

Reflections on a Palm Branch – based on John 12:13,
Mt 26:14-19, 47, 57-63, 27:1-2, 24-26
Aspen Community UMC
March 16, 2008 – Palm Sunday

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Have you ever thought about the journey these palm branches take
to be with us today? They don't grow around here, you know.

We purchased them from an organization
that wants to insure sustainable growing and harvesting
and fair wages for the workers.

This added new meaning for me. I had never thought about it before.
They are not only an expression of the season - they are an act of justice -
because we have cared about the rainforest and the workers.

When the palms arrived, Jere placed them in water - and we admired them.
Their presence in some ways graced our space, and I began to think:

How many Palm Sundays in my life –
Children often carry them - sometimes we wave them
as a way to celebrate that entry into Jerusalem.

It was not all that large a group, I suspect.
But, word of mouth and the longings that so many people had for better times
made for a day of hope.

I can imagine that the day was sunny and the air was soft,
and many were on their way to the city to prepare for the holiday -
the food and festivities.

One part of the holiday would be to go to the temple and offer sacrifice.
It was the way to be free of sin - at least for awhile - free of those things that separate us
from our source - from Yahweh - from God.

But it was also a way the temple brought in income –
selling the small birds, the doves, to be sacrificed.
That was not a bad thing, but it was just part of a bigger oppressive system
that marginalized almost everyone but the rich and powerful.

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The temple priests had quite a business going.
And that business was supported by a political system of domination and corruption
that really served to keep people in their places.

By far, most people were peasants by now.
Property - even businesses had been gobbled up over the years -
and people could do little to improve their circumstances.
If it was not tax for the crown in Rome, it was a tax to the temple.

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And then there was the thin line in people's minds
between the monarchy that was remembered - the beloved King David -
and one's image and conception of the very essence of God.
God and whoever was king were thought to be one and the same in the eyes of many.
That's why someone like Jesus, indeed Jesus himself, was sometimes called
son of David, son of God. Kings were considered sons of God.

When Jesus comes along with a message of hope for all those people
- a message about the kingdom of God -
people thought something great might be about to happen.
And they wanted to believe it.

But, it was a misunderstanding.
As much as Jesus was willing to confront persons and systems,
he was really about the heart – and not about the nation.
And crowds can be fickle.
And the adoration of today waned into mockery by the end of the week.

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But today they wave the palm branches.

These stories of Jesus have been with us Christians all our lives.
Sometimes we struggle with them, thinking about whether they are true -
or in what way they are true - or how they happened.

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Ancient storytellers have been known to begin a story with words like

“I don’t know if it happened or not, but I know it is true.”

“I don’t know if it happened or not, but I know it is true.”

We talked about this in our “Living the Questions” study group
on Tuesday night at Ward and Mimi’s house.

My point is this - the biblical writers knew nothing of our methods of recording history.

What they did know was how to write in such a way as
to express deeper truths and values – to get to the very heart of what happened.

What we have in our stories today is remembered history and remembered meaning.

The stories of this week - the week to come -
this week that begins with palm branches
is one that stands carved in our memories for all time.

The man of hope – who could do so many things -
bring the dead to life as he did just days ago with Lazarus -
or heal the sick, or tell us all about ourselves –
remembering the woman at the well – this man of hope.

Now we will betray him.

We will all betray him. Judas will do it for money.

But Peter will do it because of fear.

We all have our reasons.

And the disciples seem to scatter when the going gets tough.

Why?

Well, he threatened “the way it is.” He threatened the establishment.

He threatened the power structure that so many people,
religious people in particular had a stake in.

We don’t want to be those people, but it is hard not to be.

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We really don't want to take the risk of living into that divine call.
That might call for some big shifts in how we think and what we do.
That could have grave consequences.
But, it starts with the heart.

How many of us would be impacted if social structures and political structures
and religious structures shifted bottom up or top down?
If they changed quickly and radically it would seem like anarchy, and might well be.
And back then, the temple and all its bureaucracy -
was not about to take the risk of upsetting itself.
So there was collusion between the temple and the governor.
And Jesus was – crucified – a public death
that warns others it can happen to them. He was killed before he could upset things.
Make no mistake he was a threat to the ways things were.
But it was mostly about the heart.

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Think what it might have been like if the temple authorities
had been willing to bend their ways - cleanse themselves of some of their greed
their vested interests - and bend into – explore - some new ways of being faithful.
And think what it would have been like if his friends had not betrayed him.

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Now, we know that this is not the end of the story -
and next week will be the resurrection.
But the death of Jesus is the end of the story today.

In many churches on Thursday, we strip the sanctuary
of all color – and objects and ornaments
but for the cross - which is covered with black cloth – symbolizing his death -
and we leave in silence.

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It is a death we Christians must re-experience each year.

We let part of ourselves die
in order to get to the other side.
Death happens before new life happens.
It is part of our nature. It's part of our story.

But it also gives us pause
to consider how and when we are afraid to speak up
for what is right when it can jeopardize the way things are
especially if we in some way - any way - benefit.

It gives us pause to remember how grateful we are to those people
who will question injustice, inhumanity, slavery, domination,
and systems that demean and limit people.

Most of us don't have what it takes.
Our sense of spirit and understanding of the mystery
is too small to fathom the depths and the heights of all that is.

But, he did have it, and that is why we call him God -
or at the least a window into God -
why we call him the Christ.

For that encompasses much more than the man he was when he walked that land.

This week - take some time - perhaps every day of this holy week - and think of it.

Sit in quiet, or stop by and enter this sanctuary to pray.

For it is no ordinary week – no ordinary time.

It is time that seems to stand still between the waving of palm branches
and the hammer and nails through human flesh.

For he lived for us – so we can live better.

Was his sacrifice for you? Was his sacrifice for the human race? Many think so.

I think that to live a human life is to face crucifixion at least once -

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to experience what may seem like hell –
before the heart opens up in ways it did not do before.

So, take the palm leaf with you.

Think about its origins and the person who picked it for you,
and think about the hope it represented to people on that day.

And then think about how you can carry on the tradition,
the things he wanted
and the things he calls you to every day.

“When I was hungry you gave me food, when I was thirsty you gave me water,
When I was naked you clothed me, when I was in prison you visited me.....”

It is about living by the spirit
and loving as you saw him love in those days he walked on earth.

Think about how the palm branch was harvested
in a sustainable way for the forest and the people.

Think about how it was harvested in a way that it even grew a little more
and stayed more alive for us.

Think about how you keep growing.

Think about the possibilities for your life,
how He may be inviting you into something new this Easter season.