

Sermon for Sunday, April 3, 1977, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Senior Pastor  
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"WHEN YOU TRIP OVER A PALM BRANCH"

St. Luke 19:28-40

Text: "...saying 'Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!'" St. Luke 19:38

People were coming from all over Judea--indeed, they were coming from all over the world--and they were converging on Jerusalem. They were Jews and they were going to the ancient City of David to celebrate the Passover. And just a few days before Passover, Jesus came to town. What we are doing today is celebrating the day that Jesus came to town. You see, Jesus had been preaching and teaching and healing for three years now. He had made quite a reputation for himself. People were saying he was the Messiah from God, the Anointed One promised in the Bible. People were saying that God had finally sent someone to lead Israel back to glory and greatness.

That's why Jesus got the red carpet treatment when he came to town that day. When a people have been pushed around for centuries, when a foreign power rules your country, when the people are treated like so much dirt, and then suddenly people believe someone has come to right those wrongs, to square the injustices, and to set the people free--why, you would treat that person royally too! So the Jews lined the road leading into Jerusalem that day, and they got carried away with the whole thing. They tore branches off the palm trees and waved them--some even put their coats down in the road when Jesus was passing. "Praise the Lord!" they said. "Blessed be the King who comes in the name of the Lord!" they shouted. And that's what happened on Palm Sunday.

There is hardly a parallel in all of history to compare with comet-like career of Jesus that week. On the Sunday of the palms he had the acclaim of the multitudes. He had soared to the heights of popularity. But by Friday of that week he had plummeted to the depths of humiliation and shame. By Friday the sound of the crowds had changed. They had grown more ominous and sinister until at last they had screamed at Pilate, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" Like an irresistible force, their anger carried them on a tidal wave of hate until it spent itself against the foot of the cross where the object of their scorn as last hung helplessly.

What do you suppose happened? How was it they hailed him on Sunday and then tripped over their own palm branch? How could they hail him on Sunday and the nail him on Friday? Let me suggest some reasons for their actions. It just might be that in the process we will see some of the palm branches we are tripping over ourselves.

One reason they tripped was because they didn't like their religious life-style challenged. When they prayed and fasted, they made a big production out of it--they dressed in sackcloth and marked their faces so everybody would know. And Jesus said, "When you pray, pray in secret..." When it came to tithing, they were careful about things that didn't cost them much, like mint and cumin and anise. But Jesus said, "You have neglected the weightier matters of the law." Have you seen the bumper stickers, "Honk if you love Jesus"? Somebody has added, "Tithe if you love Jesus--any darn fool can honk". Jesus went into the temple and he challenged their religious life-style. He turned over the tables of the money changers and drove them out of the temple. And when they realized that Jesus was saying that the way they practiced their religion needed changing, they resented it.

How would you like it if someone came up to you and said, "Look, I know you mean well, but your religious practices are all wrong. You have got to change". Well, you

would resent it, wouldn't you? But I think that is the kind of question that Palm Sunday makes us ask ourselves--are our religious life-styles pleasing and acceptable to God? For example, is the amount of money you give God pleasing to him? Do you read the Bible enough to please God? Do you pray as much as you should? Do you treat others the way Jesus wants you to? Do you live the sort of life that you can show the Lord without embarrassment? You see, we may be tripping over some palm branches, too.

A second reason the people tripped over a palm branch was because they assumed that God was on their side. Were not they the Jews? Had not God delivered them from Egypt and divided the Red Sea before them? Had he not fed them manna in the wilderness? In time of famine had he not provided a Joseph? In time of national calamity had he not raised up a David? And now, would not God lead them to freedom from Roman bondage and make them great again? But do you know what Jesus did? He told the parable of the wicked husbandmen who would not give the owner of the vineyard what was rightfully his and then he said, "The kingdom of God shall be taken from you, and be given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof." And on that very Palm Sunday he had stood overlooking the city of Jerusalem and wept. He said, "For the days shall come upon you, when your enemies will cast up a bank about you and surround you, and hem you in on every side, and dash you to the ground..." That didn't sound like God was on their side!

Are we guilty of that attitude? Do we find ourselves tripping over a palm branch because we assume God is on our side? I think that is the lesson Paul had to learn on the road to Damascus. He was bent on persecuting the early Christians and when he set out to Damascus, he had warrants in his pocket for their arrest. He assumed God was on his side. But as it turned out that was the wrong question. You see, Jesus appeared to him on the way and in effect what Jesus said to Paul was this, "Hey, Paul, are you on God's side?" That's the real question, isn't it--not "Is God on my side?" but "Am I on his?" For example, suppose you are having some difficulties in relating to some other person this morning--is God on your side? But that is the wrong question, isn't it? The real question is, "Am I on God's side?" Is God on your side in the things you are praying for? But the real question is, are the things I am praying for on God's side?

We have a hymn in our songbook that goes like this: "Who is on the Lord's side? Who will serve the King..." And when you get right down to it, that's the real question each of us should ask himself--am I on the Lord's side?

A third reason the Jews tripped over a palm branch was because they were looking for easy answers. Under Roman rule the Hebrews were an embittered and destitute people. And when they waved their palm branches on Sunday and draped their robes in the streets before Jesus, they were sure God was going to change all of that. By some mighty miracle, some wave of a magic wand, God was going to set them free and make them a mighty nation again as they had been under David. No wonder they cheered as Jesus rode by! With a snap of the fingers of God, all their troubles would be over. But a funny thing happened! Jesus said things like, "In the world you shall have tribulation..." He said things like, "Blessed are the poor in spirit..." He said, "Take no thought for the morrow..."

Have you ever tripped over that particular palm branch? I know I have. For example, when some problem comes up, I'm guilty of praying for God to make the problem just vanish. I'm guilty of praying to God to bless me in writing a sermon when I've been too lazy to do the hard biblical research first. I suspect most of us are guilty of imagining God as a sort of heavenly alka seltzer who makes all of life's indigestion

problems go away. But, you know, God doesn't usually work that way. I've got a friend who went into business for himself several years ago and over the months I've watched him. He is working very hard and he is asking God to bless his hard work as he does his best. But he would have tripped over a palm branch if he had sat back and said, "Okay, God, you bless the business and I'll count the money."

Back when I was in seminary one of my professors gave me some advice that has stood the test of time. He said, "Andy, when you get out in the pastorate, work as though everything depended on you; then pray as though everything depended on God." There are no easy answers to life. Did you ever stop to think what makes a glorious Christian? Is it because he has never suffered, never had problems, never been sick, never lost a loved one, never carried a burden? No, the thing that makes a glorious Christian is that he has experienced all of those things and in spite of them God has sustained him. And I think that is something of what Jesus meant when he said, "Be of good cheer, I have overcome the world."

A fourth reason the Jews tripped over a palm branch that week was because they didn't like their relationship to God challenged. The Jews assumed they were God's chosen people. Once, when John the Baptist had said that God could raise up Children of Abraham from stones, they got so furious they eventually chopped off his head. As long as they observed the feast days, observed certain fast days, and did all of the external and superficial acts required by the letter of the law, they assumed they were the saved people of God. And do you know what Jesus said to them that week? He said, "You people are like whitewashed tombs. You look good on the outside, but inside you are filled with hypocrisy and rotteness."

Most of us don't like our relationship to God challenged. We have had a number of people leave this church because, they said, "Dr. Jumper is too evangelical." I suppose they mean by that that I talk too much about a man's relationship to Jesus. But it is an interesting thing: in 23 years of the ministry, I have never known a person who had a good relationship to Jesus object to a preacher talking about it. I sometimes suspect that it is the one who is uncertain, unsure or doubtful about his relationship to God who doesn't want the subject raised. He is tripping over a palm branch.

Jesus said, "No man comes to the Father but by me." And the Jews tripped over that palm branch. Yet, if we learn anything from Palm Sunday, it ought to be that--it ought to be that Jesus is God's provision for our salvation, and if we trip over that, we are right back there with the Jews.

Many of us saw the televised series on Alex Haley's "Roots". You will remember in the early part of the series how the hero of the story is taken aboard a slave ship and sent to America. The conditions aboard those slave ships were absolutely incredible and you will have to read the book itself to really understand how bad it was. We wonder what kind of men would run such ships--what sort of man would be captain of such a vessel. Well, back about 1760, one such man was Captain John Newton. He was a hard, ruthless man dealing in human flesh without pity or compassion. One night, as his ship with its dreadful human cargo made its way to America, a violent storm enveloped the ship. The fury of the storm was such that all seemed surely lost. Captain Newton stood on the bridge with the helmsman fighting to save his ship. The sailor, fighting against fear and terror, suddenly cried out in prayer, "O Jesus, Jesus." The name of the savior went like an arrow into the heart of that profane captain and in that moment he gave his heart and his life to Jesus. He left the sea and became a messenger of the good news about Jesus. Out of his experience that stormy night at sea he wrote a poem that has been set to music and

perhaps you have sung it many times. He wrote, "How sweet the name of Jesus sounds, in a believer's ear. It soothes his sorrow, heals his wound, and drives away his fear. It makes the wounded spirit whole, and calms the troubled breast. 'Tis manna to the hungry soul, and to the weary rest."

Yes, how sweet the name of Jesus sounds. And if we trip over that palm branch, we of all men are most to be pitied.

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