

Palm Sunday 2021
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St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
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I was reading the lessons for this week — Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday — and I thought: there is so much death here. All four of our Gospels talk in detail about the torture and death of Jesus — a first century rabbi and wonder worker whose message of radical love upset the entrenched religious establishment as well as the Roman occupiers of Jerusalem and their sympathizers.

If you spent any time walking through the artwork in the church, you saw scenes of loneliness in the Garden of Gethsemane and cruelty as the soldiers tossed dice to determine who would win Jesus' clothes, while he sat there with a crown of thorns digging into his head. You saw Jesus shrug under the weight of his cross and the cruel cuts on his arms as he hung on the cross. Finally, you saw Jesus dead and lying in his tomb. I looked at all the art just like I looked at the scriptures, and I thought: there is so much death here.

And then, to my surprise, I thought to myself: this is as it should be. We should be acquainting ourselves with death in our religious life to help prepare us for death out in the world. And if you look around this year, there is so much death here too. There were days this year when COVID deaths reached over five thousand daily in our nation. In our own congregation, we have hosted four major funerals and are planning for two more. And the newspapers are filled with mass shooting events — seemingly every month from the incident last year at the MillerCoors factory all the way to the recent events in Atlanta, GA and Boulder, CO. There is so much death here.

Yesterday, many of you joined me in a prayer walk through Lake Park. We waved palms and said our Hosannas. What a strange response to a year like this one. You might think that instead of walking through a park, we would instead write a letter to our Senator or maybe disappear into a blockbuster movie or even a piece of cake. Waving palms and shouting Hosanna will do nothing to address the climate of death that was in Jerusalem during Jesus' last days of ministry, and it won't do anything to address the climate of death that we are experiencing here in 2021.

Wariness of our ancient traditions is understandable, but let me tell you how I see the rituals around Palm Sunday. We pick up the palms, the branches, that have fallen from the trees as a reminder that praising God does not need to be fancy or costly. We do not wave dollar bills. We do not wave gold. We do not wave silk. We do not wave guns. We wave branches, held high, to welcome God into our city.

We do not bring a war horse. We do not bring a tank. We do not bring a Rolls Royce. We bring a donkey, to remind us that God accompanies the humble and that the simple way of following Jesus will triumph in the end.

And we pray as we walk. We do not shout. We do not rail. We do not demean. We keep our eyes firmly fixed on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.

And, though, it may seem strange, walking with a donkey, palms, and prayers is walking the way of Jesus. We are exercising our Christian faith. We come bearing branches. We come with prayers on our lips. And, probably most importantly, we come together. If you want to tell me that is not powerful, I would point you to the bridge in Selma, the Father Groppi marches for fair housing, and the students in Tiananmen Square. The way of Jesus changes the world.

The palms are the antidote to the guns. The prayers are the antidote to the verbal violence of this age, and our togetherness is the antidote to the increased isolation in the weary world.

And, at the end of this palm procession, after the powers of the world focus on the torture and the death that humans can't seem to live without, then we will see the power of the resurrection in our midst. We will walk the way of Jesus this week because we know how it ends. Our simple rituals have power. Indeed they have the power of life over death. See you at Easter. Amen.