

March 29, 2023 – Deuteronomy 16:13-17, Revelation 7:9-17, John 7:28-39

Why palm branches? Have you ever considered that question? Why did the people wave palm branches during the Triumphal Entry? Why did the people lay those palm branches on the ground at Jesus' feet? What was the significance of these palms?

I'll admit, it's something I hadn't really considered before this sermon series brought it to my attention. But like most details in scripture, it's not something we should take for granted. So why did they use palms?

Well, there's several possibilities. If we look at the palm tree in scripture, we'll find it often used as a symbol of life. Which isn't surprising. The palm tree is a symbol of life for pretty much every religion and culture throughout the middle east and Mediterranean.

That's because wherever there's a palm tree, there must be fresh water. They're like billboards, pointing the way to an oasis. So if you're in the wilderness, surrounded by mile upon mile of rock, sand, and scrubland, and you see a tall palm tree in the distance, you immediately know, "There's water over there. There's food over there. There's life over there."

In fact, the palm tree's ability to seemingly die off during a drought and then regrow afterwards is what has given it the scientific genus of *Phoenix*. It is the plant that rises from the ashes. That rises from the dead.

And so, if you're a Jew living in Jerusalem and you hear that Jesus has just raised his friend Lazarus from the dead and he's riding through the city gates at this very moment, you might just grab a palm branch and celebrate this man who is the embodiment of life and resurrection for the people of Israel. Makes sense.

But then why would you lay those branches at his feet, for him and his disciples to trample over? Well, that's another facet to this symbol that we should consider: The ancient world was dirty. Filthy. I don't think we can fully grasp just how dirty life was.

And while the Jews paid attention to personal cleanliness more than a lot of ancient cultures did, they're still walking on dirt roads travelled by lots and lots of horses and donkeys and camels and sheep and goats and all sorts of animals that leave waste behind. When Jesus washed the disciples' feet, that was truly an act of humility and service.

But, if someone is important, then you protect their feet from all this dirt. It's a practice we still do today, actually. That's what a red carpet is. A place for celebrities and political dignitaries to walk that is protected from the dirt of grass or pavement. That's what a white runner is for a bride as she walks down the aisle. A place for her to walk, dressed in white, a symbol of purity, without soiling her feet.

Jesus was a celebrity. Jesus was a symbol of purity and righteousness. Jesus was the Son of David, the king. And the residents of Jerusalem were rolling out the red carpet. They were stretching the white runner. They were making a path of bright green palm branches to cover the filth of the city streets for one who deserved to walk the halls of a palace.

But there's yet a third reason for the use of palm branches that Sunday morning. And it's one that is deeply rooted in the Mosaic Law. A festival known as the Feast of Tabernacles.

For Christians who rarely, if ever, celebrate Old Testament festivals, the Feast of Tabernacles is kind of obscure. Something we hear mentioned in scripture and then gloss over. But for Jesus and the people of his day, it was a major event. One of the three major festivals of the liturgical calendar that all Israelite men were required to observe.

The Feast of Tabernacles is also call the Feast of Booths or the Feast of Sukkot. It was a festival that occurred every autumn in September or October, depending on how the calendar fell. And it's purpose was kind of twofold.

In a practical sense, it was a harvest festival, just like Thanksgiving or Oktoberfest. A way of celebrating the fruitful of the earth and the end of the growing season. But its theological significance was much deeper.

You see, the Feast of Tabernacles was a remembrance of Israel's wandering in the desert for 40 years. It was a remembrance of how, for those 40 years, they lived in tents and worshipped not at a fixed temple, but at a tabernacle. How God was with them for those 40 years, the tabernacle and the Ark of the Covenant literally traveling in their midst. How he provided for them and kept them safe until they finally entered into the Promised Land.

The way they celebrated this festival was kind of interesting. Because for seven days they reenacted those 40 years in the desert by sleeping in tents. Literally. They would go outside the city walls, pitch a bunch of tents, and camp out for a week. Just to remember what it's like to live without a permanent home.

And Leviticus 23 tells us that on the first day of the festival, they were instructed to rejoice before the Lord by eating the fruit of splendid trees and waving palm branches in the air as they brought offerings before the Lord, to thank him for all that he had given them. To thank him for giving them a home to live in and farms to harvest from. And for not abandoning them.

Because, if you remember, those 40 years were not an accident. They were a punishment. A punishment for worshipping the golden calf. They were a punishment for Israel's sin and doubt. And so the Feast of Tabernacles was a feast of gratitude that God did not abandon them in their unfaithfulness, but kept his covenant and brought them, eventually, to the Promised Land.

Those people on the streets of Jerusalem were doing the same thing for Jesus. They were shouting "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!" Hosanna... save us! Don't abandon us. Don't let us wander any more. Bring us back to our home. Make everything the way it was before.

And, in a sense, that's exactly what Jesus intended to do. God had not abandoned them. He was faithful to his covenant. And he was bringing them home. But he wasn't bringing them back to a time of sinful kings and a land filled with idolatry. That was what they expected. That was what they thought they wanted. And that was why they wanted to crucify Jesus when He didn't deliver it.

No, Jesus had a better home in mind. Jesus was bringing them back to their home in Eden. He was bringing humanity back to sinless perfection. Not by traveling to the Promised Land. But by sacrificing his life for the forgiveness of their sins.

Jesus wasn't bringing them into a Kingdom of Man or a Kingdom of this World, but bringing them into the Kingdom of God. Where God's goodness overflows not just in the fruit of trees, but in fruits of the Spirit. Fruits of righteousness and blessedness. Fruits of forgiveness and grace and life everlasting.

In the Book of Revelation, the great multitude of saints stands before the throne of God with palm branches in their hands. These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. These are the ones coming out of the great forty years in the wilderness. These are the ones coming out of a sinful world. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

And now they stand before the throne of God in an eternal Feast of Tabernacles. Remembering the sin that separated them from God's Promised Land. Remembering the faithfulness of their Lord who brought them through the wilderness of this sinful world. Through the valley of the shadow of death.

And brought them to a place where they are sheltered, not by tents, but by his presence. The sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water. The living water we receive from him. The living water that quenches every thirst.

The living water that he promised to us, as our lesson from John 7 says, on the last day of the feast. What feast? Why, the Feast of Tabernacles, of course. It was at that very feast that Jesus proclaimed, "*If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture as said, 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.'*"

Which brings us back to our first explanation. Why palm branches? Because they are a symbol of life. Life in the wilderness. Life in the desert. Life in the midst of death. They waved palm branches because the palm is a symbol of Jesus. And of the life he gives to us. Amen.