

Sermon: Palm Sunday Palms Tree of Life 4.8.09 Rev. Lynn James, LMHC

At this time I invite you to take the paper and pencil in your bulletin, draw an outline of your hand, and sign your name. Now, please pass your hand to the person to your left; continue to pass the hands until I tell you to stop. Stop. I invite you to read the name you have received and then place their paper hand between your palms. Look at the hand you now hold in yours. From this moment until Easter Sunday, you are all holding one another's hands and this is a circle of support and prayer. This week, when you are tired, or sad, or lonely, remember that someone here is holding your hand, and that you are holding someone else's hand, and that the hands of God are holding us all -----

Hands,

stretching wrist to palm to finger tips, bending, grasping, pinching to pick up small things, big things, Hands full, holding on, fingers curling to keep hold Hands empty, opening, turning over, letting go. Palm Sunday hands, the Passover holiday begins in Jerusalem, with busy hands, kneading bread, stirring pots, gathering eggs, making beds, hammering nails, combing children's hair, stroking the coarse wool fur of lambs, hands moving from horns and head to neck and rope, tugging the rope end, pulling, leading them through the temple courtyard, some for sacrifice, others for selling, for buying. Hands exchanging money, the metal warm from pocket to palm to pocket. Passover hands, busy hands of neighbors and strangers, travelers and city dwellers, Hands together creating a yearly ritual of Jewish identity and faith.

Hands, gesture with excitement, palms placed on each side of their mouths, shouting down the alleys, "Have you heard? He is coming! Jesus, the healer,

teacher, Rabbi Jesus, Voice of Elijah, message of Moses, Messiah, Son of God!
Come quickly; come see!"

Hands motion others to follow, hands wave, hands reach for hands, as feet run into the street, then to the east edge of town. In the prisons, hands bound wrist to wrist by metal chains quiver with hope; they have heard the words of Isaiah resounding through the prison bars, (49:9) repeated by the One whose healing hands have restored life, health, and hope to so many, echoes which shake walls with the words "Behold, I come to set the captives free".

On the other side of town, hands of the empire's soldiers, salute, hands and arms in rigid posture marching, a parade of hands carrying weapons, waving royal flags as voices shout "Hail Caesar" and "Lord, Lord"

Royal hands, straighten the laurel leaf crown upon his head, the Roman Governor Pilate's hands clutch the sides of the royal chariot as it rolls like a mighty boulder down a mountain toward the city walls of Jerusalem.

Strong hands lift and lower whips, urging tall stallions forward, horses befitting a god and king,

This processional is powered by the hands of mighty warriors, hands which also caressed wives and tousled the heads of their little ones before heading off to fulfill their civic duty in Caesar's army.

Some hands are tired and aching, other are hands throbbing with excitement for the battles ahead.

Back on the other side of town, hands are busy gathering palm branches, no laurel leaves in these hands, no flags waving or weapons raised, just leaves gathered spontaneously from the fields.

Palm branches lifted high make the arms and hands of the crowd look like branches of a great tree. For a moment their silhouettes look like an enormous tree of life.

The disciples' hands are no longer mending fishing nets, fingers skillfully weaving together the cords that will fall into the water's depths and be raised up bursting with food to feed their families, fish to sell to a hungry town.

The disciple's hands now mend lives, fingers reaching out to dry tears, hands extended to help people stand up, fingers together carrying nets of compassion which fall deeply into people's lives, then are raised up bursting with Presence, enough to feed everyone, not to sell or barter, but to give and give and give.

Hands outstretched in offering find that they are suddenly holding even more to give away; hands clenched in fear and withholding, find that even what they thought they had has slipped through their fingers.

Generous hands touched by the fingertips of God, distribute hope, passing light from hand to hand, until the landscape is on fire and those of us who walked in darkness have become bearers of light.

The hands of the disciples now are pushing through the crowds, pointing directions, guiding people which way they should go to catch a glimpse of Jesus. Two disciples untie the rope from the post where a young colt waits. They cover

his brown coat with the coats from their backs; their hands place these garments like a saddle on his back, a soft place for a body to rest.

No whips in these hands, gently they touch the spot just beneath its brown eyes, fingers pat the white spot on the nose, then smooth the ears back. Hands that unknowingly touched the face of God now soothe the frightened animal, pulling the rope toward the loud voices of the gathering crowd.

Holy Hands now are braced on the backbone of the colt; Christ's body is lifted up and settles upon it there. No chariot for this king, no pomp and circumstance typical of royal processions. Fingers grasp a simple cloak, a garment not of silk but muslin, not royal purple but servant brown, it drapes around the shoulders of the Savior. "Lord, Lord" the crowd cries, "Our God and King". Hands reaching out to touch his cloak, hands wave palm leaves as if to send their urgent chanting higher into the sky: "Hosanna, Hosanna; Save us, Save us".

Hands tilt apart, accompanying the shrugging of shoulders. Questions are raised with the upturned palms. "Who is this to be called god and king?" Then, with a shudder of fear, "What if news of this procession reaches the other side of town?"

Some hands tremble, others tighten into a fist, some hands worriedly pull at beards upon chins, other hands rub creased foreheads, thinking, choosing, deciding which parade they will join.

The parades have ended and evening comes. The murmur of voices fills an upper room. The disciples are hungry. Gratefully their fingers lift food to their mouths, unaware that this will be the last time they will eat supper together.

Nervous fingers tap upon the table. A disciple is flexing his hands, no longer flowing with healing power; instead they are braced for betrayal.

Hands slide beneath a loaf of bread, lifting it, the scent of wheat resting on his palms, grains which were buried deep in the earth, bursting open to become stalks of wheat, pounded into flour, are now food for this final journey.

Jesus tightens his grip on the bread. Clearing his voice he offers himself, "This is my body about to be broken like the shell that encases a kernel of wheat." Breaking the loaf open he invites: "Take and eat".

Hands stop, frozen for a moment, the table is quiet as the disciples question what he is saying, what that could mean.

Jesus reaches for his cup with one hand; with the other hand he finds the wineskin filled with crushed grapes, their juice dark like the water of life that flows through his veins and ours. He tips the cask so that wine flows into his cup. He lifts it as if to offer a toast, "L'chaim-to life" and then speaks of his death. "This is my life, crushed and poured out for you."

Unsteady hands around the table reach for their cups, uncertain whether to drink or refuse this strange toast. He brings the cup to his lips saying, "Every time you drink and eat please remember me." The meal is finished but his hands still contain the impulse of compassion. He reaches down to untie the dusty sandals of his friends. Hands that once restored life to the dying now fumble with untying, knots, symbols also of the weariness and confusion of these faithful travelers.

Jesus' fingertips feel the coolness of the water in the washing bowl as he dips a cloth into it. One by one the One who saves is the One who washes the grime of the street from the disciple's feet.

One by one a final blessing is offered in humility and love.

After the feast, the waiting begins. Together in the garden, weary hands can no longer hold on, palms are now pillows for tired heads. The disciples sleep while Jesus prays.

Palms pressed, fingers bent, tips to knuckles, thumbs crossed, a warm tear falls onto his clenched hands then drops to the cold ground called Gethsemane, "Abba, Father, Daddy, please, take this cup from me. Yet, not what I will but what You will."

The disciples' hands startle, fingers tingle with a sudden rush of fear; they awaken to the sound of soldiers' voices, then one of their own.

The still nervous fingers of Judas reach out for embrace, hand upon shoulder, kiss upon cheek, then turn, no longer friend but enemy; lips that once prayed and promised now whisper death with a kiss.

Someone's hands draw a sword, fingers grasp the handle swinging it around, slicing the ear of the high priest's servant. Hands become weapons ready for battle. The hands of Christ, in their final touch of skin to skin, reach out and heal, restoring not only an ear, but a choice: no blood will be shed but his.

Outside the garden, hands pass a bundle of coins, the price of selling out. Not the hands of Judas, but the hands of you, of me. Hands that sort through racks of

blouses sewn by our sisters as they suffer in poverty, fingers bleeding and backs broken like the bread that Jesus blessed. Our hands, that search the aisles of food for the cheapest fruit, chocolate, and coffee beans, fingers brushing aside pesticide that we can wash off but our brothers cannot expel from their lungs, where their lives are used up and down the rows of poisoned fields, not even able to trade their lives for enough money to support their families.

Our hands join with Judas' hands, selling out Christ again and again. Our hands are the angry clenched hands of the gathering crowd. Once waving palm branches they and we are now shaking palms curled into fists. Crowds of hands, their hands and ours, lift Christ to the cross, as voices shout "Crucify", afraid to defy the occupying militia.

Fisted hands are frightened hands to hide behind, "See, we are not atheists of our government's deities; we believe Caesar, that money, that power, is god, and we obey these commands. With our hands we offer this sacrifice seeking our protection, our salvation. Do not destroy us; destroy him."

Unclean hands, Pilate washing and washing, unable to undo what has been done. Pilate the merciless executioner who unflinchingly has raised his hands in condemnation of thousands he has crucified before this one, here is depicted in a moment of conscience.

Pilate, whose reputation for bloodshed is well known; here is a man with unclean hands aware for the first time that they carry the truth of his sadistic sins. Unclean hands, our hands, when we have failed to reach out and help one another up, instead reaching out to push one another down.

Unclean hands, our hands, dirty from the violence that we decide is a fair exchange for getting what we want, what we think we need, even if it means others must give up what they have, must go without, must sacrifice their lives for our conveniences.

Lazy hands, fingers flipping channels, time wasted on trash tv, feasting on violence and exploitation, merchandise promising salvation from our humanness and the illusion of immortality.

Soiled hands, our hands each time we destroy instead of create, defile instead of sanctify, hurt instead of heal. Our hands, yours and mine, filled with blessings nevertheless, endless invitations to hold onto the promises of God, to hold on while God is turning the world upside down, to hold on so that we might pull the kingdom that much closer each time we harness the power of love and halt the onslaught of hate.

Hands clap now for a different parade. A wooden cross is carried down the dusty road to Golgotha, the place of death, yesterday, today, and tomorrow. Where is our Golgotha? That place in our lives where we drive nails into the hands of God, the feet of Christ?

Where is that place in our world where innocence hangs in the balance, where good people do hate-filled things, refusing to look at what we are doing and not doing with our hands?

Where are we clapping, cheering with relief at someone else's failures, that others are dying so that we might live in the style to which we have grown accustomed.

The fingers of the human hand cannot cause pain as efficiently as the fingers of a whip. The whip's fingers fly, flesh is torn, Christ bleeds and falls again. Shadows of slaves, human skin dark like the warm earth that is womb for the wheat fields, become the body of Christ each time the whip rips them open.

Centuries of lifetimes, everywhere human bodies crumble under the force of fear turned fierce and greed turned to grotesque acts of violation, God is embodied there and Golgotha, the place of skulls, is again the place where Christ is crucified.

Hammer and nails, which we could use to rebuild the world, homes for the homeless, shelter for the lost, beds for the sick, and toys for the children; hammer and nails, tools of construction and hope in some hands, turn deadly when carried into Golgotha.

Nails, no longer for building but tearing apart, the flesh of palms, the bones of feet. Hammer pounding, hand to hand, one hand crucifying the other. Which hand will we hold? Which hammer will we raise? Will our hands join the clapping crowd or will our fingers cover our eyes, resting our heads upon our palms as we weep for the suffering not only of our Christ, but of all those dead and dying because of our sins all over the world? The future is not only in the hands of God, but in your hands, in my hands, in all hands which choose to become the hands of Christ, working to bring forth the kingdom of compassion and justice, the reign of God. Hand to hand, may it be so. Amen.

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¹ Rev Lynn James , *Sermon: Palm Sunday Palms Tree of Life 4.8.09*,
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