

## Palms

Palm Sunday has a unique flavor about it. Our church year goes through seasons that are marked by color and themed readings from scripture. Green, purple, red, white... creation, birth, ministry, prophecy, death, resurrection. We walk through a cycle of Christian mile markers until we get to this day, when we literally march into church.

And while we usually have flowers and plants in our worship space - a way of incorporating the beauty of creation into it - this is the only Sunday when we pass out plants to you and make them part of the service. Props in a great drama.

So on Palm Sunday things are already different, what with our gathering outside and waving palm fronds in a procession. And they get more unusual as we move through the readings. What starts as a jubilant, unified celebration of Jesus the Messiah devolves into a confusing, fractured betrayal of him.

Palm Sunday is named for the fronds waved for Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem. Palms have a long, deep significance for the people who first waved them on that day. They are special to the people in those desert cultures and all around the Mediterranean.

Palms are symbols of life. In the desert, they signal the presence of water to travelers. They grow around oases, those fertile, watering holes in the desert and therefore represent rest and hospitality, especially in a harsh environment.

The fruit of the date palm, dates, are also life-giving. Dates contain a number of essential nutrients - which is why it is customary for our Muslim sisters and brothers to break their Ramadan fast with a date each night. Even today, mothers in the Middle East will often give a taste of date to newborn infants before giving them breast milk.

Palm trees are associated with right living. They don't have wide branches that reach outward, instead they are upright, growing straight up toward heaven. If you've been at the beach during a storm, you know that palm trees will bend in a strong wind - and then as soon as the storm is over they straighten right back up again. Perhaps this tenacity, strength, resilience, and uprightness are why images of palms and palm trees are found on ancient coins and murals and even decorated Solomon's Temple.

Palms signify triumph, so much so that the Latin word "palma" became a figure of speech for victory. For the Romans, whose soldiers stood on the sidelines of this parade, palms were awarded for military and athletic successes.

And because of their association with victory, palms also signify royalty. The top of the palm tree looks like a crown, an emblem of kingship. Palm fronds were often used in parades to recognize political and military leaders. So their use in this procession for Jesus meant that at the the very least people on that day thought he was going to be their earthly king.

So the Palm is associated with life and flourishing. Victory and success. Peace and hospitality. And for those who welcomed Jesus in Jerusalem on that first Palm Sunday, it was a way of saying without words, "You are our king, our source of life, our model for right living. You are victorious!"

And I believe they meant it.

And yet just a few days later it is under the shadow of palms that a most horrific act of betrayal occurs. After honoring Jesus with a palm reception, his followers turn quickly to distance themselves from him or call outright for his death. It seems that the palm becomes a symbol of hypocrisy, cowardice, and betrayal.

In a poignant echo of this turn of events, some of the palms we use today will become the ashes for the start of Lent next year on Ash Wednesday. We have a cycle of celebration and humility that reminds us always of Jesus' triumph and our great need for him.

There is a palm tree in the front yard of my house. A little over a year ago, after the deep freeze, I worried about whether it would survive. All of its palm fronds turned brown, so I cut them off and hoped for the best. It stood there, barren, while the rest of the yard was rebounding with life. Eventually, new branches started the sprout, then they, too, died. But just this week, after struggling for months, there is a new branch standing upright from the crown of the tree.

Both last year and this, my struggling palm tree has reminded me of all the contrasting things they mean for us on this day. Standing tall in a storm. Coming back from the brink of death. Offering hope in the aftermath of trauma.

If the palms we wave for Jesus today symbolize our celebration of him as Messiah, they also symbolize his victory over death. Like the crowd that greeted him on that long-ago Palm Sunday, we believe he is our Lord, one who brings life and helps us flourish, one who teaches us peace and hospitality, one who is triumphant over evil and death. Like them we will inevitably turn from him out of fear or pride.

It is our lack of steadfastness, in fact, that is the very reason we need such a Messiah as this one in the first place. Like a palm tree, Jesus withstands the gale force winds - or the deep freeze - of our betrayal and he springs back to life, upright like a palm tree pointing us straight to heaven.

Amen