

## Symbols of Lent: Palm Branches

John 12:12-19 (NIV)

<sup>12</sup> The next day the great crowd that had come for the festival heard that Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem. <sup>13</sup> They took palm branches and went out to meet him, shouting, "Hosanna!" "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" "Blessed is the king of Israel!" <sup>14</sup> Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it, as it is written: <sup>15</sup> "Do not be afraid, Daughter Zion; see, your king is coming, seated on a donkey's colt." <sup>16</sup> At first his disciples did not understand all this. Only after Jesus was glorified did they realize that these things had been written about him and that these things had been done to him. <sup>17</sup> Now the crowd that was with him when he called Lazarus from the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to spread the word. <sup>18</sup> Many people, because they had heard that he had performed this sign, went out to meet him. <sup>19</sup> So the Pharisees said to one another, "See, this is getting us nowhere. Look how the whole world has gone after him!"

When you walked into church this morning just before worship and were handed a palm branch, what did you think about it? Did you feel like you were getting ready to be a part of that crowd on the very first Palm Sunday, ready to shout your hosannas, do a little bit of reenactment? Did you think, "It's nice to see the green in church. Reminds me of life, that spring is here."? Did you think, "Palm frond... Oh yeah, it's Palm Sunday today"?

Palm branches are found all over the world: in tropical paradises to desert oases to California and so on. They were plentiful in the land of Israel. Not only did you see the trees, but palm branches were a part of worship life with their images being carved on to the walls and doors of the Temple. Palm branches were embossed on the Jewish coin. They were used for the annual Festival of Tabernacles. The Jews as well as other nations also used palm branches like a ticker-tape parade to welcome back a hero, a conquering hero – a kind of victory lap. That's how palm branches were used that day Jesus came to Jerusalem for the final time. John quotes the Old Testament prophet Zechariah, "Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion! Shout, Daughter Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and victorious, lowly and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. I will take away the chariots from Ephraim and the warhorses from Jerusalem, and the battle bow will be broken. He will proclaim peace to the nations. His rule will extend from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth." (Zechariah 9:9-10) This is a victory celebration for God, their king.

But what has Jesus conquered to merit such a parade? He hadn't kicked the Romans out of Jerusalem. The Pharisees and the Sadducees, those other Jewish sects, were standing around disapproving of Jesus and plotting his demise. Give it six days and it's going to look like total defeat for Jesus. He would be betrayed by one of his close twelve disciples, one who had been with him for three years! Jesus would undergo a mock trial rife with injustice and then be handed a hasty death sentence. The crowd who is hailing him as a conquering king would not do anything to stop his brutal death via crucifixion. Some of the crowd who were waving palms on Sunday and shouting "Hosanna, Save us!" may have also cried "Crucify him!" on Friday. Jesus came in on Sunday as a conquering king, supposedly victorious, and before the end of Friday, he would be dead, crucified like the most heinous of criminals.

Looking at this week from Sunday to Friday, this Palm Sunday celebration seems like a preemptive victory dance of the most embarrassing kind like the basketball player who starts fist pumping after his last second shot just to look up and see it hit the rim and bounce away to the football player who drops the ball to thump his chest before he actually crossed the goal line for the touchdown to the driver who starts waving at his fans while leading on the last lap just to be passed by another car.

The people thought that their victory had come in the form of Jesus. "He would free us from Roman rule. He would take care of us. He would make everything better." But as they observed his body hanging on the cross come Friday, they must have thought that they had celebrated too soon. What should have been a sure victory, why they waved the palm fronds in the first place, was now just a shattered dream. They were defeated.

When have you felt defeated when you were so sure that you had a victory in hand? You know God's will for you, his commandments. The Ten Commandments are simple, easy to remember. Yet, how often does the same temptation to disobey and break these commandments trap you and you fall for it? Then after you have sinned again in the same way you've done 500 times before, that you get serious about your repentance. You resolve that you are going to fight this temptation, kick this sin to the curb, throw it away and never have it bother you again. You make a plan. You employ help, set up accountability partners, blocks for the things that you know lead you into temptation. You fight. For a while you succeed. It's now behind you. It's in the past. You have emerged victorious from that specific temptation. You smile to yourself because it's over. You've won.

But then another day comes. There really wasn't anything different about the day, but on that particular day that temptation comes around again. You inexplicably stop fighting. You give up. You surrender. You said you never would again, but here you are. You've committed that same sin once again. Sin has gotten the better of you, defeated you. You feel worthless as a person who can't defeat just one sin. What will God say? Will he really take someone who keeps messing up over and over again, who can't keep even one simple command?

On Palm Sunday, Jesus entered Jerusalem like a conquering king. On Friday, he looked completely defeated as he hung on the cross. But on the following Sunday, the victory was made clear. It was not a preemptive victory celebration. Jesus had indeed come as a conquering hero on Palm Sunday.

When he arrived on Palm Sunday, Jesus had already conquered diseases and ailments too numerous to count with all the healings he had done. He had conquered hunger when he feed the 5,000. He had conquered death for at least three other people, most recently for Lazarus, a miracle he did in the sight of so many of those Jews from Jerusalem who had come to comfort Mary and Martha. He had won converts by his preaching and teaching. Those who saw Lazarus' resurrection continued to spread the word of what Jesus had done. Their witnessing brought more people to Jesus. More and more came to believe in Jesus as their conquering king. Most importantly, Jesus had already conquered many of Satan's temptations. He had won victory after victory against temptation to sin as each day of his entire life – all 33 years of it – he went to bed having kept God's Word and his laws perfectly. He came into Jerusalem righteous (right with God) and victorious over sin, death, and the devil. He won each of these victories for you and me so that we would not be defeated.

One more battle needed to be fought. This time, he fought death, his own death, death on that cross. It's one more battle that he won, and that decisive victory over death was declared on Easter Sunday when he rose from the dead and left his tomb empty. Those palm branches that were waved the Sunday before were a symbol of Jesus' impending victory, not a preemptive, game-losing showboating move. Christ came to Jerusalem as that conquering king, righteous and victorious, riding on a young donkey. He conquered death for you. Because it would be accomplished on Friday and the next Sunday, God knew he had already won the victory and nothing would change that.

Those palm branches are still a sign of victory for us today, maybe even more than what we normally think of on Palm Sunday. It may seem trivial, maybe even strange, but you and I associate palm branches not just with this Sunday before Jesus' death and resurrection. When we think of palm trees, we also think of vacation, a luxurious get-away. We see palm branches and we think paradise.

Because Jesus is our conquering king who did finish the war he set out to win, those palm branches point us forward to paradise – not just to fun in the sun, a temporary relief from the burdens and defeats of life. No, those palm branches waved for our conquering King also remind us for the paradise that Christ has won for us, the one he will take us to. And I guarantee it will be better than any tropical getaway you've ever taken or imagined going on.

John - the same John who recorded and wrote this Gospel account for today - wrote in the last book of the Bible: "I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding *palm branches* in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice: 'Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.' ... 'These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore, 'they are before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence. 'Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat down on them,' nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; 'he will lead them to springs of living water.' 'And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.'" (Revelation 7:9-10, 14-17)

Sin does often defeat us, get the better of us. We can't win that war, but Jesus did. That's why he is our conquering king. That's why we wave palm branches today. Jesus, the righteous and victorious king, who came into Jerusalem as a conquering hero has won paradise for us because he has already completely defeated death and the devil. We will partake in that victory celebration with our robes made white by the blood of the Lamb and waving those palm branches in our hands. These palm branches, they point us back to our victory won for us by our King. Bask in that victory because our King won paradise for us. Amen.