

Blessing the Palms

We pray you, O Lord, bless these branches and make them holy. May we also, carrying them forth from this place and crying out "Hosanna in the Highest" and "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord", acclaim Jesus as our Messiah and King and follow Him in the way that leads to eternal life. Amen.

The Palms in Your Hands

A favorite destination for many travelers is where the ocean is. Summers are easy for us as we are a relatively short distance from the shorelines of Connecticut, Rhode Island, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Maine. In the winter, those of us who are lucky to escape may travel by plane, train or car to Florida or California to avoid the cold and snow. If you're flying, one of the first things you see when you step out of the airport are palm trees. Now, they're actually called Majestic Palms and they are planted there on purpose to get you, as a potential tourist, in the mood to enjoy local culture and bolster the local economy.

On their own, palm branches can be used to make all kinds of things such as palm oil, palm wine, brooms, mats, blankets. But how did they come into use on what we now know as Palm Sunday and become a symbol of the start of Holy Week for Christians?

In our Lenten Book Study, which happens to conclude this evening, we learned that Palms were used in the Old Testament Scriptures. Would you believe that in the Gospel we just read that Matthew does not mention “palm branches” but merely “branches?” It is only in John’s Gospel that they mention palm branches specifically. The palm roots in the Scriptures can be found in Leviticus 23:40, Psalm 92:12, and in a few different places in Zechariah.* But they were also plentiful, regal in appearance, and happened to be nearby to wave as Jesus rode through on a borrowed donkey.

We have to set the scene as to why there were so many people in Jerusalem. They were getting ready for Passover and many people came into Jerusalem to celebrate or observe Passover there. Luke’s Gospel tells us that Jesus’ family went every year and his bar mitzvah may have

happened around that time as well. Last year we mentioned in the sermon about how there were two different parades or welcoming ceremonies that took place simultaneously. But, Matthew's Gospel tells us, there were so many people there who did not know who Jesus was. They simply stopped and watched what was going on. They may have heard a chant or the shouts of "Hosanna" and they wanted to shout as well. Let me ask you, do you remember being a child and seeing other children with balloons and you wanted one, too? Other people may have picked up the palms and waved them because they saw others do that.

We have palms in our hands today, too. We prayed a blessing over them. We waved them during the Call to Worship. We, too, want to be a part of that crowd. It is my sincere hope that you will take your palms home with you and put them in a place of honor. That way, when you look at them this week, you will remember the triumphal entry into Jerusalem. You will remember the institution of the mandate—the mandatum—to serve others. I hope that you will join us at Southwick Congregational Church on Thursday at 7:30. If you cannot, I hope that

the palms will trigger you to remember to read John Chapters 18 and 19 as we will on Thursday. Perhaps you can spend some time with them on Good Friday. Or, maybe you will want to attend a service in a neighboring church that afternoon or evening.

From Friday evening through Sunday at midnight, the early Christian church followed the custom of keeping vigil or keeping watch. I urge all of us to set aside some time for prayer as we spiritually join others who will keep the Easter vigil before we celebrate the Resurrection. It is a great time to invite your friends to see our beautiful flowers, magnificent music, powerful readings, and, hopefully, a decent sermon. These are our High Holy Days.

Let us raise up those palms again. May the palms in your hands be a symbol to keep us focussed on the importance of the week ahead.
Amen.

*Levine, Amy-Jill; *Entering the Passion of Jesus*, Abingdon Press, 2018