

March 25, 2018 • Palm Sunday • Baptism • Reception of New Members

“Love God/Love Creation: Opening the Way to Paradise”

Sermon by the Rev. Patricia Farris



Mark 11:1-11

When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples and said to them, “Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it. If anyone says to you, ‘Why are you doing this?’ just say this, ‘The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.’” They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, some of the bystanders said to them, “What are you doing, untying the colt?” They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it. Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting,

“Hosanna!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!

Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!

Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.

On this wonderful morning, we are given strips of palm, small branches that are still green and fragrant. We wave them, happy to join the children in our excitement and joy. King Jesus comes and all the people rejoice. With Christians all around the world, we wave our branches and shout “Hosanna” to the king. Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest.

On that first Palm Sunday they were all there—a large crowd, a mixed lot of all those who had heard Jesus teaching or been healed by his touch—the desperate poor, the unfulfilled rich, the healed, the unconvinced, the curious, men and women, children and youth, the broken and hurting ones, all those who had been included in by his compassionate love along the way. Everyone finding their place on that glorious, triumphal day that heralded a new beginning, embracing God’s promise of a world made new through love.

On this Palm Sunday we ourselves become part of that Triumphal Procession with Jesus. We wave, some timidly, some exuberantly along with the children, and many of us take our palms home and put them somewhere where we will see them each day to remind us of who we are and what kind of king we follow.

So it’s a good day to bring new folks on board this ship called “church,” mixed bag that we are, saints and sinners, stalwarts and doubters, truly committed and moderately curious. We are not all alike—thank goodness!—yet, still, we are one.

For some time, we’ve been talking about church membership in terms of belonging: belonging to one another, belonging to God in Christ, belonging to this way of living and being in the world and for the world and for the whole of creation. We choose to belong together because we need one another to walk this path, to help us keep our eyes and hearts open. We choose to belong to one another because we need one another’s support and encouragement and prayer and love. We belong to God together because we know our need of God’s word in Christ Jesus. We’re all part of the march today. We’re all in this together.

So what is this path we’re on? Who is this savior we follow together? What is it that we have become part and parcel of?

When we pick up the story on this Palm Sunday morning, young Jesus and his disciples had traveled from Jericho, along that road made famous by the story of the Good Samaritan. It was a dangerous road, dry and dusty, but they had safely made their way to Bethphage at the Mount of Olives. Atop the mount, amidst fragrant wildflowers if there had been rain that year, they looked over the city of Jerusalem from the west.

Looking down, they would have seen the green tops of olive trees at the lower levels of the mount and the Garden of Gethsemane. And they would have seen down into the Kidron Valley, and there, the graves of the great prophets Hagai, Zechariah and Malachi. This site was considered to be so sacred, that our Jewish brothers and sisters still believe this to be the place from which the new messianic era and the resurrection of the dead will begin, here, from the base of the Mount of Olives.

Jesus’ entrance into Jerusalem from that very spot was no accident. He was signaling something incredibly powerful to the people. He was claiming his identity as Prophet, as Messiah, as King. And so, on that first Palm Sunday, according to Mark: “Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting, ‘Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of God! Blessed is the coming Kingdom of our ancestor David!’”

And they poured out into the streets that day to greet his arrival—waving...what? Palms. But Mark’s Gospel says “leafy branches.” Hmm...Well, it’s interesting. The Gospel of Matthew leave out the word “leafy” and says that the people

were waving branches. Luke's Gospel doesn't mention branches of any kind. John's Gospel makes it clear that they were waving palms.

Leafy branches or palms? Both, probably. God's good creation carpeting the way and waved aloft in joyful greeting.

Biblical scholars generally concur that the tradition of palm branches on Palm Sunday harkens back to the Jewish festival of Sukkoth, when worshippers processed through Jerusalem waving something called a lulab, a bunch of leafy branches made of willow, myrtle, and palm. Calling to mind the words of Leviticus— "On the first day you are to take branches from luxuriant trees--from palms, willows and other leafy trees--and rejoice before the LORD your God for seven days." The first day...seven days...do you hear echoes of the Creation story in Genesis?

Throughout the Near East and the Mediterranean world, in Greece, Rome, ancient Egypt, palms and other leafy branches were readily understood as symbols of praise of God, goodness, the abundance of life, fruitfulness, joy, well-being, triumph, and eternal life. As we read in 1 Kings, the second temple contained numerous carvings of cherubim, palms, and open-faced flowers. And in Islam, the palm was a symbol of peace, and often associated with Paradise.

Palms also symbolized love's victory at the end of time, the restoration of the wholeness of all creation as we read in the Book of Revelation: "...I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands."

All this symbolism is found in the Christian story of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. This is the Messiah, the savior, the new king, the Prince of Peace, the palms say. Here is the One sent by God to save us, to heal all creation, to restore the original wholeness and beauty intended by God in the beginning. Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord who is good, and whose steadfast love endures forever. And his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace.

So, here we all are, Palm Sunday 2018. What if we make every day a Palm Sunday in our hearts? Every day a day when we sing Hosanna to the One who lives among us in beauty and in power. Every day a day of committing ourselves to continue growing in love of God and love of Creation. Every day witnessing to a future with hope, a world made new, to the victory of life over death.

What if we live it every day? Show it. Share it. Every day. Together. Faithful disciples of the Lord of Life. Hosanna in the highest! Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord.

Amen.