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Have you ever found yourself on an emotional rollercoaster, going from the high and excitement of one moment to the low and painful experience of another? You may feel as though you're tossed up and down on the waves of uncertainty and despair. What begins with anticipation shifts toward confusion. This morning's two readings from John's Gospel seem to do that, for the reading began with Jesus' joyous entry with the crowd waving palm branches, with hoorays and hosannas, but then the rollercoaster shifted to Jesus' crucifixion on a cross. What do we do with these rollercoaster stories?

This morning I brought four things to help us reflect upon the scriptures, to guide us as we travel along the highs and lows of the rollercoaster. The first is a palm branch, something we enjoyed waving as we walked into the sanctuary this morning.

These were common tree branches in Jesus' day, as common as Oak or Maple trees here in Indiana. But rather than seen as ordinary, in that part of the world palms carried significant meaning. As the crowd waved leafy branches, they were using

a symbol of victory and peace, for palm branches were awarded to athletes in ancient Greece. Think of the gold medals given during the recent Olympic games, and instead substitute palm branches presented to the winners of each competition. In ancient Egypt, palm branches represented eternal life. In Judaism palm branches were used during the festival of Sukkot, celebrating the harvest and the escape from the Pharaoh during the Exodus, so palm branches also represented liberation.

As people waved the branches during Jesus' entrance, the palms carried deep meanings of hope, eternal life, victory, and liberation. Even though today we may have forgotten the deep significance of palm branches, we still feel some excitement as we walk into the church waving the branches. Especially children know something special is happening, for we don't always begin worship waving branches. Even a child who may not be present today, when given a palm branch later this afternoon will recognize that we celebrated something special, as was the case with a child

who was sick on Palm Sunday and could not attend church. All the other the children at church waved palm branches that morning at the beginning of worship. This would have been the boy's first Palm Sunday in this congregation since they had just recently moved into the area, but he missed the event since he had to stay home with his mother.

His father returned from church holding a palm branch, and the little boy asked, "Where did you get that tree branch, Dad?"

His father replied, "It was Palm Sunday at church, and they passed out the branches at the beginning of worship to all the children; they walked around the church waving the branches. The minister suggested I bring one home since you were sick and could not be there."

The little boy was curious and asked, "Why did they wave palm branches and call it Palm Sunday, Dad?"

His Dad explained, "When Jesus came into town, everyone waved palm branches to honor him, so today we got palm branches in the worship service to celebrate the arrival of Jesus."

The little boy replied, "Aw, shucks! The one Sunday I miss is the Sunday that Jesus shows up."¹

The second item I brought this morning is a piece of purple cloth, the color of the Lenten

season. The cloth represented royalty, for only the wealthy could afford to purchase cloth made with purple dye. The purple color came from tiny snails that had to be extracted from their shells, and it took many snails to get enough dye to color the cloth.

The snails were left to soak, then a tiny gland was removed and the juice extracted and put in a basin, which was placed in the sunlight. There a remarkable transformation took place. In the sunlight the juice turned white, then yellow-green, then green, then violet, then a red which turned darker and darker. The process had to be stopped at exactly the right time to obtain the desired color, which could range from a bright crimson to a dark purple, the color of dried blood. Then either wool, linen or silk would be dyed.²

When Pilate placed a purple robe on Jesus to mock his role as a king, he took an expensive, royal color and transformed its meaning into the color of suffering.

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What began with the green palm branches of victory has shifted to the purple color of suffering, something most of us would rather avoid. Wouldn't it be easier to go from Palm Sunday to Easter and skip over the struggle in the Garden of Gethsemane on Maundy Thursday and the death on a cross on Good Friday?

As much as we would prefer to skip over these painful events, our next object reminds us that the pain of suffering is part of the story, for the crown of thorns serves as a painful reminder of what happened to Jesus. Not only did Pilate provide a robe of purple, he provided a crown fashioned from thorns, and when placed upon Jesus' head, blood began to flow upon him.

When tending my yard, I don't like to encounter thorns, for they often tear into my skin, even managing to find a way through the protection of my gloves. I sometimes wonder about the purpose of thorns, especially on the roses I've enjoyed growing for many years. Although I may not like them, thorns serve the purpose of defense, protecting plants from predators eating them.

Palms, Thorns, and Pieces of Cloth
March 25, 2018 Palm Sunday

When Pilate placed a crown of thorns on Jesus' head, I doubt he thought of them representing protection, but in a sense, the thorns remind us that God was still present in the midst of Jesus' misery. Just as thorns protect precious plants, the cross of thorns reminds us that God was still protecting Jesus, even in his suffering.

And that leads to our next object: a piece of white cloth, the cloth that Jesus' friends used to wrap his body. The cloth was stained with the blood of Jesus, a sign of death as they wrapped him and placed him in the tomb. The cloth represented Jesus' final resting place, in a tomb, dead. And yet, we know the cloth represents more than that, for soon the cloth will be shed and new life will emerge, but that's getting ahead of our story. It's so tempting to get to that news today, to miss the painful suffering, to avoid the sorrow and pain. Most of us would prefer that, wouldn't we? Don't we long for the easy path in life?

- Good grades in school without the studying?
- Well behaved children without the guidance and discipline?

Rev. Dr. Douglas Cripe
Central Christian Church, Elkhart & First Christian Church, Mishawaka

John 12:12-19; 19:16b-22

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- Great marriages without the communication and struggles?
- Great jobs without the education and learning?
- Retirement without years of hard work?
- Health without proper nutrition and exercise?

Sometimes I've been in congregations that want more people attending without the task of inviting others. Or some have wanted a beautiful building without maintenance and repairs.

In a sense, all the objects this morning remind us not only of the path Jesus traveled, but the path we are each invited to follow. The green palm branch invites us to times of celebration and hope, those joyous moments we share together in life. The purple color reminds us that each of us are chosen by God to do something important. Just as royalty are called as leaders, so are we. But the color also reminds us that sometimes we will

encounter suffering. The thorns remind us that even in suffering, God offers protection, that we have not been abandoned even in our greatest despair. The white cloth reminds us of the loving presence of friends who comfort us in times of death. The cloth reminds us that God continues to remain with us even in death, for nothing can separate us from the love of God.

Green palms, purple cloth, thorns, and white. Things we often take for granted, and yet, with God's movement in our lives, they become transformed from ordinary into extraordinary reminders of what God is doing in the world and in our lives: Bringing hope in suffering, life from death, new opportunities from failures. Don't miss the suffering of this Holy Week, for hidden in the despair you just might catch a glimmer of hope.

¹ Story adapted from sermons.com.

² <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Purple#Pigments>