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Palm Sunday
April 1, 2007

Plymouth Congregational UCC

A Sacrifice of Palms
Luke 19:28-40

Let's make a mess, shall we?

We have these branches that we only get once a year, and I feel we should make the most of it.

Wave your palm branches in the air. Really wave them, and shout, "Hosanna!"

Feel good? It's a party!

Now, please pass them to the center aisle – and if you're at the end, lay them in the aisle.

Don't keep it neat, spread them around.

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I know that this holiday might be new to some here today, so I ask you please bear with us a moment – this isn't what we usually do.

By a show of hands, how many of you have celebrated 5 or more Palm Sunday services in your life?

And how many over 15?

If you've attended 30 or more Palm Sunday services keep your hand in the air.

Take a look around. I bet if I keep going we'd be able to figure out the approximate age of a few people just by how long they leave their hands up.

That's a lot of times to hear this story, and a lot of times to celebrate the same holiday:

Jesus rides in on a donkey, the people cheer as if he were the King coming home from war, and *that's it* ...

until Thursday or Friday or Sunday,

depending on when your family decides to pick up the next part of the story.

Different question:

how many of you remember ever having to give up your palm branch by throwing it on a church floor?

Very often we do something so similar every year –

wave the branches, have a children's parade –

that they all run together.

I was hoping we could experience something different, perhaps even memorable, this time.

Because, as all 4 Gospels tell the story of Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem, it seems clear that they remembered it – and it was quite significant to them.

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In laying down our palms, we have prepared the way for Christ to enter here.

Right here: down the aisle of the space we occupy every week.

This morning: as we remember and relive the parade in our rituals – how do we respond?

Egged on by the disciples and their shouting of the miracles Jesus had performed,

the crowds prepared the way as for a conquering hero.

They didn't hold on to their palms – or as in Luke, to their cloaks

(did you notice that Luke never once mentioned Palms?).

But palms or cloaks, however the people showed adoration and praise, they didn't hold back:

"As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road".

I won't make you throw your jackets in the aisle, as we've already accomplished the symbolic act with our palms – but I *know* that many of you like to take home your palms each year, so laying them down may seem a small sacrifice.

I remember how my grandmother used to keep her collection of palms from year to year, carefully draping them over the top of the mirror in her bedroom. They would grow old and brittle, but she was adamant about securing her yearly frond.

The same was true for a number of people in the retirement community where I was chaplain. I had the joyful job of carrying an armful of palms from one apartment to the next, meeting people in the common room and gathering for worship in the skilled nursing section.

It didn't matter what religious background they were from,
people just wanted to share in the celebration and receive a token in the day's memory.

Other people I know like to make those little palm crosses out of their branch.

Many of us like to hold on to our branch as a reminder of this day for longer than just a day.

We want to hold on to the celebration throughout the week, at least.

And yet, isn't the whole point of the pomp and the parade to lay down the palm?

Wave it about and celebrate, but then lay it down like a cloak on the path in welcome and honor.

It's a small sacrifice.

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Perhaps you are thinking to yourself: Palm Sunday isn't about *our* sacrifice, the people giving up anything but a shout or two. It's about Jesus' *triumphal entry*, as we've come to call it, his coming into Jerusalem, "the heart of his people's political, economic and religious life".<sup>i</sup>

Palm Sunday is the beginning of Holy Week – a celebration of the coming of the true King, not the government's worldly stand-in, but the one who would break oppression and free them to be people of God's way instead of people of the world's ways.

In our era, Palm Sunday is the party before the Passion, one last hurrah before entering the depths of Maundy Thursday and Good Friday's shadows.

Why should we lay down our palm branches if we want to wave them instead?

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As an aside, I'd like to share a short comparative study of this story from each of the Bible's Gospels.

John, our most mystical and esoteric writer (as well as the least worried about conforming to accuracy as we might measure it), is the only one that actually mentions branches from a palm tree.

Matthew and Mark speak of leafy branches in addition to the spreading of cloaks;
while, as we heard in today's reading, Luke remarks only on cloaks.

In contrast, *all four Gospels* – Matthew, Mark, Luke *and* John – make use of this whole donkey or colt scene.

John's is short, only 2 verses long;

but Matthew, Mark and Luke each dedicate seven verses – 7 repetitive verses – to the story.

And I assure you that there have also been endless sermons addressing just the topic of the colt. Listen to Luke's version once more:

"[H]e sent two of the disciples, saying,

'Go into the village ahead of you, and as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here.

If anyone asks you, "Why are you untying it?" just say this: "The Lord needs it."

So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them.

As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, 'Why are you untying the colt?'

They said, 'The Lord needs it.'

Then they brought it to Jesus;
and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it”.

“The Lord needs it”. That’s all they had to say, and the owner was satisfied.
This was the statement given to the disciples, and no one argued.
In my mind, a colt seems a bit greater sacrifice than a leafy branch.

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Why should we sacrifice our palms this year?  
Why not take them home as we always do?  
...Because it’s not about the palms – not for Matthew or Mark or Luke or even John.

Sometimes we need to break our annual routines in order to remember:  
*Palm Sunday is not about the palms; it’s about the Christ.*

It’s about the one whose coming among us we celebrate,  
the one who promised to break our bonds to the things of this world –  
be they familiar and comforting rituals or  
“the way we’ve always done it” or even  
the leafy reminders we use to celebrate this day.  
Those same reminders which also become conformity,  
familiarity that leads us to not really think about why we’re here.

We *want* to remember, to think about the one for whom we willingly lay down the things of this world...  
because he willingly put himself out there to show us a different way...  
because he willingly kept on, even into the heart of the city, where he might be accused.

Beyond laying down the palms to show welcome and praise,  
how are we remembering Christ’s short sojourn in Jerusalem –  
where he shares the meal of bread and wine,  
where he is stripped of his friends and family,  
where he is crucified and entombed.

Celebrate with palms and hosannas to remember the story of our faith:  
Jesus entering Jerusalem in acclamation, before his arrest and execution;  
the people gathering with him and proclaiming their faith in his cause and teachings.

Remember also that for us the point is greater than the celebration –  
it is the remembering.

So lay down your palms in the path of the colt-riding Christ.  
And prepare for the Christ to take up the cross.  
For whether we like that part or not,  
it is the next part of the story,  
and we must remember.

<sup>i</sup> John M. Buchanan, "Passion Narrative" in *The Christian Century* March 20, 2007, p. 3.