

Palm Sunday/Passion Sunday is one of those strange days in our church calendar. If we're honest, we really don't quite know what to do with it. Today we wave our palms and sing "Hosanna". And then, in this single Sunday service, we may find ourselves, with a bit of whiplash as we remember Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, only to jump with lightning speed into the story of his Passion, his betrayal, unjust judgment, and death upon the Cross. Today is a day that is full; full of images, action, and emotions.....and palms.

I spent a few days visiting with my mom this week. On the wall in the room where I slept, I noticed a few dried palms tucked behind a picture frame. It reminded me of the palms that I kept each year in my own room in that house where I grew up. They're strange things, those palms. I never quite knew what to do with them. How about you? I mean, how are we supposed to treat them after today? Though they are blessed, palms from this day do not appear to get as much reverence as other religious articles. I knew I couldn't just throw them away in the trash. Blessed palm branches are supposed to be burned. But often the priest would say they had enough for Ash Wednesday. So, what to do with them?

Some of us put these palms over doors, others wind up in car visors, other folks use them as bookmarks. But no matter what we do or where we put our palm branches the fact is they are out of place. Palms imported from warmer climes do not really seem to fit in our everyday life in this part of the world. And yet the palms remain with us, as out of place as they may seem, a visible reminder of Christ's triumphant entrance into Jerusalem, a reminder of his sacrifice for you and for me.

And perhaps that's just the point. This day leads us into a week of witnessing and experiencing strange and uncomfortable things – emotions that are all over the place, judgement, torture, abandonment, grief, bewilderment, disbelief, relief, ecstasy. Palm/Passion Sunday gives us a glimpse of what is to come. It is tempting to go from Hosanna – God Save us, straight to Alleluia. After all, we know the score. We know the end of the story. And somehow all that Holy Week stuff just doesn't seem to all fit into our busy schedules and lives.

I'll admit, that's the way I chose to participate (or not) in Holy Week for many years. And then I was a member of a church that drew me in to take part more fully in the story. I had never gone to a Maundy Thursday service or an Easter Vigil before. I was captured by the liturgy, and frankly, by the drama of the it all. I was fascinated by witnessing the Last Supper, to Jesus washing the feet of his disciples. My breath was taken away at the starkness of the bare altar and the empty tabernacle at the conclusion of the service.

Many things felt strange and uncomfortable, like taking part in foot washing and coming forward to reverence the cross on Good Friday. Really taking in the reading of the Passion – to the pain, the cruelty, the crucifixion, and Jesus' death was heartbreaking. It was good to be able to walk with others through those Holy Week days.

When I was serving in NH, we had an intergenerational worship once a month in our community center building. One Palm Sunday we laid a long strip of paper on the floor and set up vignettes depicting events that took place beginning with palms and ending at the cross. And we dipped our feet in paint and walked the way of the cross together. We stopped along the way to read the stories. And when we had finished, we washed the paint from each other's feet. There were footprints of infants and women in their 90's, and everyone in-between. The experience will stay with me forever.

Palm Sunday is the gateway for us into Holy Week. It is the opportunity for us to walk this way together in faith and trust in God's plan for Jesus and for us. It is a time that beckons to us to slow down. It is a time where we don't just remember the stories but are invited to enter into them through our rich and beautiful liturgies. It is a time when we invite our imagination to accompany us step by precious step into the great mystery of God's victory over death.

In the midst of joy and sorrow, hope and despair, for millennia, the church has carried palm branches. These palms which we hold in our hands and will soon take into our homes will stay with us throughout a broad range of experiences. These palms will witness death and birth, harmony and disagreements, sickness and health, joy and sadness. On this day, our seemingly out of place palms become symbols that remind us that in the midst of all of life, in the midst of joy and pain, we are called to find and welcome Christ.

I'll be curious to hear if the palms you received today hold any particular or different meaning for you after experiencing this Holy Week here at Atonement. Please take a palm to give to a friend. I once again invite you to share this week with someone you think would enjoy experiencing this holy journey with us.

A Palm Sunday Blessing by Jan Ricardson¹

*Blessed is the one
who comes to us
by the way of love
poured out with abandon.*

*Blessed is the one
who walks toward us*

*by the way of grace
that holds us fast.*

*Blessed is the one
who calls us to follow
in the way of blessing,
in the path of joy.*

¹ written by Jan L. Richardson, and posted on The Painted Prayerbook. <http://paintedprayerbook.com/>