welcoming Jesus, the King of Kings. We repeat this verse from Psalm 118 each year on this day, Palm Sunday, the Sunday before Easter, as we reenact and remember Jesus's triumphant entry into Jerusalem.

And Matthew 26:30 tells us that after sharing the Lord's Supper together, the night before his crucifixion and death, Jesus and the disciples sang the hymn and departed to the Garden of Gethsemane. Most likely, as they celebrated the Passover meal together, even with new covenants and promises in and through Jesus Christ, they sang together the traditional Passover hymns which were the Hallel – the six psalms ending with Psalm 118. The Israelites had sung these promises from God, year after year, for centuries. Now the disciples were singing these very psalms together with the Lord Himself, one last time, before the great act of love which would bring so many of these promises into reality.

Pastor Matt Dabb invites us<sup>i</sup> to imagine a few things as perhaps Jesus continued to sing the promises of Psalm 118 over the next hours on the journey to Calvary:

- Imagine Jesus, in his heart and mind, holding the events about to unfold as he defiantly sings this victory song.
- Imagine him singing, “O give thanks to the Lord for He is good...his steadfast love endures forever” as Judas walks to the high priest.
- Imagine Jesus singing, “Out of my distress I called on God” as he walks to the garden where he will cry out to God for a cup that will not pass from him.
- Imagine him singing, “With the Lord on my side I do not fear – what can mortals do to me?” seeing the soldiers arrest him, bind him, beat him...
- Imagine Jesus singing, “God is on my side to help me – I shall look in triumph on those who hate me” as Jesus pictures his trial.
- Imagine him singing “It is better to take refuge in God than to put confidence in mortals” knowing his disciples will abandon him.
- Imagine Jesus singing these words from v 12, “All nations surround me...surround me on every side...like bees they blazed like a fire of thorns” envisioning the soldiers all around him, mistreating and abusing him...putting a crown of thorns on his head and leading him to Golgotha.

Will we sing the songs of victory with Jesus when walking difficult roads? When life leads us toward death – of some thing or idea or dream or someone – what song shall we sing to remind us death does not have the last word? Will we sing the songs of defiance over despair because we remember God’s steadfast love for us? Will these songs of praise be our songs – both individually and as a faith community – as we trust God with our today and tomorrows because we remember God’s faithfulness in our past?

On September 2, 1957, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., visited Highlander Folk School in Tennessee. Part of the school’s mission was to help prepare civil rights workers to challenge unjust laws and racist policies that discriminated against African Americans. The school also made a point of bringing Black and white people together to share experiences and to learn from each other. It was a dangerous idea. At a time when southern laws kept Black and white people segregated (or separate), some white racists terrorized African Americans with deadly violence.

Dr. King delivered the main speech that day, honoring the school’s 25th anniversary. As part of the meeting, **folk singer Pete Seeger** got up with his banjo. He plucked out a song he had learned at Highlander, adapted it some, and led the audience in singing it.

Later that day, Dr. King found himself humming the tune in the car. “There’s something about that song that haunts you,” he said to his companions.

**That song was “We Shall Overcome.** Formed from various tunes and lyrics over many years, the song soon became the anthem of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s. It offered courage, comfort, and hope as protesters confronted prejudice and hate in the battle for equal rights for African Americans.

The song spread rapidly as the Civil Rights Movement gained momentum. Protesters sang it as they marched arm in arm for voting rights. They sang it as they were beat up, attacked by police dogs, and hauled off to jail for breaking laws enforcing segregation. News and pictures of brutality shocked people across the U.S. and around the world. “We Shall Overcome” and other protest songs provided the soundtrack to the Civil Rights Movement.

Over the years, “We Shall Overcome” made the leap overseas, becoming a protest song among freedom movements around the world. It has been sung by protesters in China, Northern Ireland, South Korea, Lebanon, and parts of Eastern Europe. In India, it is known as “Hum Honge Kaamyab,” “Hum whon-key kam-yab” a song most every school kid knows by heart.<sup>ii</sup>

*We shall overcome, we shall overcome,  
We shall overcome someday;  
Oh, deep in my heart, I do believe,  
We shall overcome someday.  
The Lord will see us through someday;  
We're on to victory someday;  
We'll walk hand in hand someday;  
We are not afraid today;  
The truth shall make us free someday;  
We shall live in peace someday;  
Oh, deep in my heart, I do believe,  
We shall live in peace someday.*

The power of a song... a song of defiance, a song of victory, a song of spring. Will we sing the songs of victory with Jesus while walking difficult roads? When life leads us toward death – of some thing or idea, death of a dream or someone we love – what song shall we sing to ourselves and to one another to remind us death does not have the last word? Will we sing the songs of defiance over despair because we remember and proclaim God’s steadfast love for us? Will these songs of praise be our songs, First Baptist, as we trust God with our today and tomorrows, recalling God’s faithfulness in our past and believing in it for our future?

Psalm 118 is a responsive psalm, a song for us to sing together. It begins and ends with the same truth, “God’s steadfast love endures forever!” This is your response, and as I remind us of things that sometimes threaten our hope, you respond aloud and in unison, like you believe it, with our song of defiance, **“God’s steadfast love endures forever!”**

Though we have known suffering and pain, though life has not always turned out as we had hoped, we will stand here and say: **God’s steadfast love endures forever!**

Though life isn't always easy, the mystery of faith deepens, and we don't always understand what God is doing, we will say: **God's steadfast love endures forever!**

Though many things feel broken: relationships, homes, dreams, and bodies, we will stand here and say: **God's steadfast love endures forever!**

And though the pain of the world often seems more than we can bear or address, and it feels like things are falling apart and we're not enough, we will stand firm in our faith and say: **God's steadfast love endures forever!**<sup>iii</sup>

As we welcome King Jesus on this Palm Sunday with exclamations of "Hosanna! Blessed be the one who comes in the name of the Lord!", let us proclaim together, "**God's steadfast love endures forever!**" And as we gather this Maundy Thursday in the Upper Room with Jesus and the disciples, may we sing along with them, "**God's steadfast love endures forever!**" And when we gather at the foot of the cross where Christ, in love and anguish, declares, "It is finished," may we declare, "**God's steadfast love endures forever!**" And when the sun rises come Easter morning and the tomb is empty and death has been forever defeated, may we shout with joy and absolute confidence, "**God's steadfast love endures forever!**"

**God's steadfast love endures forever.** This, beloved of God, is our walk-up song, our song of defiance, our song of spring.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://mattdabbs.com/2017/04/18/psalm-118-and-the-last-song-jesus-sang-death/>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.kennedy-center.org/education/resources-for-educators/classroom-resources/media-and-interactives/media/music/story-behind-the-song/the-story-behind-the-song/we-shall-overcome/>

<sup>iii</sup> written by Ann Siddall, in Lent to Easter liturgies: Year C. Posted on the website of the Stillpoint Spirituality Centre. <http://stillpoint.unitingchurchsa.org.au/>