

# From Pastor Marissa Becklin

## From Palm Sunday To Ash Wednesday And Back Again

Every year on Shrove Tuesday I begin my day with an annual ritual: burning last year's leftover Palm Sunday branches in order to make ashes for the beginning of our Lenten journey as a congregation. There is so much powerful symbolism in this ritual, and as we continue our Lenten journey together this year I want to invite you into this holy act that marked the beginning of our repentant season.

These branches were, on Palm Sunday 2023 (Sunday, April 2), bright green and fragrant. They were grown last year in the forests of Guatemala and Mexico, and were sustainably harvested in a manner that protects the valuable natural forests and forest communities in these countries. Those who gathered these branches were fairly compensated for their work, so that they are able to provide well for their families. After being shipped to our congregation, they were cared for throughout the week by being kept in water and in a dark, cool place.

As we gathered for Worship on April 2, we prayed God's blessing on these branches:

Bless these branches and those who carry them. Grant us grace to follow our Lord in the way of the cross, so that, joined to his death and resurrection, we enter into life with you; through the same Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

As we waved our branches and sang "*All Glory, Laud, and Honor*", we followed behind Jackson Leshar as he carried the cross into our Sanctuary. We then moved into the reading of the Passion story, and prepared our hearts and minds for Holy Week.

The leftover palms from that day were stored in a box, and kept to dry. As our lives continued throughout the year, we all experienced the full range of human life—joy and sorrow, good news and tragedy, newness and death. We accompanied Christ to the cross many times throughout the months that followed last Easter, both individually and as a congregation. Through it all we clung to the promise of resurrection, and trusted that as we cried "Hosanna", which translates to "save us", Jesus heard us.

When I pulled out these dried palms on Shrove Tuesday this year, this is what I was reminded of. These palm branches carry so many stories—their growth in the forests of Central America, their harvesting and the hands that cared for them before us, the blessing of God, the representation of Christ's triumph and passion, the hope of resurrection, the reality of human life and the passage of time. As I stood in my driveway and stripped the leaves into a galvanized bucket, I said this prayer:

Merciful God, you called us from the dust of the earth, and claimed us for Christ in the waters of Baptism. We give thanks for these palms, that in their life drew life from the earth and gave it back to our air and the animals they hosted and sheltered. We give thanks that in the Worship of our community, they helped us offer festive joy. Now, as these palms are reduced to ashes for use as we begin our Lenten pilgrimage, we pray they will serve as a sign of our mortality and your power to save. May we recognize your love at work in us throughout the holy season before us, replanting our lives in the sure and humble soil of your truth and grace, so we may once again greet the Christian Passover with joy and gladness. Amen.

After cooling and processing the ash from these branches, they were mixed with olive oil, blessed in Worship, and traced on your foreheads as a sign of God's power to save in the face of death. That Ash Wednesday ritual carries us through to Palm Sunday, March 24, 2024, when we will begin again the cycle of the story of God's hope and love.

Blessings on your Lenten journey, dear ones.

*In Christ's Love, Pastor Marissa*

## **Ashes For 2024**

