

Westminster Sermon: A Branch Extended
Scripture Lessons: Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29, Matthew 21:1-11
Palm Sunday, April 2, 2023
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Today we remember the entrance of Jesus into Jerusalem, which marks the beginning of Holy Week and his journey to the cross. Psalm 118, in its entirety, is a song of thanksgiving sung by one who has been to the edge of the abyss and who has been delivered by God. In the selected verses that form today's reading, verses 1-2 and 19-29, we encounter the theme of pilgrimage to the Holy Place, a festal procession with branches. Hear now God's Holy Word.

O give thanks to the Lord, for God is good; God's steadfast love endures forever!

² Let Israel say, "God's steadfast love endures forever."

Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them and give thanks to the Lord.

This is the gate of the Lord; the righteous shall enter through it.

I thank you that you have answered me and have become my salvation.

The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.

This is the Lord's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes.

This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.

Save us, we beseech you, O Lord! O Lord, we beseech you, give us success!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. We bless you from the house of the Lord.

The Lord is God, and God has given us light.

Bind the festal procession with branches, up to the horns of the altar.

You are my God, and I will give thanks to you; you are my God; I will extol you.

O give thanks to the Lord, for God is good, for God's steadfast love endures forever. Amen.

In Matthew's account of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem in chapter 21, he paints a colorful portrait by quoting the words of the Prophet Zechariah. Beyond the description of the details of the procession, the cloaks, the branches, the hosannas, Matthew emphasizes the gentleness and humility of Christ, who knows the way home will not be easy, and yet, who is determined to accept what lies ahead with courage, dignity, and grace. Hear what the Spirit is saying through Holy Scripture.

When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Beth phage', at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, ² saying to them, "Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. ³ If anyone says anything to you, just say this, 'The Lord needs them.' And he will send them immediately." ⁴ This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying, ⁵ "Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey." ⁶ The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; ⁷ they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. ⁸ A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. ⁹ The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!" ¹⁰ When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, "Who is this?" ¹¹ The crowds were saying, "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee." Amen.

The title of the sermon: A Branch Extended

The Text: "A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road." Matthew 21:8

Let us pray: Holy and loving God, thank you for the branches extended to honor and welcome Jesus on his journey home. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

The picture of men, women, and children welcoming Jesus, their king, by cutting branches from trees and spreading them on the road as a royal carpet is a lovely and meaningful image. It is the gospel writer John who identifies the branches associated with Jesus' Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem as palm branches. The palm branch, or palm frond, resembles the palm and fingers of an open hand, and symbolizes victory, triumph, peace, and eternal life.

Throughout history, the open palm has been associated with truth, honesty, and openness. On the other hand, a palm's down gesture suggests dominance, aggression, and authority. Our children and youth raising their palms with branches as they processed down the center aisle lined with colorful coats, gifts of the congregation for members of the community, and presenting their One Great Hour of Sharing Offerings, a branch extended to support brothers and sisters facing disasters around the world, affirm the God who came to us with open palms in Christ Jesus proclaiming the truth about who God is.

Before his pilgrimage home, Jesus spoke lovingly to his disciples when he said, "*I am the vine, you are the branches. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me.*" The image of the entwined, interwoven vine branches reminds us that we are intimately connected with one another and with the One who nourishes and enriches our spirits. This is Jesus' final "I am" saying and part of his Farewell Discourse. Jesus' parting words are meant to give his followers strength for the days following his death.

May the branches we raise to honor the pilgrim Christ on his Holy journey home be a reminder of the life-giving connective nature of branches, a metaphor for our relationship with Christ and an essential biological structure in both plant and animal kingdoms.

The flexible and fluid branches and their leaves in a tree's canopy harvest energy from the sun while the branches of the tree's root system extract water and nutrients from the soil; the connective nature of both branch systems gives life to the tree. Furthermore, branching vessels have evolved in humans so that the heart can pump nutrients, water, and energy through the branches of the vascular tree within our bodies.

Branches are life-giving and when the dove returned with an olive branch to Noah's ark in Genesis 8, signaling the flood had ended, the olive branch became a symbol of peace and reconciliation. Extending an olive branch to another is an offer of peace, a gesture to end a confrontation, disagreement, or argument, and a movement toward resolution of a conflict.

As we commemorate Jesus' pilgrimage home, *the festal procession with branches*, we are amazed at the confidence, the sense of self, with which Jesus travels. It is not smugness or self-assuredness, which often hints at arrogance or self-righteousness. No, Jesus of Nazareth had an inner peace that comes from a complete trust in God and a humble conviction of who he was and who God called him to be.

Along with the palm branches spread on the road as a royal carpet for this humble king riding a donkey, Jesus came extending an olive branch, an offer of peace to those threatened by who he was.

It is Jesus' confidence in the steadfast love of God proclaimed by the psalmist that enabled Jesus to endure the hostility he encountered following his entry into Jerusalem. This confidence and sense of self grew out of Jesus intimate relationship and branch-like connection with God. Jesus absorbs the hostility, and, in its absorption, the hostility dissipates...like a great stone thrown into a silent pond! Christ's strength to absorb the hostility of the world on the cross reveals a healing and forgiving God. Jesus suffers, not because he has done something wrong. Jesus suffers because he does what is right, which rubs the powers that be the wrong way.

Each one of us has had to absorb hostility, especially when we advocate for others, and the best gift we can give our children is to empower them to become advocates for others, and to risk absorbing the hostility of the world when they do what is right. If we want to be true to the gospel, we must acknowledge the suffering that is a part of life. If we only remember the shouts of Hosanna on Palm Sunday, we cut short the way that leads to Easter.

Not only is suffering at the heart of our faith, it is also at the heart of our shared humanity. If we risk being human, living with our palms open, loving, serving, celebrating life; we will know loss, disappointment, and sorrow. Part of the beauty of our faith is that we belong to a God who chose to share our humanity, who lived among us with open palms, who extended an olive branch time and time again, and who encourages us, today, to branch out in our faith and at the same time to stay connected to the One who gives us life.

Because Jesus walked this way, we can walk with courage and confidence, extending branches of welcome, openness, reconciliation, and peace time and time again. By the grace of God, may it be so for all of us and each of us. Amen.