

## PALM SUNDAY

April 10,2022

If you look at this palm that children gave you, I wonder what meaning this has for you. For some it might evoke childhood memories of this Sunday throughout your life. You may remember being in a church where we got one palm leaf that was long stemmed instead of a branch like this. The world is full of different kinds of palm trees. You might be feeling some joy because this is our first in person Palm Sunday service in 3 years. The first Palm Sunday that came just after the shutdown began in 2020, people could come to the church and collect palms outside, and it was pouring rain. So a few stalwart people came and did it, but I just remember thinking, "it doesn't get any worse than this: handing out palms to an absent congregation in the rain". And here we are with them back in our hands. It can be deeply satisfying to participate in a ritual that you've been doing throughout your life, to be here in a sanctuary with other people who have the same branch that you do and to be in community with all those people before me, in your own life. And here in this church, who have carried out this ritual. You may take meaning from the life and ministry of Jesus and this palm is a reminder or it could be a sign for you that Easter is coming and all the joy that comes with that. But these palms have also had some difficult meanings over the centuries. And I especially want us to think about the meaning that they might have in their Jewish context that we've heard about in a story this morning, and the ways in which constantly has been a difficult Sunday for Jewish people in Christian communities over the centuries.

It's always important to remember that Jesus was a Jewish man in a Jewish context talking to other Jewish people. There are very few characters in all the gospel stories who are not Jewish. His followers called him Rabbi. He spoke Aramaic, which was the Jewish vernacular in Israel at the time, and he read Hebrew. The Gospels emphasize how much Jesus was familiar with the Torah which was written in Hebrew. And so especially Jews who went to temple and heard the Torah read, or who could read themselves might have no Hebrew, but they would speak Aramaic. And at that time, Jesus was one of many leaders who were seeking to reform the Judaism that he experienced, growing up. Judaism existed in Israel at that time under the thumb of the Roman Empire, and Rome was just the latest in a series of empires who had ruled over that part of the world. And there were lots of different movements within Judaism at the time; that thought what we need to do as Jewish people is to change what we're doing to make this moment. Now, we don't really know exactly how Jesus understood his own mission, because we have nothing written by him. And even the things we have that are written about him by other people are somewhat cryptic and hard to understand. A few quotes from Jesus were written down by Paul of Tarsus, who was alive at the same time as

Jesus, but they never met each other. Most of the stories we have of his life before the gospels in the Bible, were written several decades after he died, perhaps not written down by people who knew him personally. It's more likely that there were stories in his community of followers that were written down by the gospel writers later - and then to make things even more confusing those four gospels do not all tell the same story.

So some of the stories in the gospels, for instance, especially the Gospel of Matthew, they present Jesus as a king in the line of David who will come to save his people and be a political, and even a military leader for them. So Matthew quotes Scripture quite a bit to show how Jesus is a person called for in the scriptures. All the stories present Jesus as a healer, as a man with a unique relationship to God, a person learned in the Torah, a person operating at a different level, not at the everyday level of ordinary people, but a mystic. But above all, the Gospel stories presented him as Jewish. And we heard some of that in the story of Palm Sunday this morning. You just read the Gospel story. It sounds as though Jesus has come for Passover by hearing these people with palms as they lay them down in front of Jesus; but probably the palms are from Sukkot and the people are welcoming Jesus as a triumphant king or as their leader. They may have thought that Jesus was going to revolt against the Romans as the Maccabees had done against the Syrians 200 years before. And another important thing to remember is that in fact, the Roman crackdown on Judaism in Jerusalem did happen. About 40 years after Jesus died. Jewish people were expelled from Jerusalem and the temple was destroyed. And all the stories that we have about Jesus' life, all the gospel stories were written after that catastrophe, and his life and leadership was remembered in light of the loss of everything that had helped together centralized Jewish worship in Jerusalem. So all those questions of identity and the right to worship, what is the right thing to do? How could we have avoided this catastrophe and what should we do next? We're suddenly thrown in the light of that of the destruction of the temple. So by the time that some of the later gospels are written, a certain contrast between Jesus's followers and the people, called the Jews in the Gospel begins to emerge.

The story of Jesus's arrest for instance, in the Gospel, and in Matthew and John gives responsibility for his arrest to a group of people called the Jews "on our head beit" is the quote from the gospel. Now, of course, the people the writing in the Gospel were maybe they were not Jewish themselves, but this community around Jesus was still a kind of Judaism but by the time you are after the destruction of the temple, and the Gospels are being written down between the year 80 and 110, this division is

being created. The followers of Jesus see themselves as something different from the people they are calling the Jews. And right here, so early is planted the seed of Christian anti semitism, a scourge that is still with us today. So by the time of the Middle Ages in Europe, Christians took the Holy Week liturgies as almost permission for hatred against Jews and violence against them in European communities. The liturgy in the Catholic Church from mid from the earliest years until after World War

II, especially on Good Friday, blamed Jewish people for Jesus's death and prayed for the conversion of contemporary Jews living in a community. Following that liturgy, in some European towns, Christians would throw stones at Jews houses, enact violence against Jewish people, even commit murder. And those words in the Catholic liturgy did not change until after the horrors of World War II. And sadly, even after knowing what happened in the war, knowing the truth of the Holocaust, even living in this enlightened era in which we live today, anti semitism and anti-Jewish hatred and violence are still a problem in our communities. And a problem even here in Massachusetts.

In Massachusetts, our Attorney General is investigating violent anti-semitic and racist, racist and homophobic incidents at the Danvers high school hockey team that happened last year and is being investigated now. A 1983 Arson conviction was just overturned this week in Massachusetts because of anti-semitic remarks were made in the jury room at the time.

The anti-Defamation League nationally tallies anti-semitic incidents in the United States, and 2021 is the third highest year for such incidents since they began in 1970. So you might think that we are getting better at this but the evidence shows we still have a long way to go. In January an armed man took four people hostage during services at a synagogue and Colleyville Texas. The rabbi and the people there in his synagogue were able to remain safe because they had received training on how to handle a violent situation in a synagogue. So I am so grateful that those leaders have that training and were able to be keep their head cool and think about what to do in an emergency. But it is so heartbreaking that rabbis and Jewish communities need to seek out that training, knowing that the violence could come their way. We remember the people of the Tree of Life congregation in Pittsburgh, who in 2018 were killed by an American white supremacist during worship services their; 11 people died. Their memories are a blessing to all of us.

So then we have the question of what can you do? You know, I so appreciate you coming to be with us, Nikki because you give us such a clear understanding of what we can do to help solve a social problem in our world. And we wonder the

same thing about anti semitism? What can we do? First of all, I believe that Unitarian Universalism itself gives us some tools. We take care to affirm the wisdom that we find in all of the world's religions, and then celebrate that wisdom here in our church. And here at First U because of the leadership of Jewish people in our church, who particularly celebrate the wisdom of Judaism. So, we will have a Seder, led by Abby Hannaford-Ricardi, who's a Jewish member of our staff, on Saturday, the 23rd and then a Passover service to share that story of freedom with our whole congregation on the 24th. But even if we are in First Unitarian Church, we need to be careful about how we use the Bible, to not perpetuate that anti semitism but can be found there. For example, that what those words were saying in our opening hymn, "Hosanna in the highest", those are words that go with Palm Sunday if you grew up in a Christian tradition, and the people may very well have said those words as Jesus entered his community may have welcomed him with that Hosanna. But we can't forget that those words come from a Jewish text from the 118 Psalm that which was probably a hymn sung by Jewish congregations for hundreds of years before Jesus came on the scene, celebrating the Return of the King after a military victory. When the Psalm says, "Let Israel say his steadfast love endures forever", that is probably a direction to the congregation about how to sing the hymn. When the psalmist writes, "the stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone", we need to remember that that was not written with Jesus in mind. It's not talking about Jesus. It was written hundreds of years before he was born. It is a Psalm of song, the hymn, a poem, about a Jewish king in a Jewish context be celebrated for his leadership of his people. "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord." You may remember those words from this Palm Sunday literary and readings but those were words written by Jewish people about Jewish leadership.

I think another thing that we can do to combat anti semitism is to openly appreciate Judaism and other minority religions in America, for the blessings that they offer to the world. We can be curious and not judgmental about other people's space. We can accept opportunities to learn more, to be a guest to participate. And finally, I offer something that a Jewish colleague taught me recently. She connected the concept of anti semitism to the concept of blame. She said hatred and conspiracy theories take root in blame, and Christian communities have been quick over the years to blame Jewish communities for the problems they encountered. We can say not to cast blame on others for problems we encounter in our own lives. Not to blame another group who may be different from us but does not have any real power. Blaming gets in the way of seeing the truth about our communities and working together to improve society.

It's likely that any group we would seek to blame could be a partner in fixing the problem that we are encountering. I grew up in a community with a large Jewish population. My middle school was probably more than a 50% Jewish. I grew up being a guest at seder meals and not having school on the High Holy Days of Yom Kippur and Rosh Hashanah. I grew up in a school where we did not celebrate Christmas or Easter at all in the school, because the school was very clearly non-religious in order to be accommodating of everybody. I have a great personal appreciation for the Jewish friends I grew up with and the wisdom and comfort that I have received from their tradition. We give thanks for the benefits and blessings that Judaism has brought to our lives from the blessings we may have known from all the world's religions. Each one of us has only our piece of what it means to be human. Where we grew up, and the culture and the religion that we carry with us.

Together all of us - we make a mosaic, truly pleasing in the eyes of God. I love you all. Amen.