

St. John's Lutheran Church
March 16, 2008

"Joining Our Voices"
Matthew 21:1-11

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Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, grace and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus, the Christ. Amen.

It is Palm Sunday! Our choirs enter our worship waving Palm branches - as Christians have done on this Sunday for centuries. What is going on? Why do we wave leafy branches in Palm Sunday worship? And what is the significance for our lives today?

We are actually familiar, perhaps, even in on our own culture with the idea of waving something in the air as a means of celebration. When I was a very small child growing up in small town Minnesota, I remember small American flags going on sale just prior to the Fourth of July. The small flags were attached to a wooden stick with a golden point on the end. And as the Fourth of July approached we would ask our parents if we could have a flag, and the answer always was yes.

We used those American flags in different ways. Sometimes we planted them on either side of our front side walk just beyond our front porch. Sometimes we fastened them to our bicycles so they would wave in the breeze as we road around the block. Sometimes we brought them to the Fourth of July parade and waved them high as the marching bands marched by. It was a means of helping to celebrate our nation's birthday.

More recently in the State of Minnesota there has been the phenomenon of the Homer Hanky. It was introduced in the fall of 1987 when the Minnesota Twins made it to the World Series and beat the St. Louis Cardinals for the World Series Championship. The Homer hanky appeared everywhere, but not least of all in the hands of those who made it to the games, they were waved as a means of rallying the team to victory. Ever since, when the Twins make the play-offs there is a reincarnation of the Homer Hanky, waving in the hands of cheering crowds.

In the worship of the Old Testament people of God, there was a tradition of waving leafy branches at one point in their liturgy. And this waving of leafy branches was connected to the word, "Hosanna". The word "Hosanna" is from the 118th Psalm, the hymnbook of the ancient people of God. Literally translated it simply means, "Save us, we beseech thee." As the people sang their Hosannas and waved their leafy branches, they called upon God for help and greater success in their lives. "Hosanna! Save us, we beseech thee."

As Jewish belief and tradition developed it came to be believed that God had promised Israel that he would send them a great king. That great king yet to come came to be known as the "Messiah". It was understood that he would be a descendent in the line of a former king of Israel, King David. And this future king would restore the fortunes of the people, and the Kingdom, of Israel. And the word, "Hosanna", "Save us, we beseech thee," came to be attached to this hope of a future king who would restore the fortunes of the people of Israel to former greatness.

All of this, then, is helpful background, to the events of the first Palm Sunday. Word got out that the future king, the Messiah, was coming into the capital city – the City of Jerusalem. A very large crowd gathered and spread their coats on the road. And others of the crowd cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. And the donkey continued walking. Walking on the people's coats. And walking on the soft branches. Some of the crowd fell in ahead of Jesus and began walking before him on the road. Others fell in behind Jesus and walked behind him on the road.

And together the people in the crowd were shouting a loud chorus, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!" And we hear that his entrance into Jerusalem caused a turmoil throughout the city.

And so it was that when the crowds cried loud "hosannas" on that first Palm Sunday, they were calling out their expectation that Jesus would be the promised king, whom the people had been expecting for centuries, to come and save his people from political tyranny. And the current political tyranny the people were experiencing, in those days, was the tyranny of the Roman Empire.

Jesus, of course, was the Promised King the people were expecting. The hope in their voices as they cried out for him to save them, Hosanna, was not misplaced. The only surprise was that it was not from the tyranny of the Roman Empire that Jesus would save them, but rather from the tyranny of sin, death, and the power of the devil. He was riding into the city to die, in order that he might rise as victor on Easter Sunday.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, today we join our voices to those who cried out Hosanna so many

centuries ago. And we join our voices to those who have cried the same all down the centuries. For we, on our part, are well aware that we are in need of salvation from sin, death, and the power of the devil. And as we feed on his word today and on this bread and cup, we celebrate the same king Jesus, come in our worship to save us, in our time, as well. "Hosanna to the Son of David. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Also to us, today. Amen.