

CHRISTIAN EDUCATION DEPARTMENT

Simple Reflections and Ideas on Palms and the Pandemic

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A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road.

The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

*When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, "Who is this?"
Matthew 21:8-10*

Sunday, April 5, 2020, many churches would normally commemorate Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem as recorded in Matthew 21 with the sharing and waving of palms, processions, and shouts and songs of Hosannas. Many ask how shall we celebrate in this time when we are asked to practice "physical" distancing and to shelter at home to help flatten the curve of the spread of the coronavirus. Can we celebrate Palm Sunday or as some call it now, Palm/Passion Sunday without palms? Many argue that the answer is yes and strongly recommend that we do in creative ways that are in keeping with the biblical account, sound theology, church tradition and practice, and the prevailing pandemic precautions of the day.

A Practical Reflection on the Biblical Text

In the account of Jesus' triumph entry into Jerusalem, it is important to keep in mind the context of the story. It is worth noting that everything that was needed and therefore used in this celebration was readily or at least relatively available to the participants. Jesus instructs the disciples to go and borrow the donkey and colt. Most likely, the crowds had their cloaks and garments with them or even on their person and palm trees were present with branches ready to be used as processional adornment. In their praise and procession, those in the crowd used what was immediately at their disposal that could be used to pay homage to the Messiah. Palms were instruments on that day; and, now to this day, they have become a powerful symbol.

A Practical Theological Thought

Symbols are incredibly important; but, symbols are not greater than the thing or principle that they represent. Symbols point to something greater. Palm branches are beautiful; but, they are no more sacred than say another similar plant or tree. In this instance, palms point to the intentions and faith of that crowd so long ago and to our intentions and faith today, to praise and honor the Messiah, the one

who comes in the name of the Lord to save us. Because of the intention and faith, the symbol of the palm is powerful.

Church Tradition and Practice

Now, for centuries, because of this powerful symbol, priests and pastors have prayed, blessed and set aside branches and fronds, stewardesses and altar guilds have stripped and bundled and prepared, and congregations have sung and processed down aisles, avenues, and boulevards with the faith and intention to declare, “We praise and honor the Messiah, the only one who can save us!”

The truth is, probably for just as long, the faith and intention have been expressed with what was readily available—palms, tree branches, signs, banners, etc. In many parts of the world, where Christians worship and witness, palms are not prevalent or available, yet the observance, the praise, the celebration still happens.

Practical Pandemic Considerations and Ideas

Many scientists, public officials, researchers, and faith leaders have reached a consensus and conclusion on one fact in the midst of all the unknowns and uncertainty of this current pandemic: THE FAITHFUL RESPONSE for this moment is to STAY AT HOME as much as possible and practice SOCIAL (PHYSICAL) DISTANCING. For now, we must worship together while being physically apart.

Drive-thru palm distribution and processions, while creative, do not comply with preventive measures presently recommended by the World Health Organization, CDC, and other national health authorities. The creativity of those who envisage such worship innovations are perhaps to be applauded. There may not be any reason to doubt that those officiating and organizing such faith acts do so with sincere faith and the best intentions for worship and even the safety of the faithful; however, what these practices do not do or encourage is the faithful response of this present global season and that is STAY AT HOME, which still is one of the best practices, which helps to reduce risk and spread.

Here are but two practical suggestions that still can honor the liturgical tradition, bear witness to our faith in and need for the Messiah, and allow us to stay at home to help flatten the curve.

Hanging of Greenery

Take palms, tree branches, greenery, wreaths, green cloth or material and adorn the doors and/or windows of our homes as a beautiful and powerful symbol of Palm Sunday, as we enter Holy Week. You may choose to add banners or signs with words such as “Hosanna!”, “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.” (AND WASH YOUR HANDS WHILE SINGING THE DOXOLOGY.)

Making Palm Crosses

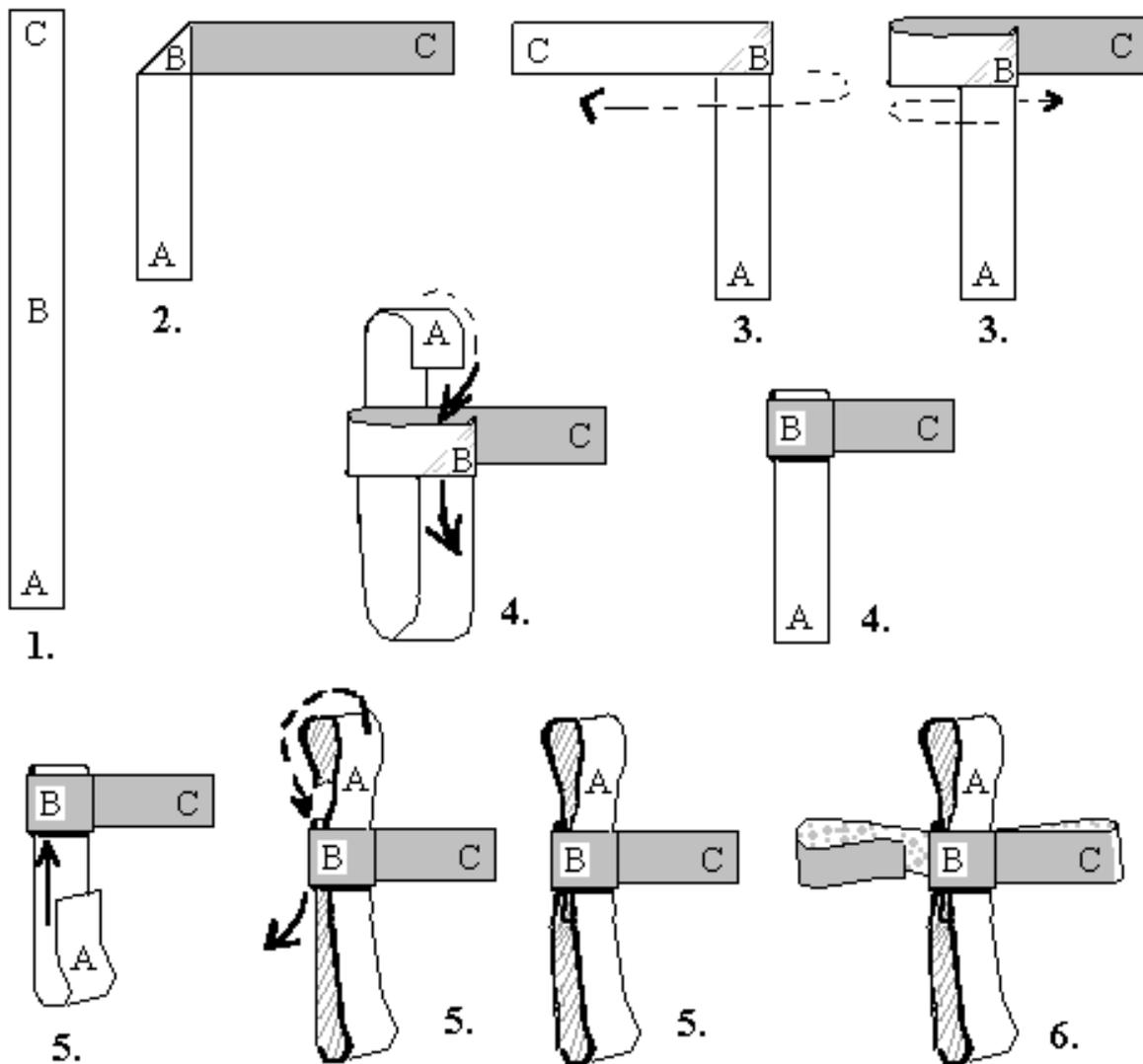
For years, many have taken their palms and made crosses. If you have palms, you can do the same this year. If you do not have palms, consider using strips of paper. The strips can be decorated on one side with designs or with words like “Hosanna” or with simple prayers. This can be a wonderful activity that can be a part of an individual’s or family/household devotional time. (AND WASH YOUR HANDS WHILE SINGING THE DOXOLOGY.) Observing proper safety precautions, crosses can be safely mailed to or shared

with others to spread good news and love during this uncertain and anxious (and for some, lonely) time. Written instructions and a link to an instructional video follow.

Our Messiah still saves and will surely save us even now. He is still worthy of our praise. We, the crowds, not in the streets but in our homes, can still declare as the crowd of old, “This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.” Matthew 21:11b NRSV



HOW TO MAKE A PALM CROSS



Here is a helpful demonstration video for making Palm Crosses with real palms or paper:

https://youtu.be/Wds_CXYYyL4