

"The Sign of Palm Branches"

John 12:13

April 14,2019

Palm Sunday

As those of you who have been attending our Wednesday evening Lent services know, our theme for this Lent has been "signs of salvation" – those things which point us to God's saving plan for us. So far, many of the signs which we considered have been very ordinary – ashes, a baby, and so on. One might think on this special day that the sign which we consider might be special, too. But it's not. The sign which we considered today is a tree branch.

Now don't get me wrong. Tree branches are very beautiful as they bud in the spring and give their colored leaves up in the fall. Tree branches can also be useful for providing shade on a hot summer day or fuel for a fire on a cold winter night.

However, today we think of a special tree and the branches that come from it – palm branches. They are so significant that this special day in the church calendar receives its name from them – Palm Sunday. On this day which begins Holy Week, palm branches were used by people in welcoming Jesus into the city of Jerusalem. But trees in general, and palms in particular, serve a greater purpose than merely a welcoming device. Today, trees, branches from trees, and what hung on those trees also serve as signs, not only of our salvation, but of the reason we needed saving in the first place.

All of our troubles in the world started because of a tree. Long ago, when God made the world, He made two special trees -- the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Hanging on those trees was fruit. God wanted Adam and Eve to eventually eat the fruit from the tree of life and live forever, but, of the other tree, God said, "Don't eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. When you eat of it, you will surely die."

You all know the story of what happened. Satan tempted Eve, "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden'?" Eve, at first, refused this temptation by saying, "We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, but God did say, 'You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.'"

Satan upped the ante by making this tree, forbidden by God, look more attractive to Eve. He said, "You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." Eve listened to Satan's words, saw how attractive the tree looked, how good the fruit hanging on that tree looked for eating, thought of how desirable it would be to be like God, knowing good from evil, and she decided to ignore God and rebel. She ate the fruit, thus sinning against God's command. She gave the fruit to Adam and he ate it, too.

This tree and its fruit became a sign of our condemnation. By this one tree, Satan not only overthrew Adam and Eve, but all of humanity for each of us have inherited Adam's sinful nature. God has also put "trees" in our lives - things He commands us to do or things He forbids us from doing. Like Eve, we often know God's

command clearly enough. We think that alternate choices are attractive and simply choose to rebel with the hope that we will be "like God" and in better control of our lives.

But do we gain or make our lot in life better by trying to be God? Not at all. We fall under the wrath and judgment of God by refusing to obey Him. Our refusal to obey also causes the suffering we experience in our world. We have so much crime and pain because people won't obey God's commands "You must not steal!" and "You must not kill!" We have poverty and homelessness because all people won't obey God's command to share and care for one another. Husbands and wives divorce, parents and children have conflicts, there is jealousy and back biting at work -- all because people won't obey God's command, "You must love your neighbor as you love yourself." There are many more examples that could be given. My point is: all of our suffering occurs, not because God is absent from this world or because He delights in evil, but because we choose to sin and refuse obedience God. All of that sin began with one tree in the Garden of Eden. That tree is a sign of our hopeless situation.

But God promised to send Someone to change all of that. God promised to send Someone to save us from our choices and the eternal consequences of those choices. That person, of course, is Jesus Christ. And, again, a tree and its branches are involved - a palm tree.

In our lesson for today, Jesus is riding into Jerusalem to begin His work of saving us. The people are so excited and full of enthusiasm and want to show it, just like we show our excitement for our favorite athletes, movie stars, and political figures by holding up signs, waving foam rubber hands, and so on.

But these were the days before such ways of showing excitement. The people used what they had available. Our text says, "They took palm branches and went out to meet him, shouting, 'Hosanna!' 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!' 'Blessed is the King of Israel!' " They were all excited because they believed that Jesus was the Messiah who had come to free them.

But free them from what? A palm branch is a symbol of an earthly king. Those people felt that Jesus was coming as King to free them from poverty, from disease, from Roman rule, and from high taxes and set up a glorious kingdom here on earth in which Israel would enjoy wealth and success while ruling the nations.

But Jesus did not come to save people from those problems. Maybe you are thinking, "Well, why not? If Jesus would save us from poverty, from terrorism and war, from disease and infirmity, from bad government and high taxes, and so on, that would be great!" That would be good, but would not be enough. Jesus came to do more.

It is like a doctor treating the disease by taking care of the symptoms, but not healing the disease. For example, if a person has a brain tumor which causes terrible headaches and the doctor gave him Tylenol or even morphine, that would be easy for the doctor to do and maybe would relieve the pain. However, the tumor would still be there. The pain would return and death would eventually be the result. The doctor must do a harder work and remove the tumor itself.

In the same way, Jesus did not come to save us merely from the symptoms of sin - poverty, suffering, and pain in this life, but Jesus came to heal us from the disease which causes these symptoms, namely, sin itself.

This would involve the tree in what hung on it. It was not a pretty tree with decorative palm branches. It was the bare hard tree of the cross. He took the disease of sin upon himself as He hung on that cross and died to heal us from the disease of sin, as well as to ultimately free us from the consequences of sin, namely eternal death and condemnation by God.

How ironic this was. Long ago, Satan used a tree -- tree of the knowledge of good and evil -- and the fruit which hung on it to overcome people and cause us to be slaves of sin and doomed to hell. Now, God uses a tree -- the cross -- and what hung on it -- Jesus -- to overcome Satan and free us from our slavery to sin and give us everlasting life in heaven. He even rose from the dead to prove that this was so -- 100% sure -- without any doubts.

This gives us much hope. And, again, a tree is involved. Remember that I told you God made two special trees -- the tree of knowledge of good and evil and the tree of life? Adam and Eve ate from the first and only came to the knowledge of their sin and doom, but they never ate from the tree of life to live forever.

The Bible says that you and I will. We will continue to experience problems of various kinds in our lives -- financial, health, emotional, temptations to ignore God live for self, and so on. They don't magically vanish because Jesus went to the tree of the cross. Yet, remember that these are but symptoms of the disease called sin. The disease itself has been cured for each of us.

But how do we overcome these symptoms? We can't do it ourselves. We are too weak. Yet, through our Baptism, we are given a new and stronger life in Christ. We are often doubting and afraid. Yet in His Holy Word, He for supports, encourages, and strengthens us in that new life. In Holy Communion, our new lives are fed and nourished with the body and blood of Jesus Christ. Living in Him and through His strength, we are able to endure and overcome. And He promises, "To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God." (Rev. 2:7)

We have heaven assured, life forever with our Savior Jesus Christ. What a wonderful idea when compared with our life here and now. But what will we do there? A little boy came home from church once and told his mother, "I don't want to go to heaven." His mom was shocked and asked, "Why not?" The boy said, "Well, today the pastor said we will worship God forever in heaven. I don't want to go to heaven, sit on a hard wood pew, and listen to a boring sermon that lasts forever."

Heaven is not like that. We will worship God forever - true, but it will not be dull and boring. It will be a celebration, a party, a feast that will continue forever. Again, a tree is involved. The palm branches we hold today are reminders and signs of that coming time. For, just as they were used in praising Jesus on that first Palm Sunday many years ago, they will be used again in praising Him in heaven for all eternity. God allowed St. John a glimpse of heaven which he has recorded for us in the Book of Revelation where he writes, "

"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 in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice: "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb." All the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures. They fell down on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, saying: "Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!"

That's not a bored crowd, sitting on wooden pews, "enduring" worship as some sort of duty or punishment. That's an excited crowd, waving their palm branches, shouting and singing praise to the Lord forever! As people who have been redeemed by Jesus Christ, made members of His family through Holy Baptism, and given the gift of faith, we enjoy a "foretaste of the feast to come" as we gather together here to worship and we will join that crowd after our death.

Sometimes, it is easy to get caught up in the problems and frustrations of our lives now and forget the joy and excitement that is waiting for us in heaven. Palm Sunday is a good day for remembering that excitement and celebration. The palm branch is more than a decoration. It serves well as a sign to help us remember what has come and what will come. As you see the palm branch, remember that it was palm branches like this which welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem to begin His work of salvation by dying on the tree of the cross to overcome the ill effects on humanity that the tree in the garden had on us. And, as you look at the palm branch, remember that it will be palm branches like this which will welcome us into heaven and our place in the great throng of all believers from every nation, tribe, people and language before the throne of God. May the palm branch help you to remember and treasure what has been done for you by Jesus in the upcoming Holy Week, as well as help you to remember and anticipate what is yet to be done for you by Him when you eat of the tree of life which is in heaven. The celebration has been put in place this coming week. The fulfillment is coming soon. Amen.