

Palm Sunday 2013. St. Augustine's in-the-Woods Episcopal Church, Freeland WA
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Here we are again; gathered together to remember a very familiar but somewhat odd day when pieces of dead vegetation take on very profound significance, and the actions of someone not present in today's story are so important that without them Palm Sunday's events actually lose some of their immediacy and significance.

Both the plant and the person are familiar.

The plant is – obviously – the palm. The person is Pontius Pilate.

In the Torah palm trees were symbols of God's promise of a land of milk and honey – metaphors for metaphors for HOME in all the profound meanings of that word. Lining Jesus' path with palm branches would be like lining the streets with the Stars and Stripes on July Fourth for a presidential visit – a double celebration of national identity and of the coming of one representing the people.

The "Absent Man" – Pilate, is significant on this day because of what he's doing on the other side of Jerusalem: entering the city riding a war horse at the head of a long line of Roman soldiers in full military uniform, supported by cavalry. Think of the old footage of the Nazis marching into Paris in June of 1940 – the message to an unarmed civilian population is unmistakable: "don't mess with us or we'll kill you". And, in fact, it was usual for a few – and sometimes many – Jews to be murdered by Romans during the Passover, as an object lesson that "you can celebrate freedom from the slavery of an oppressive Empire – Egypt – all you like, but try the same tricks against us and we'll kill you all". Which, during the 2nd Jewish Revolt of 132 A.D., is exactly what they did.

Add Jesus' use of a donkey – the symbol chosen by King Solomon to signal to his kingdom upon his ascension that he "came in peace", and you have a remarkable contrast: from the west, the Prince of War; from the east the Prince of Peace. Laurel wreaths vs. Palm branches

There's much more symbolism and metaphor that make clear the stark reality here, but you get the picture. This is a volatile mix that only lacks a match.

The "match" is a word. A word that must surely have pushed the Romans over the edge when they heard that it had been used: "Hosanna".

Hosanna. It's a Greek word not an English word translated from something else – a transliteration. But "Hosanna" the Greek word is also not a Greek word but a transliteration from Hebrew: "hoshiya na." That phrase - because it *is* a phrase in Hebrew, means "Save us", but it has an emphasis. Save us "Not in 5 minutes, or tomorrow, or next week, but "now" ...or, actually "NOW!!" "Save us NOW!" "SALVATION NOW"

Sounds like a chant from a political rally, doesn't it?! It's the sort of chant that can get people

worked up; and when people get worked up, riots – or worse – can happen.....a fact never lost on occupying armies who often don't have enough forces to put down a popular uprising.

So you cut off the head and the body dies. You execute the leaders quickly, publically, and brutally, and most times it puts an end to peoples emotional response.

I'd be very surprised if more than a few people didn't wonder, on that day, what might happen to Jesus when the Romans found out about this demonstration. As day followed night, they would have thought, there will be consequences..... They only needed to wait a week to find out.

It must have been a truly remarkable experience to walk beside Jesus in the midst of that crowd! To hear the shouts, to join in the chanting, to feel that, yes, something special was happening, to feel our emotions stir, our spirits raise, to believe that perhaps the time for freedom had come.

By the end of the week everyone had deserted Jesus, including pretty much every one of his closest disciples.

When the shouting on the Day of Palms had died away it turned out that fear of dying – granted probably quite horribly – had overcome them all.

Today's collect prayer has a really remarkable phrase: "When the shouting dies down." When all the emotion has drained away, when everyone has 'slept off the party' and we awake to a "room" strewn with empty bottles and dried food and the harsh and unflattering light of a new day – to a real world with complex problems not susceptible to the easy answers of a boisterous crowd how will we respond to God's call to discipleship?

The week that lies ahead of us invites that sort of question – and a question that is not just for the week ahead, but for our whole lives. When the shouting and celebration dies down will we still walk beside this man on a donkey as he seeks to enter those places of intractable conflict, heart-wrenching poverty, agonized suffering? Will we, his disciples, carry that message in our lives that says, in answer to the questioning, demanding cries for freedom from all the things that enslave us, "Yes, I will come in the name of the Lord"?