

The Palms Part

Text: Ephesians 2: 1-5; Luke 19: 29-38

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A tender memory...comes with me to today. It's about my daughter Karen when she was all of 8 years. Back in those days, she would go to church early with me on Sunday mornings. It was our own best and special time.

So imagine us on the way to church, just the two of us in the car, as she chattered on without leaving a single pause for my response . . .

*Daddy today is Palm Sunday, right?
And we all get palms to take home, don't we?
I just love the palms part!
It wouldn't be Palm Sunday if we didn't get them.
I hope you keep that part of the story in there every year.
It would ruin the whole day without them.
I mean, how could we be joyful for Jesus without waving palms?*

And then, as if on cue, we arrived at the church and she hopped out of the car; and in a dash was on to the rest of the morning, where before long, she was shucking palms with a few other kids, as they made ready for the grand parade.

Our theologically playful chat...comes back to me every year as Holy Week begins. It reminds me of how essential certain memories, narratives and practices are as faith passes from through our years.

It was the palms that conveyed the story for Karen, offering her a kind of hands-on access the drama of Jesus and his entry into Jerusalem. The innocent act of blessing and waving palms brought her a felt-sense of being joyful for Jesus.

I know that for many others it's the music that carries the day – which is true not just on high and holy days. I know in particular that hearing *The Palms* and *All Glory, Laud and Honor* opens up deep and treasured spaces in the soul.

So not to worry...my dear Karen and any others! We won't leave out the palms or the cheers of hosanna or the songs or the triumphant crowd today! But, I do want to push us deeper into the story of that first Palm Sunday and reach beyond the surface and the edges.

There were simply so many other layers in what was happening that day – none of which can ever be fairly left out. Cues and clues and indicators and inklings. Some of them were filled with joy and others were wrapped in foretaste and shadow.

I want to trace two of them with you that don't often get direct mention. They are core to the story and I think that being explicit in naming them invites a more robust grasp of this Hosanna day.

The first one...is to pay attention, in a fresh way, to the posture of Jesus as he made his famous ride, down through the Kidron valley and up into Jerusalem. It was one of complete unpretentiousness and humility and humbleness.

Arnold Kenseth, pastoral poet of the New England Congregational variety, once coined the insight: "Palm Sunday is the parable of the meek king." And, that's just it. The scriptures give us this optic: "Here comes your king, humble and riding on a donkey."

Please note: these are hardly regal words for a crowd awaiting a new age of leadership! Moreover, they portray such stark contrast to the culture and powers of the day. But in his very being, Jesus was signaling, modeling and showing a different paradigm in the structure of life and relationship and how the world could work.

He emptied himself over and again for others. He was not selfless by any measure, but was self-giving. And while he could have made a great splash for notoriety or attention, he chose differently. He simply shared the power of vulnerability and love, as he invited others into a new order of the things that matter most.

Just for fun, I read an article recently called "*Seven Ways to Tell If You're a Truly Humble Person*." The title amused me! It offered some rather intriguing insights about self and the power of self-giving. But then, even more fun: the article was linked to a quiz, which I took. Sad to say, I discovered I am too humble to tell you how I did!

So humility, meekness (don't mistake that for weakness), humbleness – we miss something critical about the day if we undervalue or overlook these qualities in the very being of Jesus.

And then, let's add...an unlikely partner to his unpretentiously humble way. Courage. Courage defined classically is: 1) the ability to do something that is hard or frightening; or, 2) strength in the face of pain or grief. A few synonyms enrich the thought even more: daring, audacity, and boldness.

Make no mistake on this: Jesus was not a victim of the Roman Empire. Quite to the contrary: he was dead set on exposing them. He was deliberate and intentional. He was not afraid. Had courage and boldness in the face of all that was unfolding – even at great personal risk. And his eyes were wide open.

The epitaph on Robert Frost's grave proclaims: "I Had a Lover's Quarrel with the World." Well, Jesus had a lover's quarrel with the world, too! It was one that ran deep with love and compassion. It did not ever waver. A lover's quarrel fueled his vision and strengthened his resolve.

Ted Loder is a pastoral poet whose free verse prayers have always been helpful to me. Like this one:

O Gracious God,
whose lover's quarrel with us is our anguish, history and hope,
we confess that too often we lack courage with ourselves and the world.

We have not quarreled with power
when it's used for only the privilege of the few
because too often we are the privileged.

We have not quarreled with cleverness
that turns truth into lies that profit
because too often we've profited.

We have not quarreled with arrogance
that dictates the domination of one race
or nation, or gender or religion over others
because too often we're the dominators.

Have mercy on us and heal us, Lord.
Empower us to the kind of courage
to dare to do what is just and beautiful,
true and faithful, visionary and deeply joyful
that will one day bear all people free and whole. Amen.

I think that on Palm Sunday Jesus would like to know we prayed that prayer.

Back to Karen...my child who is now 34! She was so right in reminding me not to ever forget the palm part of what today is all about.

But if I might dare to say so, I am right too, in asking us to not ever forget the humility and courage by which Jesus set that day in motion. If we stop short of balancing palms and music with humility and courage, well, frankly, we miss the deeper call of the story.

One more thing. Later, on that Hosanna day 26 years ago, a small cluster of palms showed up on my desk in my study at home. Next to them was a note with a splash of some crayons and three words from Karen: Hosanna! Thanks! Dad!

Now you tell me: how much sweeter can it be? Amen.

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