

This past week I was blessed to visit Helen Corbin and Shirley Foster, members of Flint Hill UMC. The first thing they showed me when I walked in their house was the altar they had created from their Lenten packet. It was beautifully displayed on a coffee table, and meticulously placed by Helen.

In this moment, I saw that these two women who have not been out of their house for a year were connected to their faith in Christ and their brothers and sisters in Christ. Today they will take the palm and wave it, just as people did thousands of years ago, as they welcomed Christ into their midst.

Our centering element today is the palm. When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the people laid down their clothes, and palm branches, and shouted: “Hosanna!” They created a pathway that welcomed Christ into their hearts and lives. In the Old Testament, we learn that palm branches symbolized victory and were often depicted on coins and important buildings. King Solomon had palm branches carved into the walls and doors of the temple (1 Kings 6:29).¹

We also see that palm branches are mentioned in the book of Revelations. In Revelation 7:9 the Bible reads: "After this 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."

It was important that palm branches were used on this important day, because this action signified that the people recognized Jesus as a king who was coming to save them. In this moment, the fulfillment of victory prophesied in the Old Testament was coming to fruition through Jesus Christ.

When Christ arrived, he was not who they were expecting. During that time, the people of Jerusalem desperately wanted to be saved from the “crushing imperial rule.”² They were expecting a king like the kings they had encountered. Before Jesus rode into town on a donkey, another man rode into town on a war horse.

Commentary tells us: “As Roman imperialism crushed and oppressed God’s people, Pilate made the trip into town to uphold law and order. Pilate must have entered the city in a procession of pomp complete with war horses and an armored army.”³ While it was probably impressive to witness Pilate’s entrance into town with his armed guards, beautiful horses, and decorated vestments, the people did not feel that Pilate was coming to save them, what they felt was fear.

Christ wandered into Jerusalem as a humble servant. He was unarmed, he did not have beautiful vestments, but he had come to be among the people and show them that the Son of God was with them. Unlike their reaction to Pilate, the people were not frightened by Christ’s presence, but excited that the promised Messiah was coming to save them.

All along the way in this parade, Jesus’ disciples were reciting his many amazing deeds and miracles, just in case people did not know who he was. Jesus did not come into town proud and arrogant like Pilate. He did not have a fancy horse adorned with shiny vestments but sat upon a lowly donkey and colt, ultimately fulfilling the prophecy in Zechariah 9. Jesus arrived as a servant instead of a king. He was not dressed up, he did not have money to give away, and he did not demand fancy accommodations.

Jesus was approachable. He took time to speak to those who were considered untouchable. He healed lepers and those who were very ill, paralyzed or already dead. He took time to equip and teach his disciples. He cared about his family and friends. He did not lead by invoking fear, but through bestowing grace.

Jesus’ servant ministry is a hallmark to the way that he led people to God. He led by example. He showed people that effective evangelism happens through relationships. Some of the most powerful stories in the gospels are when Jesus started a relationship with someone unexpected. Some of the most powerful parables in the Bible, told by Jesus are about the unexpected relationships that occur when we offer one another grace and forgiveness.

Christ came into town a weary traveler, hoping that others would understand who he was and why he had come into the world. He knew this was only but one day on his journey to the cross, but every Palm Sunday I am filled with joy as we remember that God incarnate witnessed humanity recognizing God face to face, if only for a moment.

On this Palm Sunday we are also called to wave our palm branches. These palms are a symbol of our hope that Christ will continue to save us. The palms are extensions of the pathway that we have been creating throughout this season of Lent, for Christ to come once again and save us. Today we continue our journey of following Jesus from the wilderness to the cross. Palm Sunday marks a turn and is the first day of Holy Week. As we wander with Christ into Jerusalem, we take part in this joyful parade, but we know the rest of the week will be harder as Jesus walks to the cross bearing the sins of the world on his shoulders.

On this important day, the people responded to Jesus by offering what they had. They didn't offer him gold or money, they laid down their clothes to make a pathway for him, they picked palms off the trees and waved them. We also offer all we have and all we are to Christ today and ask that Christ would save us.

We have all been through a lot this past year and there are a lot of things that we need to ask Christ to save us from. We ask that Christ would save us from the corona virus, from mass shootings, from hate crimes, from political division, and even from ourselves. We still need Christ's saving action in our lives today now more than ever.

The danger for us as a people of faith during this pandemic is that we would turn insular. That we would start worrying only about ourselves and those we love. But even during this pandemic there is a great opportunity for the people of God. Now more than ever people need the good news of Jesus Christ.

How are we bearing witness to Christ our Savior? How are we sharing with other people that God continues to save us through the gift of Jesus Christ?

Palm Sunday matters because it gives us the opportunity to recognize Christ and respond. Christ is still reigning as king in the world today, but are we submitting to Christ or to the lures of the world?

The question before us today is how are we worshipping God with our lives? We know that the very same people who worshipped Jesus as king, only a week later would yell “Crucify him!” We are called to continue to recognize Jesus Christ as Lord of our lives through the way that we embody the servant ministry of Christ.

We embody the servant ministry of Jesus Christ when we put God and other people above our own needs, when we share our resources, when we help the lowly and oppressed, when we make time to build relationships with people that we would not know otherwise.

The beautiful thing about the early church that we hear about in Acts 2 is the way they lived together in community. Acts 2:44-47 reads: “All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.”

These first converts of Christ are much like us, desperately hoping to follow Christ, yet still feeling like they were figuring it out day by day. As a church, we continue to share our resources through our gifts to the church, through the time we take to write cards and check on people who are sick or unable to come. We embody the servant ministry of Jesus Christ when we pick up a palm and lay down our burdens at the cross so Jesus can take them on, and we can become free.

The good news for our lives today is that Jesus Christ is still Lord, the same way he was on that Palm Sunday thousands of years ago.

This week, as we continue our Holy Week journey from Jerusalem to the cross, to the tomb, we are called to really let go of the things that are inhibiting us from having a better relationship with Jesus Christ. We are called to forgive; we are called to sacrifice our time so that others may know the living God.

On Maundy Thursday we remember again the servant ministry of Jesus Christ when he washed the disciples’ feet. On Good Friday we will meditate on the stations of the cross and thank God for Christ’s sacrifice for our sins. Then on Easter Sunday we will celebrate that we serve a God who can defeat death so that we may be free. I do hope to see you at each of our Holy week events this week as we continue to celebrate Christ our servant king.

Even in the uncertainty of life, the good news for our lives today is Jesus is our way forward and Jesus is our King and Savior. May we embody the servant ministry of Jesus Christ today and always. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Endnotes

¹ <https://www.thoughtco.com/palm-branches-bible-story-summary-701202>

² <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship/lent-2019-worship-planning-series/april-14-palm-passion-sunday-year-c/palm-passion-sunday-2019-year-c-preaching-notes>

³ <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship/lent-2019-worship-planning-series/april-14-palm-passion-sunday-year-c/palm-passion-sunday-2019-year-c-preaching-notes>