

Year Old Palms
Matthew 21:1-11
Rev. Dan Schumacher

It's really strange how much can change in a month, let alone in a year.

Just one month ago, we gathered in worship and "hand-shaked" and hugged like we had nearly every Sunday for the last five years — and for many, many years before that for lots of us.

A month ago, I drug Jay Neubauer up on the rostrum and made a "public service announcement" about how we were going to suspend hugs and handshakes, and trade them for elbow bumps.

A month ago, this virus hadn't taken the life of Alicia and Alana's aunt Gwendolyn.

Since that time, it seems like a lot has changed.

For instance, "date night" for Christen and I used to be a night out on the town — a fancy dinner, maybe a show at the Pikes Peak Center or trivia somewhere. Our favorite dates have always been live music.

But more recently, "date night" isn't dinner out, but dinner *in*. After dinner, we'll curl up on the couch together and catch some "live" music — only now we're streaming artists from their living rooms, where they've set up to play an hour or so worth of music in a room by themselves.

This last week, one of my favorite artists, Jeffrey Foucault, set up such an event from his home office. In the background were shelves and shelves of books. And when the shelves ran out, the books were piled high on any available surface. When I saw that, I looked at Christen and said, "I knew me and Jeffrey were kindred spirits."

The back wall of his office was covered in cowboy hats, and a few loose strings of old Christmas lights were strung across the background, I guess, to provide a little "mood" lighting for the show. He was surrounded by a seven or eight guitars, six of them all in a row on a stand that he sarcastically called "the gunrack." On the other side of him was a computer and a professional calibre microphone. He looked a bit crowded crammed into his office like that — a bit like he was putting on a concert from the middle of a sardine can.

I started to wonder if he realized how seriously some of us who were "tuned in" were studying his home.

Jeffrey's a big guy, standing well over six feet tall. He's built like an Iowa farm boy, and he's ruggedly handsome, too. I've never seen a man wear so much denim and pull it off

like he does. He's why I'm trying to grow this beard out. I'm hoping that if I have a beard like his, Christen will look at me like she looks at him.

He's also a thoughtful guy. He does covers of John Prine and Greg Brown. He's a good writer, and not just of music. His prose has an "earthy elegance" about it. You can tell that he's studied the language.

I've seen Jeffrey live at least a half dozen times, so it was weird watching him look into a camera and not into a crowd of faces. He acknowledged the same. After he played his first song, he said, "Well, there you go. Welcome to the streaming show. It's pretty weird... This is probably not that weird for you. We all stare at the computer occasionally, but," he confessed, "it is *deeply* weird for me."

As he finished his second song — one of his classics and a fan favorite — he let out an audible grunt. It was right at the moment that you'd expect to hear applause. He said, "It's funny when you think about clapping... it's what we all do [after a song in a concert] and we get used to it — and when it's not there, *it feels kinda funny.*"

I mean, have you ever been at concert when people didn't clap after the song. What is a concert without applause? What is a concert without *the crowd*?

Can you imagine Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem with out the shouts of acclamation, without the waving branches, without *the crowds*?

You know, as an anonymous body of people, "the crowds" function as a character in the gospel of Matthew.

The crowds were there at the beginning, coming to Jesus from all around the region (4:25). *The crowds* were there at the Sermon on the Mount, listening to his teaching (5:1). *The crowds* were repeatedly astounded at his authority (7:28-29). *The crowds* were there when he healed the sick (12:15) and when he casted out demons (9:33), and they had their bellies filled — twice! — with a just a few loaves of bread and a couple of fish (14:13-21; 15:32-39). *The crowds* were some of the first who began to wonder whether Jesus might be the Son of David (12:23).

So it shouldn't surprise us, then, that it's *the crowds* who got caught up in the moment when Jesus rode into the city.

According to Matthew, Jesus came down from the Mount of Olives on the back of a donkey and its colt. The disciples had placed their cloaks on the back of the donkey for him to sit on.

As he sauntered into the Holy City on the back of that donkey, *the crowd* gathered and laid out a royal carpet before him made of their own clothes and of branches cut from area trees.

They clapped. They danced. They hooted and hollered. They skipped and frolicked. They shouted, "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!"

They shouted, "*Hosanna.*" Do you know what Hosanna means?

I think we sometimes confuse "hosanna" with "hallelujah."

Hallelujah means, "God be praised!"

Hosanna means something else entirely. Hosanna means, "*save us...*"

As they paraded with Jesus, stripping off their cloaks, cutting branches from the trees, and laying them on the ground to honor him, they shouted to Jesus, "Save us... you who come in the name of the Lord, save us."

Why would the crowds be shouting "save us?" From what did they need saving?

Jesus' parade wasn't the only parade happening that day.

"Two processions entered Jerusalem on a spring day in the year 30," write biblical scholars, Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan.

One procession came from the east. It was largely composed of peasants, following a man named Jesus, who was from a small town in Galilee. He came riding down from the Mount of Olives on the back of a humble donkey.

But, on the opposite side of the city, there was another procession happening. From the west approached the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate. He entered the city not on a humble donkey, but on a massive war horse. He wasn't followed by peasants, but by garrison of imperial cavalry and soldiers. He came to Jerusalem not to observe the Passover, but to maintain law and order over all those troublesome Jews who were attending the festival. He came to tell the city who was in charge.

One from east, one from west. One celebrated by peasants, one feared by peasants. One on a donkey, one on a war horse; one on a tractor, one on a tank. One to usher in the kingdom of God, one to insist on the reign of Rome.

Which parade would you have been at? Which *crowd* would you have been a part of?

That's the thing about the crowds crying out "Hosanna!" to Jesus. When people cry out "save us," that is, in and of itself, a confession that *things are not as they ought to be.*

Things are not as they ought to be... boy, that's the truth, isn't it?

Things aren't right. Concerts happening from living rooms with no crowds? Church happening from home with no congregation? Things aren't as they ought to be.

It's Palm Sunday, and not one of us has waved a palm branch! There's been no palm procession through the church, no shouts of "Hosanna!" from our children's mouths, no parade through the building.

On Palm Sunday, I always make us practice the call to worship in the belly of the building after Sunday School, so that it sounds more energetic when we get to worship. *We didn't do that.*

I make us stand and wave palms as the Christ candle is marched down the center aisle during the prelude. *We didn't do that.*

We almost always sing "All Glory, Laud and Honor." *We didn't do that.*

I mean, what is Palm Sunday without *you*, church. It'd be a lonely little parade today. Just me, myself, I and marching around this big ol' sanctuary, praying the church mice join in... or at least that the stones cry out...

"Things aren't as they ought to be, Jesus. *Save us.*"

But you know, part of you might just be here with me, whether you realized it or not.

The palms on the table behind me aren't new this year. These are the palms from last year. The weather in February was too unpredictable, too cold, too snowy for me to be able to go outside and burn last year's palms for this year's Ash Wednesday service. So these palms have sat in storage for a year, and I brought them out for today, so that we could remember *the crowd* of people with whom we gather, with whom we worship God, with whom we follow Jesus.

These are the palms you held. These are the palms you waved. These are the palms you left at the altar last year as you exchanged your palm branch for a palm cross. That means your fingerprints are all over these palms.

Who knows? This palm branch might be the one Jennifer Rutter held as she marched the children around the church saying, "Hosanna" with her wonderful Tennessee accent.

Or maybe it's the one the Ellie West held and waved from her spot down at the front of the sanctuary. Ellie's hands are still considered essential service as she now cooks food for takeout only. Though none of us are sitting in restaurants, her hands are still busy feeding hungry people. Maybe this was her palm.

Or maybe it belonged to Jack Yates — though it wouldn't be the only thing in our sanctuary with Jack's fingerprints on it. Years ago, Jack built our sound booth. He's an incredible wood worker. He made his living doing it. I'm guessing Jack is still spending a little time out in his shop, making rocking horses or other toys for children who'd otherwise be in need. Maybe this palm has Jack's fingerprints on it.

Or maybe it belonged to Dale Timms. Last year, Dale was the one who processed our Christ candle down the center aisle during the prelude. Dale loves worshiping at First Baptist Church, so much so that when he had to get another job, he took a cut in hours and in pay so that we could be here worshiping with us on Sunday morning. Maybe this branch was Dale's.

Or maybe it belonged to Isaiah Mitchell. I don't think I've ever met a teenager I respect and think as highly of as I do Isaiah. When he's here, he's always so willing to serve. He's our "go to" back-up on all things A/V related. Devin can't be here to run the board? Ask Isaiah. John is unavailable to run slides? Ask Isaiah. He is just a quality young man. Maybe Isaiah waved this branch through sleepy teenage eyes on this morning last year.

Or maybe it belonged to Linda White. Bill and Linda moved to Grand Junction over the summer after having been members of this church for decades. There aren't many places in this building that don't have Bill and Linda's fingerprints all over them. On Easter last year, I was amazed as I watched Linda play what seemed like a dozen different bells during one song. It was incredible. Maybe this palm was waved as precisely as a handbell by Linda White.

Or maybe it belonged to John-Mark Brown or Kent Hill or Sharon Schutz or Helen Switzer or Russ Storm or Sara Nielsen.

Or maybe it belonged to you. Where were you one year ago? Were you in the choir? Did you help take up the offering? Were you in your "normal" spot? Be honest — were you skipping church?

This "crowd" that we call First Baptist Church is a special one, and though we aren't all parading around the sanctuary together this morning, we are together *in spirit*.

"Hosanna, Jesus." All is not as it ought to be — but we trust that through Jesus *it will be*.

And that is enough for today.

Amen.