

St. Paul's, Concord
Palm Sunday
Mark 11:1-11
The Rev. Drew Courtright, Curate

I'm not native to New Hampshire even though I've been here three years, I think I finally understand the the whole "snow bird" phenomenon. Last week I went on vacation to Florida with my family for a trip that was half winter escape, half second babymoon. It was great to unplug and be off duty for a bit but I couldn't help but think a lot about Palm Sunday for two reasons. First, there were palm trees everywhere. Second, I got a blister on my palm from going to the driving range too much! But seriously the palm trees were beautiful and they were everywhere. Tall ones, short ones, different types of leaves. We even saw landscapers pruning some with long saws which our two-year-old Margaret found fascinating.

They were so prevalent in Florida and they were just as prevalent 2000 years ago on the outskirts of Jerusalem. To this day, the path of Jesus' donkey ride, from Bethany and Bethpage, to the Mount of Olives, and over to the Old City is covered in palm trees.

Now we call this Palm Sunday, but you may have noticed that Mark makes no mention of palms explicitly. Of the four gospels, only John actually specifies that the crowd picked up palm branches. Matthew and Mark say "leafy branches" and Luke just says they spread their cloaks on the ground. I bring this up because, even though most churches use palm branches in their celebrations, there's nothing inherently special about palm branches. They don't have a built-in quality that makes them the best plant to praise God with. Instead, they were just what was on hand when Jesus rode into town. Same with the cloaks. They weren't special as much as they were what the people had with them when this unexpected entrance occurred.

Which makes me wonder... if Jesus were to ride into Concord on a donkey, what would a crowd of Granite Staters use to welcome and praise him? We'd certainly take off our cloaks... and hats, and mittens, and scarves. And maybe instead of palm fronds, like this one which I picked up in Florida... we might use ... eastern white pine. Now, I'm not sure what the New England equivalent to "Hosanna" might be but I'm willing to bet some smart-aleck in the crowd would say to Jesus "You can't get theyah from heyah!" ...

While this scene might never happen, I think there is more to learn from the actions of the crowd. What does this group of "many people" do? They spread their cloaks, cut and spread leafy branches, walk alongside Jesus, and shout Hosanna to him. I'd like to take a look at these in pairs.

First the cloaks and the branches. What I find fascinating about this is that they took off their cloaks and took up those branches and they laid them both down at the feet of Jesus. It

reminds me of our Lenten disciplines--those things which we either take off or take up in order to welcome Jesus more deeply into our lives during Lent. Maybe you took off eating certain foods, or binge-watching TV, or swearing. Maybe you took on reading a devotion each day, or attending a Lenten series, or being more prayerful throughout your day. And don't worry if you messed up. This faith thing is about progress, not perfection, and grace abounds. As the psalmist says, "Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, his mercy endures forever." Either way, we still have one more week, the most important week of the Church year, to take off or take up something and lay it at the feet of Jesus.

The other thing the crowd did was they shouted "Hosanna" while they walked alongside Jesus. Hosanna simply means "save us." Those who were shouting this must have seen Jesus as someone who could save them. That's true but not in the way they probably expected. Some of those folks might have recalled a prophecy from Zechariah about a long-awaited king of Jerusalem coming humbly on a donkey, and bringing in a time of peace and prosperity. But most others probably saw Jesus as a Messiah figure whose arrival signaled the impending violent overthrow of the occupying Roman forces. Either way, they shout "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!" With joy and excitement they welcome this savior.

But Jesus knows that crowds can be fickle. He knows that on Palm Sunday the crowd shouts "Hosanna" but on Good Friday, they shout "Crucify Him!" Were they the same people in both crowds? Maybe, maybe not. But it's a glimpse at our own human nature--how we can praise someone one day and curse them the next. Or how we can trust in God one day, and deny him the next. That's why it's especially poignant that some of the palms from today will be burned into ash for next year's Ash Wednesday and used to mark our mortality and penitence.

Now it may be true that they go from Hosanna to Crucify in less than a week but it's not the end of the story. That's what Holy Week is all about. We walk this path that Jesus walked, from the triumphal entry of Palm Sunday to the servant leadership of Maundy Thursday; from the sacrificial love of Good Friday, to the solemn sanctity of Holy Saturday; and finally to the overwhelming joy of Easter Sunday. Today, we walk with Jesus just like they did that first Palm Sunday. But we are called to keep walking, this Holy Week and each and every day. Some days we praise God, other days we question. Some days we washing another's feet, other days we're asleep in the garden. Some days we run to the empty tomb, others days we run and hide. But through it all, God who is faithful, whose love is stronger than death, is with us, here in Concord just like on that first Palm Sunday. Let us take off our cloaks, take up our branches, and walk this week with Jesus shouting "Hosanna! Hosanna in the highest!"